

AROUND THE WORLD WITH  
*Chris Marker*



**PART II  
TIME REGAINED**



# Kino-Eye

## THE LEGACY OF SOVIET CINEMA AS REFRACTED THROUGH



*The Train Rolls On*

Dear Chris Marker:

No one would mistake you for a True Believer—they're the ones causing all the trouble in the world, as Hank Quinlan put it—but there's no denying a certain aura of Keeper of the Flame. Actually several Flames, the sheltering of which might derive from an early personal (or collective) trauma of wartime uprootedness. Of

are, to be sure, preservationist currents in your work that seem reflexive, in more than one sense; the impulse to reclaim a "usable past," nearly involuntary (if hardly Pavlovian). No image is allowed to stand as frozen artifact, each one cracked open for purposes of present-tense revision. More precisely, the past as self-satisfied display expires in a burst of synthesis in which—abjuring our customary archival footage triumphs—you replay, primarily, the follies of political certainty actively transformed by collapsing spatio-social borders. Internationalist at the cinematic marrow. You were born in the afterglow of the Bolshevik Revolution so it is surely no accident that you drew visual heat and intellectual light from the inheritance bequeathed by early Soviet cinema. Of the filmmaking generation at the forefront of the upheavals of the Sixties, only your friend Godard and fellow maverick Dusan Makavejev extended classical montage aesthetics with the same consistency or vigor. And you were the only one to do so exclusively in the sphere of documentary, bypassing what Dziga Vertov

called the "cine-nicotine" of fiction as you doubled back to rephrase, in a double-take of critical fascination, what could be gleaned from the idiolects, indeed the living careers, of Eisenstein, Vertov, Medvedkin, and other stewards of the Great Experiment.

Affinities between Soviet film and what you do, how you do it, and how it positions itself within contemporary political art are so numerous—embedded in brief casual allusions, amplified into full-length essayistic treatments—that I hardly know where to begin. In *Letter from Siberia* you were writing from the "edge of the world," a topos of endless return at once physical and imaginary whose lineaments you would investigate under the cloak of disparate generic guises. I infer that for you, as for a long line of Left-identified writers and media artists, Siberia can never be simply a place but must function as symbolic marker (as it were) of an "undiscovered country" for which the Soviet Union in its infancy issued a promissory note. Socialism. The note already shredded by the time you arrived, but still a specter decked with

*The Last Bolshevik*



course you'd find that sort of psycho-biographical speculation odious, yet it is not, I think, entirely alien to patterns of interpretation in your films and videos, especially the handful made to staunch postmodern amnesia around Left culture—and, yes, to honor old friends. There



## CHRIS MARKER'S ALWAYS-CRITICAL VISION BY PAUL ARTHUR

secrets. And available for the exercise of typically mordant, dare I say "Russian," humor: "The duck is collectivist by nature; there are no kulaks among ducks." The inventory you took of that desolate region is telling: music, especially peasant songs, arcane folklore, time tripping, statues, animal tropes, and talismans, Kuleshov's creative geography spliced onto the tundra, the spectacle of industrialization (in particular, a lyrical dance of steel cranes reminiscent of Eisenstein's raising of the drawbridge in *October*, possibly by way of Joris Ivens's similar invocation in *The Bridge*). Looking back, you culled enough material to float a raft of later projects. Is it any wonder that, slipping back to review, in several cases virtually exhume, a faded figure or episode from the Soviet period, you discover reflections of your own indelible concerns—a gnarled topic in *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich*. Does the temporal sequence or pressing conditions under which those connections were forged truly matter? I doubt it, although as George Steiner says in the epigraph to *The Last Bolshevik*, "It is not the literal past that rules us: it is images of



the past." Perfect! But you notoriously chafe under ironclad regimes, and have hardly made anything that doesn't push meaning in prodigal directions.

"History," then, binds you at the outset to that fiery moment, due in part to its vaunted convergence of theory and praxis, political aspiration and formal method—always for you an antidote to commercialized lures of disengagement, mystification, transparency. To put it a different way, it is the Soviet labor around the *representation* of history, atomizing received models of historical time amidst

the explosive embrace of moving-picture time, that reappears in your work, worthy of special fealty and, inevitably, skepticism. Those recent revolutionary converts to socialism were a fractious bunch, yet they each imagined a royal road to historical truth through the presumed isomorphism of dialectical thinking and montage editing. In the process they manufactured a hardy product line of montage rubrics: Collision, Attraction, Intervals, Overtone. You would filter these marching orders through your own internal rhythms and passions, gaining a mastery of graphic matches and tonal swaps. (Already in *Siberia* you butted shots of hunters against a chorus of wounded animals, deftly transferring their agonies across the cut to the elegant/horri-fying swoons of ballet dancers.) A taut, unsettled mixture of doom and hope inhabiting your outlook like a shade from a 19th-century Russian novel.

It was Eisenstein who wrote that "montage thinking is inseparable from thinking as a whole," that the canny arrangement of shots could generate not only charged subjective responses but abstract concepts like "social justice" or "surplus value": "From image to emotion, from emotion to thesis." This is what might have caught your eye in, say, *October*'s "God and Country" sequence, but there is also the broader argumentative rhetoric anchored at one end by sly metaphor—say, Kerensky and the peacock—and at the other by Eisenstein's intricate plans for filming *Das Kapital*. Vertov and Pudovkin, offering alternative agendas for the function of cinema within a landscape of social change, spoke of "fact factories," "assemblage," the

fusion of art and science—at their best pouring out ethical visions solely by pictures placed in structures brimming with excursus and heady jolts of intensification. Was this a (fragmentary) primal scene for your nurturing of the essay film? "The strength of montage resides in this, that it includes in the creative process the emotions and mind of the spectator"—Eisenstein again. By 1928 his cohort had wholeheartedly endorsed sound as a central element in montage construction. Not the blather of sync dialogue but counterpoint of image and sounds,



polyphony. Sadly, their plans went largely unrealized, a faint whisper until you and Godard and a few others expanded the practice of sound units as independent, at times contradictory threads in a discursive fabric. Images undercut by words and vice versa, complicated by discerning attention to music of various stripes—not forgetting to make *silence* part of the dialectical equation.





Hovering above the practical fray was the outline of a new historical consciousness, geared to the inevitability of proletarian revolution and said to require new ways of depicting historical time. Hence we note the “vertical” leaps Eisenstein carved into linear storytelling, the fierce contractions and distensions of complex events throbbing in documentaries as well as period pieces from the Twenties. This spirit manifested in split-screen effects, looping, slow motion, fast motion, reverse motion, freeze frames. You would retrofit the entire, supposedly outré arsenal either as homage or placed at the service of futuristic travelogues. Rather than the “formalist” hijinks of anti-populist directors (a charge eventually leveled by Stalin’s cultural apparatus), such devices expressed a desire to transform an oppressive clockwork of historical continuity, lending it a materialist flexibility and multivalence capable of accommodating something beyond parallelism, or what Eisenstein refers to as Griffithian “competition.” It was a reevaluation aimed at making the very stones come alive, in Marx’s poetic phrase. I regard your work as making common cause with this rupture-cum-liberation of image-time, although not with the reductive ideological vistas to which it was harnessed. In projects directed at Soviet cinema—from the meta-newsreel *The Train Rolls On* to the denser accretions of *The Last Bolshevik*—reshaping time has often meant underscoring the paradox of still and moving, conjuring stillness as simultaneous coagulation of human struggle and longed-for release. Forget about *La Jetée*: the richer cache of frozen gestures resides in the films and videos (and installations) devoted to stripping clotted meaning from extant images. Immobility made signifier of a productive, technically impossible, refusal.

At this point I imagine you objecting that the preceding report is flawed. Eisenstein, a former engineering student, is of course unavoidable, yet you were never drawn to the control freak, monumentalist side of his legacy, being more attuned to the vagrant, playful acuties spun by Vertov (first to claim that all editing is essentially re-editing, synapses of interpretation) or Alexander Medvedkin, auteur without a signature scrawbling along the margins of an inflated industrial ethos. There is cautious celebration of your friend in the six so-called letters of *The Last Bolshevik*,

but even before meeting him in 1970 you had ventured into hands-on collectivist imagemaking reminiscent of the Soviet agit-train—that revolutionary prop adroitly conducted by Medvedkin in 1932–34 towards the making of workers’s instructional films with titles like *Stop Thief!* and *Fruits and Vegetables*. Launching SLON as well as collaborating on the short-lived *Ciné-tracts* strike me as ur-Sixties versions of the underside, a “dissident” side, of Soviet cinema’s epic ambitions. Like Medvedkin before his descent into lock-step political subservience, you understand the limits of creative ego—taking supportive, unflashy roles (producer, writer, consultant, co-director) on a host of oppositional projects across multiple continents. By the same token, at the level of representation Soviet



directors attempted to replace the individualist heroic figures of capitalist culture with street-level agents of historical renewal: in short, the masses. Is this the backdrop for *Le Joli Mai*, or for that matter *Sans soleil*? You once said, via a fictional surrogate, that “only the banal interests me now,” and although your films contain a few Great Men portrayed for their remarkable interventions, you often traffic in the charisma of banal figures, like the heroine of *The Kouniko Mystery*, or the banality of charismatic figures, as when Fidel parades his fixation with Continental cuisine in *A Grin Without a Cat*.

I confess I find *Andrei Arsenevich* a troubling project; my investment in the analytical portrait form wrestles fervently with my ambivalence towards Tarkovsky’s oeuvre. You remark that “Andrei was not a dissident.... his heroes were not rebels, they were foreigners to this earth.” Yet his confrontations with Soviet authorities stamp him in a similar mold with Medvedkin at the time of *Happiness* and *New Moscow*—both objects of veneration in *The Last Bolshevik*. Of course there are ample points of contact for you in Tarkovsky’s life and work: reclusive-

ness, symbolic attachments to the animal world, letter writing, infatuation with historical retrieval and time travel generally, a yen for Asian culture (like Eisenstein in this regard), a propensity for fractured storytelling. These unspoken filaments yield typically incisive readings of his movies, a systematic unpacking of Tarkovsky’s iconography—landscape, water, fire, mirrors—sliding into a wilder metaphysics of his camera movement. Rehashing at face value the director’s tale of a prophetic dream, in which Boris Pasternak tells him he will complete only seven films, seemed an odd move, so unlike the debunking machinery grinding away in your other historical reflections. As if you were determined to remove the quotes from the common epithet “mystical artist.”

Yet Tarkovsky’s *Zone*, to my mind, is nothing like the terrain(s) you explore, saturated as his films are with sour resignation and righteously removed from everyday struggles with power. Or at least that’s how you seem to cast them, in soggy sentimental light. *Andrei Arsenevich* becomes, then, a second, dialectical work of mourning set against the hardheaded, polysemous architecture of *The Last Bolshevik*—whose original title, *Le Tombeau d’Alexandre*, hints at the graveside miasma hanging over both. There, referring to the Moscow show trials of the Thirties, you cite Gorky’s famous line, “In the kingdom of shadows, you see strange mirror effects.” How that warning resonates for me, reverberating across both bio-critiques to encompass a wide swath of your own output and aspiration. Your handling of these deaths suggests as well a personal send-off to Soviet communism, to the long-since entombed ideals of revolutionary cinema—not ignoring its post-Stalinist, alienated, anti-authoritarian progeny—and perhaps even a jab at postmodernism’s eclipse of utopian thinking. In *A Grin Without a Cat*, Fidel proclaims that, “there will come a time when all that the Revolution has created will be institutionalized.” Your films and videos are persistent reminders, reproaches, and antidotes to exactly that process in the kingdom of cinema.

Yours in solidarity and respect,  
Paul Arthur

*Paul Arthur’s collection of essays on American avant-garde film, A Line of Sight, will be published by the University of Minnesota Press.*



# Ghost World

JAPAN THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS BY OLAF MÖLLER



*Sans Soleil* (also below)

Japan has a special meaning for Chris Marker. It's the one place this eternal traveler—once of the physical world, now mainly of the mind, soul, and Net—has returned to time and again, filming, pondering, and remembering experiences that in some cases he might never have had.

Marker's oeuvre is packed with films and videos made in Japan or referring to/imagining the archipelago's culture and history. His earliest exploration, the 54-minute *The Mystery of Koumiko* (65), was made during a trip to Tokyo for the 1964 Olympic Games. Some 20 years after that, Marker entered what could be termed his Japanese Phase, a transitional period during which he transformed himself from an analog filmmaker into a digital media artist. This phase begins with the now-classic *Sans soleil* (82), which everybody seems to remember as a film only about Japan, which it isn't. The

many other locations (often other islands—Cape Verde, Iceland, the Île de France in Paris) merge into the curiosities of Marker's Japan and his electronic imagemaking. In *Sans soleil* Japan becomes preeminent and the rest of the world exists in its shadow. *Sans soleil* is followed by *A.K.* (85), a film about the making of Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, which, as its title indicates, is a portrait of, and homage to, the director, a man Marker considers a kindred spirit (although the film is far less inspired than his later filmmaker tributes *The Last Bolshevik* and *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich*, which portray masters as remembered by Marker, rather than at work). Marker's Japanese Phase comes to a close with *Level Five* (96), which begins with its heroine's quest to find an alternative outcome to a video game programmed to adhere to the historical facts of the WWII Battle of Okinawa, which

ended in mass suicide and carnage on a scale so monumental that words like "tragedy" and "catastrophe" are rendered inadequate. The film takes off from there, branching out into cyberspace, looking for a virtual loophole for guilt and a rabbit hole to rebirth.

Japan also crops up in minor works: two tapes featured in the 1990 *Zapping Zone* installation, *Tokyo Days* (part of the original lineup) and *Okinawa/Bullfight* (a later addition), the three 1994 "video haikus," *Petite ceinture*, *Chaika*, and *Owl Gets in Your Eyes*, as well as





Marker's poetic anti-whale hunting pamphlet, *Vive la balaine* (72), and Yann Le Masson and Benie Deswarte's militant documentary on the destruction of local farming communities, *Kashima Paradise* (74), for which he co-wrote the commentary. And of course there's also his 1982 book *Le Depays*. A rummage through his oeuvre turns up even more references to Japan, like the *Hiroshima, mon amour* poster in his 1995 *Silent Movie* installation....

One thing is certain: Although Westerners attribute a high level of truthfulness to Marker's Japan (especially as seen in *Sans soleil*), in essence it's a

death and transfiguration. The novel begins with a meditation on a plane crash—the kamikaze pilot who will be mentioned over and over in *Sans soleil* and who becomes the key to *Level Five*. Was Marker afraid of Japan, of what it might tell him? If it had been his ultimate dream, the last country on his soul's map of places to be visited, would Japan prove to be the site of all his dreams as well as the sum of all his fears?

The cinematic connection that led him to Japan in *The Koumiko Mystery* was somewhat mundane: the Tokyo Olympics. Tokyo '64 was about chasing away the last of Japan's old shadows and heralding its

Japan is a woman (in mythological terms the Japanese might agree) with whom Marker falls in love. Everything Marker says about Koumiko in this maze of asides and wayward glances can be understood as a comment on Japan itself. This meta-reading comes through so strongly that, despite Marker's insistences, many have suggested that Koumiko Muraoka never actually existed, that she was an invention, a medium through which Marker could approach the country.

When Marker returned to Japan with *Sans soleil*, much had changed: he had reached the end of a chapter with his second magnum opus, *A Grin Without a Cat*, whose second part, "Severed Hands," shows the defeat of the kind of left-wing politics he continues to espouse. Hence Marker's Japanese Phase is a period of doubt in which he discovers a different kind of truth in images.

In the following years, *Sans soleil* would become the touchstone for a certain postmodern stance, one that expresses concerns and proposes ideas through Japan, by projecting them onto images of Japan's culture and physical form. This surfaces in works like Ange Leccia and Dominique Gonzales-Foerster's *Île de Beauté* (96), which feels like a stunted *Sans soleil* knockoff, or Trinh T. Minh-ha's underrated *The Fourth Dimension* (01), which, in its most inspired moments, functions as an implicit critique of *Sans soleil*—or, more precisely, how Marker's film is usually read when it's treated like Roland Barthes's *The Empire of Signs*. If Marker doesn't repeat Barthes's mistake of treating Japan as an abstraction and as the ultimate example of Oth-

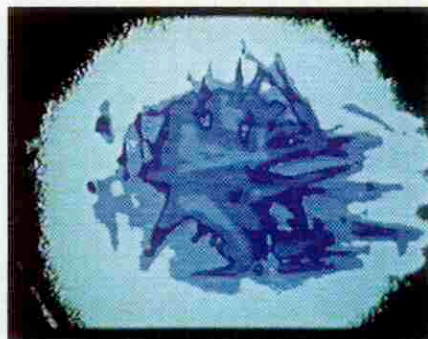


fictional ghost world, a looking-glass country. As Marker writes in *Le Depays*: "If you want to get to know Japan, you can just as well invent it."

Before Marker could invent Japan he had to go there, to make contact with what he would imagine. In one way or another he could connect with the dying French colony of Indochina (in his delirious essayistic novel *Le Coeur net*), with Russia (i.e. Siberia), China, and Korea (in his photo-essay book *Coréennes*, whose images later appear in his 1966 film *If I Had Four Camels*)—but initially he could not connect with Japan. His travels reflect his personal development, and perhaps his dreams: in Japan he had to look for something to discover.

That said, the first page of *Le Coeur net* tells you what he would finally find there:

emergence as a new industrial leader, the First Nation of non-communist Asia. Marker all but ignores the multilayered political implications of those Olympic Games. He prefers to fall in love with a girl, Koumiko Muraoka, whom he pretends to spot there, and who becomes his guide and guardian spirit, leading him through the country and enabling him to finally see it (and her, too). *The Koumiko Mystery* marks the filmmaker's initiation into Japan. He doesn't really discuss the country—he simply observes it, with patience and curiosity. The most significant moment is the brief sequence, à la *Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, of a rainy Tokyo full of brightly colored umbrellas—here, Marker is an auteur in full New Wave swing, discovering a foreign city. In this daydreamy, lighthearted film, so flirtatious in spirit,



erness, perhaps that's partly because it's in the nature of the film medium to accept the ambiguous reality of what simply is. The letters of Sandor Krasna, Marker's camera-traveler-cum-corre-



spondent and quasi-protagonist of *Sans soleil*, speak of Japan in a way that is scholarly and thorough. With all their loftiness, they could have come straight from Barthes (an especially bad model when dealing with the subject of the Japanese language). Krasna's words and ideas are never to be totally trusted or believed: they're constantly tempered or scrutinized by the film's images—which, again, can only be trusted for what they are, not for what they seem to represent. As "Hayao Yamaneko" ("Yamaneko" can be translated as "mountain cat") Marker himself points this out through the electronic treatment of various images, transforming them into potentially beautiful monochrome blobs. When at one point Marker/Krasna says, "The Code is the message. It points to the absolute by hiding it—that's what religions have always done," it feels like a good-natured yet pointed joke about Barthesian semiotics.

But there is something more to the images. If *Sans soleil* feels so enraptured by Japan—and Guinea Bissau and the Capeverdean Islands—it's because of Marker's eye, the way he films people in their surroundings. There are two basic Marker strategies for filming people: in profile, caught unawares, lost in their inner selves; and head on, when they're confronting the camera, offering themselves to it. Two kinds of intimacy: one hidden, the other open, and both revealing secrets. *Sans soleil*'s feeling for life as it's happening comes partly from the dialectic between these two modes of looking, and partly from the different places Marker/Krasna contemplates and splices together at the editing table in his mind—it's a feeling of being at play with the world. The images always know more and show more than the voiceover can comment on, and they often pose questions, albeit implicitly. Take a look at the scene with the President of the Japanese Patriotic Party standing on top of his car denouncing "the hand of Moscow" with a bullhorn, by now a Japanese cliché: what are the flags of the Republic of Korea and the Republic of China doing there, side by side with the Japanese flag, particularly since Marker/Krasna has just referred to Japan's Korean outcasts? In Japan, political distinctions become as fuzzy as the relationship between the traditional and the modern, as demonstrated in the scene of the

*matsuri* dance staged for a PR stunt but nevertheless pulsing with the energy of the streets of Tokyo, in all their bustling, life-affirming ambivalence.

While Marker mentions that the Japanese invented CinemaScope hundreds of years before Hollywood with the kabuki stage and scroll paintings, he never directly discusses the very different manner in which the moving image was historically perceived in Japan. Japanese cinema's origins in theater—as opposed to photography—are more deeply rooted than those of any other, and so the moving image isn't a keeper of truth through the representation of life but rather its expression.

Exactly what truths? Japan's history and images become the site of the spiritual crisis that is *Level Five*. Marker wouldn't be the first *gaijin* to toy with notions of going native—assuming a Japanese identity for his work with electronic imagery in *Sans soleil*. Confronted with the images of the Battle of Okinawa, in the course of which hundreds of thousands of people died, Marker-as-Laura (the ultimate union of male filmmaker with his leading lady?) finds them all but impossible to understand; he finds no way of empathizing with the suffering, despair, and experience within them. Talking to people who survived the battle doesn't offer any clues, nor does talking to filmmakers who, like him, have tried to account for this great human enigma. Moreover, Marker/Krasna's remark in *Sans soleil* about the Japanese being the warriors of a digital future haunts *Level Five* with its footage of Japanese civilians jumping off cliffs en masse. (Isn't it fitting that A.K. deals extensively with the shooting of a scene that doesn't end up in the finished version of *Ran*, another ravishingly beautiful and deeply heartfelt paean to a dying warrior class?) *Level Five*'s computer game doesn't offer any alternative outcome to the Battle of Okinawa. All hope of digital forgiveness, for a second chance, is crushed. *Level Five*, the highest level of human experience in Marker-as-Laura's world, seems unattainable.

After Japan, images would never be the same for Marker—something that Hayao Yamaneko, in a final mind-boggling twist, always understood.

*Olaf Möller is a regular contributor to FILM COMMENT and a curator for the Pesero and Oberhausen film festivals.*

## Five Films by CHRIS MARKER

### REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS TO COME

Directed by Yannick Bellon and Chris Marker



"A Marvel! The most unforgettable film of any length you will see this year!"

- Elvis Mitchell, *New York Times*

"A small masterpiece... in its deployment of still photographs (as in *La Jetée*), its theme of history and memory, its subject-skipping montage and rapid shuttle of wit and philosophy, REMEMBRANCE is pure, marvelous Marker."

- James Quandt, *Cinematheque Ontario*

### A GRIN WITHOUT A CAT



"That valiant, incomparable master-filmmaker Chris Marker has chosen to revisit GRIN WITHOUT A CAT, giving us still more of this magnificent film essay. More is, happily, more,

as the energy and optimism and tragedy of decades of political activism are rendered with that mental restlessness and ingenious pathos typical of Marker's great films." - Susan Sontag

### A BIENTOT J'ESPERE



Besançon 1967. A strike, unusual in so far as the workers refused to disassociate the industrial conflict from its cultural background, is called at a textile factory owned by the Rhone-Poulenc trust.

### ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF ANDREI ARSENEVICH



"★★★★. A Masterpiece!"

- Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*

"Brilliant... The most sustained and heartfelt tribute one filmmaker has paid another."

- J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*

### THE LAST BOLSHEVIK



"The most haunting, corrosive, and thoughtful exploration of the train wreck we called the 20th century." - Howard Hampton, *Artforum*

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# Red Skies

## JOINING FORCES WITH THE MILITANT COLLECTIVE SLON



We don't need a weather vane: *A Grin Without a Cat* and *À bientôt j'espère* (below)

To start with, an image: a Parisian bar some months before May '68. Two men sit face to face, in silence, for an hour. One is Jean-Luc Godard, the other, Pol Cébe, a worker and militant at the Rhodiaceta factory in Besançon, soon to become a worker-filmmaker with the Medvedkin Group. Around the table, out of frame, a third man, the go-between who's been gauging the scene in terms of cinematic language: an hour-long *plan fixé* of the cinéaste and the militant. For, as Chris Marker recalled in a 1995 interview, this was "the first time in his life Godard had laid eyes on a worker." Marker never got to shoot that hour-long take. But in the years following he questioned the nature of this silence, a question shared by many others at the time and one that became central to the SLON project.

SLON stands for Société pour le Lancement d'Oeuvres Nouvelles ("Company

for Launching New Work"). It's also the Russian word for elephant, the nickname of Slonimovski, one of the 32 men who took



part in Soviet filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin's ciné-train experiment in the Thirties. During his SLON years, the period from 1967 to 1976, Marker worked anonymously within this militant collective—one of a number that sprang up in France's politicized film culture. Unlike

the Dziga Vertov Group, which was basically a two-person collaboration between Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, SLON was a production and distribution cooperative that existed independent of Marker.

SLON dates its beginnings to 1967 rather than 1968, with the production of two collective projects, *Far from Vietnam* and *À bientôt j'espère*. Despite the considerable impact in the U.S. of the former, an expression of anti-Vietnam War solidarity, and the scale of the production, which involved 150 technicians and renowned directors like Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Alain Resnais, and Marker himself, SLON judged it unsatisfactory, not least due to the pitfalls of its conventional distribution in France by its nominal producer, Sofracinema. By contrast, *À bientôt j'espère*, explicitly acknowledged by the group as its real



## BY MIN LEE

launching pad, was the outcome of the collaboration between a group of film professionals around Marker and the militants of the 1967 strike at the Rhodiaceta textile factory, and set the course for many of SLON's subsequent projects.

From a wider perspective, what makes *À bientôt* such an interesting case is that it prompted SLON to revive and renew a certain tradition of French filmmaking, one that was marginal, at times dormant, but never extinct: the *cinéma ouvrier*. To follow critic and worker's movement historian Tangui Perron's postulation, the *cinéma ouvrier*, made by and largely for the working class, essentially coincides with the historical cycle of worker's movements in France: Ciné-Liberté's legendary films during the Popular Front era; the CGT union's 12-minute *La Grande lutte des mineurs* (The Miners' Great Struggle, 48) during the struggles of the post-Liberation years; and militant cinema, which flourished during May '68 and its aftermath. Central to this history is the demarcation separating the '68 phase from the previous periods dominated by the French Communist Party (PCF), the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) trade unions, and other associated organizations.

SLON's intervention in the working-class milieu can also be framed in terms of the French tradition of popular culture movements, i.e. the voluntarist concern of intellectuals and militants to educate workers and those deprived of proper educational opportunities. In a more radical form, it holds to the notion of awakening working-class consciousness within the framework of revolutionary syndicalism in France. Pre-'68 popular culture movements were active during the same periods as *cinéma ouvrier* and faced similar problems with regards to the dominance of the Communist Party during the postwar years. Having worked with two of the major players in the great popular culture movement of the Liberation period, Travail et Culture (TEC) from its inception in 1945, and then Peuple et Culture (PEC), Marker should have

known a thing or two. Asked what of his experience as an *animateur* in these organizations might have carried over to his SLON phase, he answered, "You can't understand the history of popular culture without knowing it was managed at the highest level of the CP's [Communist Party's] bureaucracy, and that the main feature of the years 1946 to 1950 is the battle between the Party's apparatchiki and certain unyielding individuals—something which naturally couldn't be repeated, at least in those terms, in the Sixties."

The "unyielding individuals" most likely include André Bazin, explicitly denounced by TEC for his article "The Myth of Stalinism in Soviet Cinema," and Marker himself, given the saga of the Communists' intervention on *DOC*, a monthly periodical produced as a joint project between PEC and TEC, which was launched under the direction of Marker and Joseph Rován in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

It seems almost preordained that during the Rhodiaceta strike, René Berchoud, a member of the popular culture organization CCPPPO (Centre Culturel Populaire de Palentes les Orchamps), would get the idea to invite Marker down<sup>2</sup>, and that during a dis-

1 *DOC* was subjected to a screening process by a representative of the Party secretariat, writer Edith Thomas. According to Rován, the vice-president of PEC, Marker resigned in protest.

2 In March 1967, Berchoud, a fervent admirer of *Cuba Si*, sent a letter to its author: "If you're not touring China, consider a trip to Besançon; I have the feeling important things are happening here." Marker for his part: "I received a letter. A priori, I thought not to go. It was morning. I drank my coffee, and suddenly decided to head for Besançon with two technicians, Antoine Bonfanti for the sound and Pierre Lhomme for the photo." Part of the 1995 interview mentioned above.

3 There were, in fact, two Medvedkin Groups, first at Besançon and then at Sochaux. The Sochaux Medvedkin Group was dissolved in 1974.

cussion after the screening of *À bientôt*, Marker in turn would challenge the workers to take up the camera themselves. When Pol Cébe, Henri Traforetti, and Georges Binetruy accepted that challenge, Marker baptized them with the name of his cherished Soviet touchstone, Alexander Medvedkin. Thus were the Medvedkin Groups<sup>3</sup> born—and with initial technical support from SLON, they would go on to make nearly a dozen films, some of them stunningly beautiful, most notably *Classe de lutte* (68/9) and the eight-part "Nouvelle Société" series.

In autumn 1968 SLON assumed a formal structure and in order to bypass financial and censorship problems registered itself as a Belgian company, with André Delvaux, the "godfather" of Belgian cinema, as its first managing direc-



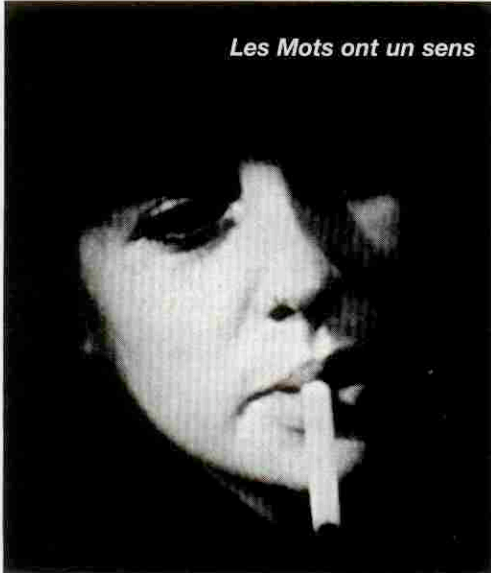
*À bientôt j'espère* (above) and *On vous parle de Prague* (below)



tor. (Eventually, in 1974, under the name ISKRA—Images, Son, Kinescope, Réalisation Audiovisuelle—but also the name of Lenin's newspaper, it reestablished itself under French statutes.) Although initially operating like other militant groups



(voluntary workforce, minimal technical facilities, direct method), by 1972 SLON had nonetheless managed to produce over 50 titles, and by 1976 was renting out about 20 films per week, more than any other film collective. In its political orientation, beyond a broad Leftist, anti-



capitalist, anti-imperialist stance, SLON emphasized non-sectarianism and set down only three conditions: SLON projects had to be political, tied closely to reality, and reject auteur cinema principles. Thus, unlike groups like the Communist Party-affiliated Dynadia or the Maoist Revolutionary Proletariat, SLON elected not to follow a particular party line—it produced both CGT pro-communist films and films critical of communism from within the Party, as well as films with Maoist or Trotskyite leanings. In addition there was a consistent engagement with Third World issues. In short, SLON encompassed more or less the entire spectrum of the post-'68 French Left.

Whereas there were no formal requirements for membership, its regular crew incorporated established professional technicians and directors such as cinematographer Pierre Lhomme (best known for *Le Joli Mai*, Jean-Pierre Melville's *Army in the Shadows*, and Jean Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore*), sound engineer Antoine Bonfanti (*Le Joli Mai*, Resnais's *Muriel*, Godard's *Tout va bien*, and Truffaut's *Day for Night*), and editors Jacqueline Meppiel (*Léon Morin, Priest*), Valérie Mayoux, and Bruno Muel. Last but not least, Inger Servolin must be mentioned for overseeing the financial

and managerial aspects of production.

SLON not only distributed its work through non-commercial circuits (at least 2,000 venues in 1976), such as politicized ciné clubs, unions, local committees, and political parties, but also opted for conventional theatrical release whenever possible. Strikingly, SLON's work was also taken up by television from a very early stage. Roughly 90 percent of the group's income in the Seventies came from sales to *foreign* television, including stations in West Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, and Quebec. Servolin's account of this aspect of SLON's life is telling; with 60-110 pounds of films in the trunk, she frequently drove around Europe for weeks on end previewing SLON's work for programmers. And though it was constantly beset by financial problems, SLON came to be seen by some, as Servolin retrospectively puts it, as "a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer of the Left."

Most surprising of all: at rue Henri Barbusse, just eight stops south of the Gare du Nord in Paris, SLON (or rather, ISKRA) continues to stand its ground today, the only surviving group of its kind from the Seventies. Servolin, who's still there, recalls 1974 as the point when things started to dissolve and the late Seventies and Eighties as virtually a desert for *engagé* filmmaking. Things took a turn for the better in 1986 when Culture Minister Jack Lang's audiovisual funding policies paved the way for ISKRA to co-produce with French terrestrial and cable television, notably Arte, France 3, Canal +, and Planète. This brought two vital changes: ISKRA gained access to higher, albeit still modest budgets (between 800,000 francs and 2 million francs); but it also became increasingly dependent on television, with over 50 percent of its total budget coming from the small screen. Today, without TV contacts, non-commercial producers like ISKRA would have no other access to public funding.

From 1967 to 1976 Marker produced over a dozen titles with SLON, either as director or editor. Thematically, his SLON films more or less fall into three categories, corresponding to three geographical poles and three passages of *engagement*. The first consists of films concerned with French political struggle, giving voice to the working class, show-

ing solidarity with the industrial strikes then occurring in unprecedented numbers, and countering the misinformation of the official French media: *À bientôt j'espère* (68); *Puisqu'on vous dit que c'est possible* (74); *Les Mots ont un sens: Portrait de François Maspéro* (70). The second involves so-called Third World issues, particularly in Latin America: *On vous parle de Brésil* (69); *The Battle of the Ten Million* (70); *On vous parle du Chili* (73). The third path leads to the country Marker refers to as "Mother Russia": the citadel, the locus, real or imagined, of Communism: *The Train Rolls On* (70) presents Medvedkin's ciné-train experiment while *On vous parle de Prague: le deuxième procès d'Artur London* (70) questions Soviet intervention in the East European satellite states.

In terms of form and aesthetics, the majority of Marker's SLON films (shot in 16mm black-and-white and grounded in direct cinema methods) show the predominance of fixed camera angles, long takes, shallow depth of field, and gray, grainy visual texture. Thus one of the characteristics central to the aesthetics of Marker's SLON work is its "austerity," readily accommodated by the extremely low budgets typical of militant cinema's restricted economy. According to SLON's production documents, the provisional budgets of Marker's films during this period range from 17,560 (*Les Mots*) to 55,999 francs (*La Bataille*)—at a time when the average cost of a French feature film was 1.48 million. During this period Marker also made further advances in compilation filmmaking, systematically developing the use of found and borrowed images as a device to foreground their ideological and historical connotation—excerpts from Costa-Gavras's 1970 feature *The Confession* and newsreel footage of the original 1952 Slansky show trial in *Le Deuxième procès d'Artur London*; quotes from Vertov's *Kino-Eye* in the first part of *The Train Rolls On*; not to mention his incomparable demonstration of the form's potential in *A Grin Without a Cat*, the summation of his SLON period.

Finally, Marker's SLON films can be approached as ciné-portraits—and, to a certain extent, self-portraits. Four titles take a figure with considerable historic import as their central subject—François Maspéro, Alexander Medvedkin, Fidel Castro, and Artur London—each of them representative of a Left front in accord with Marker's own



engagement. (Although London himself appears for only about two minutes in *Le Deuxième procès*, the film is as much about Yves Montand, Simone Signoret, and Jorge Semprun recanting the sins of their Stalinist past via London.) Additionally, outside the SLON orbit, Marker made the striking Montand portrait film *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Singer* (74). The essence of the portraiture in these films lies, first, in the duality of Marker's standpoint. The protagonists are staged as "social subjects," encountered at work in their professional field. And the questions Marker poses as an interviewer are always refracted through the prism of each subject's commitment to that work, which is aligned to Leftist causes. But simultaneously these films are expressions of friendship and comradeship. As such, underlying the formal distance, the visuals convey a palpable sense of intimacy and tenderness toward Marker's subjects. The shift to portraiture involves changes on a number of levels, from treatment of subject matter to narrative construction, but particularly with regard to how the subjects are visualized. Prior to montage, the intervention of voiceover, and the addition of music, this is fundamentally a question of framing—choice of angle, range, shot duration, etc.

Ultimately, Marker's work with SLON, from direct documentary and compilation films to portraiture, reintroduces something that goes back to the provenance of the classical political cinema of Eisenstein and Vertov: the *presence of the people*, or, in the words of philosopher and film theorist Gilles Deleuze, "the idea that cinema, as art of the masses, could be the supreme revolutionary or democratic art, which makes the masses a true subject." At the same time, Deleuze contrasts this with the central characteristic of the great works of modern political cinema: the acknowledgement of the *absence of the people*. Marker's attempt to swim against this tide might be due to two factors. The first might be inferred as Marker's utopian sentiments. The second might be the peculiarity of the circumstances surrounding May '68, an extraordinary moment in modern French history that enabled, however briefly, the reality of "the here and now" to gain utopian, revolutionary momentum—well, at least for some.

*Min Lee is a research student at the University of Warwick in England.*

# Total Recall

## FILM, VIDEO & MULTIMEDIA WORKS BY CHRIS MARKER COMPILED AND WRITTEN BY CATHERINE LUPTON, SAM DIORIO, MIN LEE & MICHAEL CHAIKEN, WITH ASSISTANCE FROM CHRIS MARKER

### **Statues Also Die / Les statues meurent aussi** (1950; co-directed with Alain Resnais, 30m)

An inquiry into the fate of African art and culture under colonialism. The works of art are made animate by Resnais's fluid direction, while Marker's commentary probes the contrast between "dead" museum artifacts and the living role of art as repository of cultural memory. Banned by French censors for ten years.

### **Olympia 52** (1952, 82m)

Conceived as an homage to Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the Olympic Games, the film underscores the "human contents" of the 1952 Helsinki games: the personalities of the champions, the beauty of their gestures, and the universal character of the international encounter. Produced by the organization *Peuple et Culture*, with its cultural *animateurs* acting as the core crew.

### **Sunday in Peking / Dimanche à Pékin** (1956, 22m)

An engaging personal account of Marker's visit to China, which obliquely addresses the country's political status in the contemporary world. The first film to establish Marker's trademark style of intimate commentary, drawing together the familiar and the exotic in a manner that unsettles conventional expectations.



### **Letter from Siberia / Lettre de Sibérie** (1958, 62m)

Imagining Siberia partway between the Ice Age and the space age, Marker uses live footage, intimate commentary, animation, and pure invention to explicate the complexity of contemporary Siberia. A landmark demonstration of how documentary images and sounds create versions of reality rather than simply reproducing it.

### **Description of a Struggle / Description d'un combat** (1960, 60m)

With a nod to Kafka, Marker turns his attention to Israel. The result is an optimistic portrait of a young nation at a turning point in its history. Having emerged from the horrors of the past, Israel is seen struggling to realize the present's uncertain promise. While acknowledging the tense divide between the Arab and Israeli communities and the ever-present specter of war, the film concentrates on the wonder of the everyday and the utopian potential of the future.

### **Cuba si** (1961, 52m)

Shot in January 1961, and edited while the Bay of Pigs invasion erupted, this enthusiastic, emotionally charged depiction of the Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro was banned for two years by the then Minister of Information. The starting point of Marker's long march with Castro, *Cuba Si* prefigures his Seventies engagements with other Latin American causes.

*Continued on page 45*



is also the film's most successful moment. Marker presents us with a documentary image that is at once full of significance and completely neutral: a street in Irkutsk. We see a bus going by and workers repairing the roadway, and then at the end of the shot a fellow with a somewhat strange face (or at least, little blessed by nature) who happens to pass in front of the camera. Marker then comments on these rather banal images from two opposed points of view: first, that of the Communist party line, in the light of which the unknown pedestrian becomes "a picturesque representative of the north country," and then in that of the reactionary perspective, in which he becomes "a troubling Asiatic."

This single, thought-provoking antithesis is a brilliant stroke of inspiration in itself, but its wit remains rather facile. It's then that the author offers a third commentary, impartial and minutely detailed, that objectively describes the unhappy Mongol as "a cross-eyed Yakout." And this time we are way beyond cleverness and irony, because what Marker has just demonstrated is that objectivity is even more false than the two opposed partisan points of view; that, at least in relation to certain realities, impartiality is an illusion. The operation we have observed is thus precisely dialectic, consisting of placing the same image in three different intellectual contexts and following the results.

### Intelligence and Talent

In order to give the reader a complete sense of this unprecedented enterprise, it remains for me to point out that Chris Marker does not restrict himself to using documentary images filmed on the spot, but uses any and all filmic material that might help his case—including still images (engravings and photos), of course, but also animated cartoons. Like McLaren, he does not hesitate to say the most serious things in the most comic way (as in the sequence with the mammoths). There is only one common denominator in this firework display of technique: intelligence. Intelligence and talent. It is only just to also point out that the photography is by Sacha Vierny, the music the work of Pierre Barbaud, and that the narration is excellently read by Georges Rouquier.

*This article first appeared in France-Observateur, October 30, 1958.*

*Continued from page 41*

### La Jetée (1962, 28m)

Presented (almost) entirely as a sequence of still images with voiceover narration, *La Jetée* tells the story of a man possessed by an image from his childhood who is subjected to time travel experiments after World War III. Marker's best-known film and one of cinema's most original and haunting works, *La Jetée* brings into pristine focus Marker's abiding preoccupations with time, memory, death, and the image. Remade by Terry Gilliam in 1995 as *12 Monkeys*.

### Le Joli Mai (1962, co-d. with Pierre Lhomme; Part 1: Prière sur la Tour Eiffel. Part 2: Le retour de Fantômas; 165m)

A revealing portrait of French society at the close of the Algerian War, made up of interviews with a cross-section of Parisians who discuss their hopes, fears, and beliefs. Marker's first venture into cinéma vérité, *Le Joli Mai* illuminates the sharp contradictions of French society by granting its subjects the space to voice their opinions, then uses montage to highlight and compare radically different experiences and values.

### The Koumiko Mystery / Le Mystère

#### Koumiko (1965, 54m)

A meeting with a young Japanese woman during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics leads to an extended correspondence when the narrator-filmmaker returns to Paris. As well as being an homage to the French New Wave, *The Koumiko Mystery* marks the beginning of Marker's fascination with Japan, and pokes gentle fun at the new trend of market research by asking in what terms we can really know another human being.



### If I Had Four Camels / Si j'avais quatre dromedaires (1966, 49m)

A photographer and two of his friends peruse and comment upon photographs taken all over the world during the previous decade. Composed like *La Jetée*, this meditation on what photographs mean and why they are taken is a prototype for later projects like *Sans soleil*, *Zapping Zone*, and *Immemory*, in which Marker offers a map of his own memory by sifting through images he has made in the past.

### Far from Vietnam / Loin du Vietnam (1967, 115m)

Marker organized and edited this collective anti-Vietnam War film, featuring contributions by Resnais, Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, and Claude Lelouche. Key

for its presentation of both the necessity and limits of political protest on the part of Western filmmakers and intellectuals, *Far from Vietnam* was the first film produced by SLON (Société pour la lancement des œuvres nouvelles). (Segments by Agnès Varda and Ruy Guerra were omitted from the final version, although Marker insisted that they receive onscreen credit.)

### The Sixth Face of the Pentagon / La Sixième face du Pentagone

(1968; co-d. with François Reichenbach, 28m)

This early SLON short documents the October 1967 march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam





War. Marker and Reichenbach capture the drama, tension, and dreamlike absurdity of the event, the first major demonstration against the war (and, by extension, the American establishment) in the U.S. Cameos by Shirley Clarke, Abbie Hoffman (who with fellow Yippies attempt to exorcize, then levitate the compound), and Peter, Paul and Mary. The title comes from a Zen proverb: "If the five sides of the Pentagon seem impregnable, attack the sixth." (SLON)

**À bientôt j'espère** (1968; co-d. with Mario Marret, 55m)

Account of the 1967 strike and occupation by textile workers at the Rhodiaceta factory in Besançon. A year ahead of May '68, extensive interviews with the workers describing degrading work conditions and demanding the right to education and cultural life on a par with improved pay and conditions. (FIRST RUN/ICARUS: [www.frif.com](http://www.frif.com))

**On vous parle du Brésil: Tortures** (1969, 20m)

Freed and flown to Cuba in exchange for the American ambassador, kidnapped on September 4, 1969, by a group of Brazilians, five former political prisoners testify to what they have been through in jail. (SLON/ISKRA: [iskra@iskra.fr](mailto:iskra@iskra.fr))

**On vous parle de Prague: le deuxième procès d'Artur London** (1969, 28m)

One part documentation of the making of Costa-Gavras' 1970 feature *The Confession (L'Aveu)*, one part expression of solidarity with *The Confession's* principal collaborators (actors Yves Montand and Simone Signoret, writer Jorge Semprun, Artur London), the film evolves around a central question of historical import: the truth of the 1952 Slansky trial, the last of the great Stalinist show trials in Eastern Europe, of which Artur London was one of the 14 victims. (SLON/ISKRA)

**Jour de Tournage** (1969, 11m)

A sequel to *On vous parle de Prague*, capturing the essence of a day's work on the shooting of *The Confession*.

**On vous parle du Brésil: Carlos Marighela** (1970, 17m)

Profile of the Brazilian freedom fighter who led the struggle against Brazil's U.S.-supported military dictatorship before being shot by police in 1969. This austere film discusses Marighela's brand of violent armed engagement as a possible type of revolutionary action, retelling his story through layered anonymous testimonies. (SLON/ISKRA)

**On vous parle de Paris: Les mots ont un sens** (1970, 20m)

Portrait of the left-wing publisher and bookshop owner François Maspéro. The film combines interview footage with short montage sequences that concisely affirm Maspéro's belief in the role of counter-information as a vital tool of revolutionary struggle. (SLON/ISKRA)

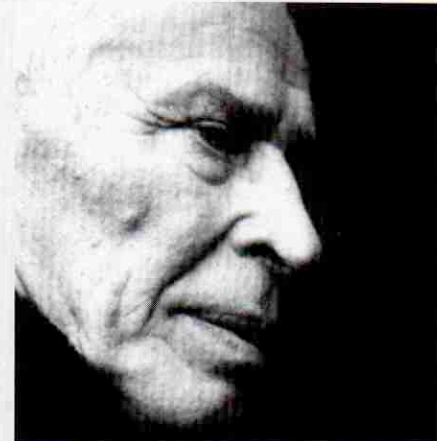
**The Battle of the Ten Million / La Bataille des dix millions** (1970, 58m)

Beginning with the admission "This year, Cuba isn't fashionable," the film reaffirms Marker's solidarity with the Cuban revolution. Utilizing Santiago Alvarez's documentary footage and TV reports of Castro's speeches, Marker depicts the national drama of the 1969-70 *zafra*, the aborted ten-million-ton sugar harvest, through a brilliant feat of montage. (SLON/ISKRA) (U.K. DIST: CONTEMPORARY FILMS - [www.contemporaryfilms.com](http://www.contemporaryfilms.com))

**The Train Rolls On / Le Train en marche** (1971, 32m)

A key SLON project, theatrically released as a preface to the Soviet director

Alexander Medvedkin's reissued 1934 feature *Happiness (Scahastie)*. With great admiration and sympathy, Marker shows the 70-year-old Medvedkin at a Paris train depot in 1970, "for the first time telling in his own words the story of the *Kinopoez'*"—the Thirties ciné-train experiment. According to Marker, "a film-train, carrying cameras, lab, editing tables, screening material, and even actors, produced the first rail movies, films made on the spot, in collaboration with local people (workers in factories, peasants in *Kolkhozs*), shot in one day, processed during the night, edited the following day, and screened in front of the very people who participated in its making." (SLON/ISKRA)



**Vive la baleine** (1972; co-d. with Mario Ruspoli, 30m)

An informal sequel to Ruspoli's 1956 short on whale hunting, *Les Hommes de la Baleine*. This time, however, Marker and Ruspoli take the whale's side. The result is an intricately detailed history of the relationship between whales and humans that touches on Melville, Japan, and advances in harpoon technology before reaching an abrupt and chilling conclusion.

**Embassy / L'Ambassade** (1973, 20m)

A Super-8 film diary found in a French embassy, recording an assorted group of political activists who have taken refuge there following a military coup. A work of fictional reality in which Marker re-imagines the events and consequences of the Pinochet coup in Chile from a startling new perspective. (LES FILMS DU JEUDI: [filmsdujeudi@wanadoo.fr](mailto:filmsdujeudi@wanadoo.fr))

**Puisqu'on vous dit que c'est possible / Since We Say It's Possible** (1974; 60m)

An hour-long documentary about the landmark strike at the Lip watch factory in Besançon, France. In 1973, workers unhappy with company mismanagement occupied the factory, wrested control from the owners, and ran the business at a profit until they were shut down by armed police nine months later. According to Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, Marker's involvement in this project was limited to editing; the bulk of the film appears to have been shot by the alternative media collective CREPAC (Center for Research on Popular Education and Cultural Action).

**The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Singer / La Solitude du chanteur de fond** (1974, 60m)

Portrait of actor and singer Yves Montand rehearsing and performing his 1974 benefit concert for Chilean refugees at the Paris Olympia. Observes and conveys Montand's vitality, grace, and self-analysis as a performer—as well as his famous arguments with pianist Bob Castella.

**Spiral / La Spirale** (1975; collective film, 155m)

Marker oversaw the production of this collaborative work by Armand Mattelard, Jacqueline Mappiel, and Valérie Mayoux, and contributed to the completion of the commentary. The film, jointly produced by Reggane and Seuil Audiovisuel, remains one of the most thorough and acute analyses of the collapse of Chile's Popular Unity government. It traces the events from the election of Salvador Allende in September 1970 to General Pinochet's coup d'état in September 1973, incorporating a wealth of material from film and TV archives.



**A Grim Without a Cat / Le Fond de l'air est rouge** (1977, 240m; 1993, international version 180m; Part 1: Fragile Hands/Les Mains fragiles. Part 2: Severed Hands/Les Mains coupées.)

A two-part exploration of the changing fortunes of the international revolutionary Left from 1967 to 1977, made up of archival footage and outtakes from militant films. This monumental analysis positions film representation as the substance of recent Left history, and deploys montage and the contrast of images and commentary as methods of incisive historical inquiry. The French title is a play on the expression "Le fond de l'air est frais." Marker explains: "The idea is that on a fair day you can perceive some freshness in the background, provided you pay attention. Similarly, the idea of revolution was already present but only for particularly sensitive people." Marker adds: "There are in fact *two* three-hour versions. One was made for England's Channel 4 in 1988, minus whatever was too bluntly 'French-oriented' (that's what was shown in U.S.). The other one was meant for France, shortened simply because four hours was really too long and many elements (especially at the end) which were crystal clear at the time I made it, had become so obscured in people's memories years later that I'd need an extra hour just to explain them. In both cases the process was one of shortening, never modifying, so when it was released last year I was a bit sorry to read in most U.S. reviews the words 're-edit' or 'new cut,' which implies rewriting History. The thing remains what it originally was, simply shorter for the comfort of the viewer (with a brief updating text at the end)."

(FIRST RUN/ICARUS)

**Quand le siècle a pris formes ("Guerre et Revolution") / When the Century Took Shape ("War and Revolution")** (1978, Installation for the "Paris-Berlin" exhibition at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris; 12m)

A multi-screen evocation of the dawn of the 20th century, including WWI and the Russian revolution. Screens answer one another in a checkerboard pattern. A first draft of what *Silent Movie* would later become.

**Junkopia** (1981, 6m)

Filmed in July 1981, *Junkopia* is a meditation on the weathered sculptures along the shoreline of Emeryville beach near San Francisco. Set to a musique concrete score, Marker forgoes his trademark commentary and uses montage to create a dance macabre of "found" art objects, which include the skeletal remains of a wooden airplane, a metal kangaroo, and a lavishly decorated fish. Punctuated by shots of a nearby freeway, *Junkopia* is a haunting elegy to the discarded relics of a not-so-distant past.

**Sans soleil / Sunless** (1982, 100m)

An unseen woman reads from the letters of a globetrotting film cameraman, who ponders the enigma of memory through footage gathered in Japan, Africa, Iceland, France, and the U.S. Arguably Marker's masterpiece, *Sans soleil* is a text of digression that weaves together poetic reveries and political insights in a breathtaking meditation on history, memory, and "the dreams of the human race." (NEW YORKER FILMS: [www.newyorkerfilms.com](http://www.newyorkerfilms.com))

**2084** (1984, 10m)

The centenary of the French trade union movement is re-imagined from a point 100 years in the future. Marker deploys computer imagery and the physical processes of filmmaking to indicate the role of human volition and aspiration in creating history. (ISKRA)

**A.K.** (1985, 71m)

The legendary Akira Kurosawa filmed at work on the set of *Ran*. Maintaining a respectful distance, Marker combines close observation of

Kurosawa's methods with lateral reflections on the major themes of his films.

**Mémoires pour Simone** (1986, 65m)

A compendium of clips from Simone Signoret's films and TV appearances, commissioned by the Cannes Film Festival (and never publicly screened since) to commemorate her following her death in September 1985. A moving tribute to an old friend in which Marker adroitly juxtaposes scenes from Signoret's films to illuminate aspects of her life and public persona.

**The Owl's Legacy / L'Héritage de la chouette** (1989, 13 x 26m)

A 13-part "cultural documentary" produced for the TV channel La Sept, tracing the roots of the Western world to ancient Greek civilization. Each chapter is structured around a "quasi-policier" investigation of one of 13 words of Greek origin (Symposium, Olympianism, Democracy, Nostalgia, Amnesia, Mathematics, Logomachia, Cosmology, Mythology, Misogyny, Tragedy, Music, Philosophy), based on dialogues with a host of illustrious experts from all walks of cultural life, including George Steiner, Elia Kazan, Cornélius Castoriadis, Iannis Xenakis, and Theo Angelopoulos. Encyclopedic and erudite, it brings out the best of the "scholar" in Marker.

**Berliner Ballade** (1990, TV version 25m/complete version 29m)

Borrowing its name from Robert A. Stemmle's 1948 comedy, Marker's made-for-TV travelogue maps leftist politics in Berlin six months after the fall of the wall. An extension of the site-based interrogations in everything from *Letter from Siberia* to *Sans soleil*, this short presents a German left struggling to regain its footing in the wake of the country's sudden and violent swing to the right.

**Getting Away With It** (1990, 5m)

Music video for the U.K. pop duo Electronic (Bernard Sumner and Johnny Marr). Produced by Michael Shamberg, the clip was shot by cinematographer/director Yves Angelo and features actress Catherine Belkoudja. Marker

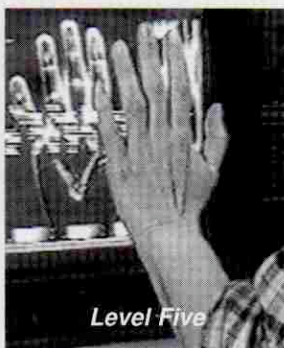
shot in the Sauvage Forest of Rambouillet and Abbey Road Studios in London. The result was rejected (purportedly because Sumner hated animals) and reshot by the group. Marker would salvage the original clip in his multimedia installation *Zapping Zone*.

**Zapping Zone (Proposals for an Imaginary Television)** (1985-1990,

Made for the "Passages de l'image" exhibit at the Pompidou Center, Paris) This open-ended multimedia installation brought together short films on a wide variety of topics (animals, friends, politics, mathematics, spaces urban and otherwise) and simultaneously screened them on monitors and computer terminals strategically distributed throughout the exhibition space. By walking around the gallery viewers channel surf through Marker's imaginary in a manner that directly anticipated *Immemory's* labyrinthine passageways. Marker: "A rather chaotic display of TV sets and computer screens, playing on the near-impossible task of focusing on a precise target in the middle of the cyber-noise." A QuickTime sample of the exhibition is available online at: <http://www.newmedia-arts.org>. The exact program changed depending on where it was exhibited, but it generally included excerpts from *Sans soleil*, *Le Joli Mai*, and *Level Five*, as well as the following shorts:

*Matta '85* (14m\*) Chilean artist Roberto Matta guides the viewer through his work, imitates a snail, shows his belly button, dabbles in metaphysics, and comments with wisdom and distance ("The Matta of others doesn't matta to me") on his painting.

*Christo '85* (24m) A short documentary about Christo wrapping the Pont Neuf in Paris. Marker records the reactions of bemused bystanders.





*Bestiaire* (9m\*) A video gallery of familiar animals.

Part 1: *Chat écoutant la musique/Cat Listening to Music* (2m) A warm portrait of Guillaume-en-Egypte listening, apparently, to Federico Mompou.

Part 2: *An Owl Is an Owl Is an Owl* (3m) Owl portrait gallery: who is who?

Part 3: *Zoo piece* (2m) A sad and tender bestiary.

*Tokyo Days* (1988, 24m\*) Video journal of a city at work and play. Tokyo watches, listens, and sings as the camera takes in string quartets, escalators, robot koto players, Arielle Dombasle playing Pole Position, and a lengthy exploration of what looks like the basement market of a Takashimaya department store.

*Berlin '90* (1990, 20m\*) A journey through post-wall Berlin at election time, closely related to *Berliner Ballade*.

*Photo Brouse* (301 photos, 17m). A virtual slide show of Marker's photographs.

*Détour Ceaulescu* (8m). Perhaps Marker's angriest film, delivering biting commentary on media coverage of the trial and execution of Nicolae Ceaucescu

and his wife.

*Theory of Sets/Théorie des ensembles* (1991, 11m)

Asking "how did Noah classify the animals on the ark?" this short introduces viewers to "ensemble theory." Cameo by Snoopy. An excerpt from this film is available here: <http://www.artvideo.free.fr/musee/b-autres.html>

Other films in the exhibition included:

*Tarkovsky '86* (26m); *Eclats* (20m); *Spectre* (27m); *Azulmoon* (1992, loop); *Coin Fenêtre* (1992, 9m); *SLON Tango* (1993, 4m\*); *Bull-fight/Okinawa* (1994, 4m); and *E-clip-se* (1999, 8m).

(\* AVAILABLE FROM ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX, NYC. [www.eai.org](http://www.eai.org))

### **The Last Bolshevik / Le Tombeau d'Alexandre** (1993, 2 x 52m)

The life of Soviet director Alexander Medvedkin (1900-1989) is the thread that Marker pulls to investigate the history and legacy of Soviet communism. Testimonies to Medvedkin's life and significance form part of a wider inquiry into how we can conceive history in a world dominated by iconic images of the past, conducted via the juxtaposition and digital manipulation of visual archive materials. (FIRST RUN/ICARUS)

### **Prime Time in the Camps / Le 20 Heures dans les camps** (1993, 28m)

A group of Bosnian refugees from the Roska camp in Slovenia create their own television broadcasts by pirating signals from CNN, Radio Sarajevo, and Sky News. The young production team is interviewed and filmed at work, each member drawing on their own experiences of war and exile and expressing aspirations to preserve their dislocated cultural heritage and offer a genuine representation of refugee life. (ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX)

### **Video Haikus** (1994)

*Petite ceinture, Chaika & Owl Gets in Your Eyes* (1m each). Marker: "Small pieces, the title says all."

### **Silent Movie** (installation, Wexner Center, Ohio, 1994-95)

Housed in a crude steel tower, five vertically-stacked television monitors play random sequences of clips from four thematically organized groupings ("The Journey," "The Face," "The Gesture," and "The Waltz") and one of intertitles, taken from pre-sound films or re-enacted in their spirit by Catherine Belkhdja, and accompanied by music. Commissioned by the Wexner Center in Ohio to celebrate the centenary of cinema, Marker employs a computer interface to scramble the image sequences and thus act as mediator

of a collective cultural nostalgia for the early decades of the cinema.

### **Blue helmet / Casque bleu** aka *Temoin d'une casque bleu* aka *Gedanken eines Blauhelms* (1995, 26m)

François Crémieux discusses his experiences as a member of the 1993 U.N. peace-keeping force in Bosnia. Marker's barely edited, fixed-camera approach provides Crémieux ample room to elaborate a lucid narrative of his time abroad. His statements attest to the mission's numerous flaws and describe how the well-being of the local community was threatened by ill-conceived administrative decisions.

### **Level Five** (1996, 106m)

"Laura" (Catherine Belkhdja) must finish designing a computer game about the Battle of Okinawa left unfinished by her dead lover. Returning to Japan to address a forgotten WWII trauma through the medium of computer games and the Internet, Marker compels us to take new media seriously as vehicles for historical investigation, and anticipates the ways in which they are becoming archival sites of collective memory.

### **Immemory One** (1997 CD-ROM; U.S. edition 2003)

The most recent topography of Marker's memory presented as a CD-ROM, divided into seven Zones: Cinema, War, Photography, Poetry, Memory, Museum, and X-plugs. The fluid, multidirectional navigation of the CD-ROM liberates Marker's memory from the linear constraints of film, and allows the user to digress at their own pace through the hypermedia fabric of his past. (EXACT CHANGE: [www.exactchange.com](http://www.exactchange.com))

### **One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich / Une Journée d'Andrei Arsenevich** (1999, 55m)

A study of director Andrei Tarkovsky that interweaves film and video diaries of Tarkovsky's last months in Paris, behind-the-scenes footage from the shoot of *The Sacrifice*, and extracts from the Russian director's films. Marker offers both a lyrical exposition of the central themes in Tarkovsky's work, and discovers arresting images that suggest profound connections between his life and films. (FIRST RUN/ICARUS)

### **Un Maire au Kosovo** (2000, 27m)

Interview/portrait of Bajram Rexhepi, the mayor of Mitrovica, a former surgeon who fought in the UCK (Liberation Army) and who, according to Marker, "says quite sensible things about his fight, his country, and the future of the Balkans (incidentally, two years later he was appointed Prime Minister by Rugova)."

### **Worried April / Avril inquiet** (2001, 52m)

Marker writes: "A series of portraits which was to be the second wing of my 'Kosovo report.' Still unfinished. I announced it for 2001 but since then so many things happened.... And as nobody cares about Kosovo anymore anyway—until the next war." The title is a reference to Albanian writer Ismail Kadare's novel *Avril brisé* (*Broken April*).

### **Remembrance of Things to Come / Le Souvenir d'un avenir** (2002; co-d. with Yannick Bellon, 42m)

Marker's third work composed entirely of still photographs. In collaboration with Yannick Bellon, a pioneering female director in France, it draws on the archives of her late mother, the photographer Denise Bellon (around 25,000 negatives from 1937 to 1956). With 50 years of hindsight, Marker shows how Bellon's images of the Thirties Parisian milieu and prewar travel photographs from North Africa capture traces of the coming future—WWII and postwar colonial insurrections. (FIRST RUN/ICARUS)

**For Part II of this filmography—a comprehensive list of all Marker's film collaborations—go to [www.filmlinc.com](http://www.filmlinc.com)**





# Printed Matter

## THE AUTHOR BEHIND THE AUTEUR: PRE-MARKER MARKER

At times Chris Marker seems as famous for his obscurity as for his films. Since the Fifties, he has crafted a body of work that is more talked about than seen. Much of the English-language critical writing on Marker concentrates on his recent work and leaves the start of his career completely out of the picture.

And rightly so. The little information circulating is both contradictory and vague: born just outside of Paris to a family of Latin

American property owners, a student of Sartre's in the Thirties, American paratrooper during WWII, schooling in Indiana. . . . By the end of the Forties, however, the picture becomes slightly clearer. At this point, Marker began a serious career as a writer. In addition to releasing a number of books (*L'homme et sa liberté*, *Regards sur le mouvement ouvrier*, *Giraudoux par lui-même*, and his novel *Le Cœur net*), articles, essays, poems, translations, and short stories appeared in a wide number of French periodicals between 1947 and 1953. Few of these pieces have been reprinted since their original publication.

Although almost completely unknown today, they shed important light on Marker's subsequent work. What were these writings about and how do they relate to his films?

The bulk of Marker's early work appeared in the journals *DOC* and *Esprit*. *DOC* was a collaborative effort by *Peuple et Culture* and *Travail et Culture*, two leftist cul-

tural associations that made a massive effort to "democratize" French culture after WWII. Their goal was to make art, theater, literature, and film accessible

to the largest possible audience. *DOC* was intended as a resource for the organization's members and provided access to a wide variety of material: important texts by writers like Bertolt Brecht and John Dos Passos, biographical sketches of great composers, book and film reviews, and practical advice about running ciné-clubs and amateur theater groups.

Marker edited *DOC*'s early issues, publishing texts by André Bazin, Benigno Cacères, and actor Jean-Louis Barrault as well as a number of his own pieces. His contributions range from a maniacally detailed guide for staging Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro* to a tantalizing 1948 essay entitled "Photography as a Means of Expression." Ostensibly a how-to guide for amateur photographers, the piece also works as a left-handed *ars poetica* in which Marker develops an early version of the collage-based aesthetic that would form the foundation of his future work.

During this same period, Marker was also a regular contributor to Emmanuel Mounier's leftist Catholic review *Esprit*. If the pieces for *DOC* are rooted in humanist pedagogy, *Esprit* offered him a greater opportunity for creative expression. This journal was an important presence

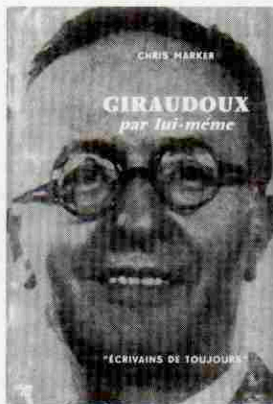
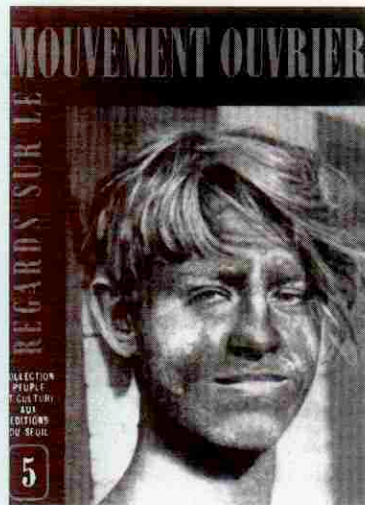
writing to later films: the apocalyptic visions of his 1947 short story "Till the End of Time," for example, anticipate *La Jetée* by 15 years.

Marker's most abundant contributions to *Esprit* can be found in the monthly column "Journal à plusieurs voix" (Journal of Many Voices). A partial record of the journal's Monday-night roundtables, this umbrella feature brought together op-ed pieces, bits of poetry, statistics, political critique, and art criticism, creating a montage of the key issues in contemporary intellectual life. Marker's contributions ranged from the factual (an analysis of the Tito Affair in Yugoslavia) to the fantastic. On a number of occasions he contributed short pieces called "Newsreels," which used the cinema as a tem-

plate for satires of current events. His comic take on topical issues predates later commentaries for films such as *Letter from Siberia* and gives evidence of Marker's fascination with the historicity of the often absurd minutiae of the everyday.

Over the course of the early Fifties, Marker's interest in cinema became increasingly pronounced: the occasional reference to film gradually developed into long pieces about Cocteau's *Orphée* and the Dr. Seuss-scripted cartoon *Gerald McBoing Boing*. At this time, he also began to contribute to *Positif* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, publishing pieces about German and Mexican cinema, the Hollywood blacklist, and "the most beautiful film in all the world," Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

By 1952 Marker had begun directing films, and when his second feature, *Sunday in Peking*, was released in 1956 he had long since stopped editing *DOC*, and his work for *Esprit* had slowed to a trickle. At the same time, it's too easy to



in France's postwar intellectual landscape. During the late Forties and early Fifties, its contributors included Paul Ricœur, Jean Cayrol, Albert Béguin, Bazin, and Mounier himself. Here Marker published social criticism (with Henri Michard, he compiled a 60-page dossier on juvenile delinquents), book reviews (of Langston Hughes, C.S. Lewis, and Stephan Zweig,

among others), and essays (on jazz, politics, films, and, naturally, cats) as well as poetry and fiction. Here too, it is possible to draw a straight line from his



## BY MICHAEL CHAIKEN AND SAM DIORIO

say that Marker's writing stops when his films begin. The early texts demonstrate again and again that any separation of Marker the filmmaker from Marker the writer would be false. Ultimately, what's most impressive about these pieces is that years before his involvement with cinema, the dual commit-

ment to visionary aesthetics and social engagement was already in place. Pre-Marker Marker? Doesn't exist.

*Michael Chaiken is the Program Director for Film at the International House in Philadelphia. Sam DiIorio is Assistant professor of French at Hunter College.*

### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Le Cœur net** (Éditions du Seuil, 1949)  
The fate of a heroic young mail pilot in Indochina transforms the lives of three other characters. Strikingly indebted to cinematic techniques of intercutting and vivid juxtaposition, this assured and lyrical novel established Marker as a distinct voice in postwar French literature.

**L'homme et sa liberté: Jeu Dramatique pour la Veillée** (Éditions du Seuil, 1949)

In typical fashion, Marker accomplished his sole venture into theater without writing a word for the stage. *L'homme et sa liberté* is a savvy montage of texts (by Cocteau, Michaux, Jarry, Giraudoux, and others) and music (Piaf, Bach, Russian folk songs) grouped around the idea of liberty, which is framed in the introduction as "one of the essential themes for our generation." The result, part starting point for amateur theater groups, part parlor game for close friends, is a handmade work of art meant to speak to readers alienated by the empty gestures of mainstream product.

**Giraudoux par lui-même** (Éditions du Seuil, 1952)

Critical essay on the French playwright Jean Giraudoux. With passion and erudition, Marker illuminates themes and preoccupations in Giraudoux's work that would come to characterize his own: personal discretion, the power of imagination to redeem human reality, and love of the mundane and humble things of the world.

**Regards sur le mouvement ouvrier** (with Benigno Cacérès: Éditions du

Seuil, 1952)  
Another montage text, this time assembled with writer and activist Cacérès. This introduction to the history of the worker's movement was intended to appeal to a broad public. Starting with Brecht's "Questions from a worker who reads," the pocket-sized collection is packed with a wealth of material, including sheet music, Daumier caricatures, and passages from everyone from Queneau to Chrétien de Troyes.

**Coréennes** (Éditions du Seuil, 1959)  
This book, the first and (as yet) only in a proposed series of *ciné-essais*, is very much in keeping with the films Marker was making in the late Fifties. Like both *Letter from Siberia* and *Description of a Struggle*, *Coréennes* is an optimistic travelogue that maps a country in the process of rebuilding itself. Marker's travels through North Korea are documented through clusters of images (photos, maps, comics) and stretches of text (poems, legends, essays, lists) that form a double portrait of a nation struggling to recover after a devastating war and an outsider coming to grips with the ebb and flow of history. Ultimately, what holds the two domains together is the warmth of individual presence: as the final letter to "Chat G" affirms, "At the heart of this voyage is human friendship. The rest is silence."

**Commentaires 1** (Éditions du Seuil, 1961)

*Les Statues meurent aussi, Dimanche à Pékin, Lettre de Sibérie, L'Amérique rêve, Description d'un combat, Cuba Si*



**Commentaires 2** (Éditions du Seuil, 1967)  
*Le Mystère Koumiko, Soy Mexico* (imaginary film), *Si j'avais quatre dromedaires*  
Marker's film commentaries, including one for an "imaginary" film that was never actually shot, are published with sequences of stills that sample the projected films while permitting them to exist in another form. The *Commentaires* confirm Marker's graceful, witty, and astute commentaries as literary works in their own right.

**Le Dépayés** (Éditions Herscher, 1982)  
A companion work to *Sans soleil*, this second photo text compilation expands Marker's meditations on Japan, offering alternative takes on the issues of memory, identity, and the image.

**La Renfermée, La Corse** (Marie Susini, photos by Marker: Éditions du Seuil, 1981)  
Marker's crisp black-and-white photos are interwoven with a lyrical text by Susini. Both text and image are attempts to reclaim Corsica, to develop a more complex understanding of a landscape by reading it through the intersection of public history and individual memory rather than the reductive exoticism of tourist bureaus.

**Silent Movie: La Petite Illustration Cinématographique** (Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995)  
The catalogue for Marker's *Silent Movie* installation contains essays by Marker, Sherri Geldin, and curator Bill Horrigan, plus quotes and photos from the exhibition.





# Bazin on Marker

## IN A NEW, NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED TRANSLATION, LEGENDARY FILM CRITIC ANDRÉ BAZIN HERALDS THE CINEMA OF THE FUTURE.

Chris Marker, as you may remember, wrote the narration for *Bibliothèque Nationale (Toute la mémoire du monde)* and *Statues Also Die* (which the public still has only been able to see in a version cut to half its length by the censorship board). These incisive, powerful texts, in which cutting irony plays hide and seek with poetry, would be enough to secure their author a privileged place in the field of short filmmaking, currently the liveliest fringe of the French cinema. As the writer of the narrations for these films by his friend Resnais, with whom he shares a marvelous understanding, Chris Marker

restrictions of the short format seemed inadequate for such a big subject. And it also has to be said that the images, while often very beautiful, did not supply sufficient documentary material in the end. It left us wanting more. But the seed of the dialectic between word and image that Marker would go on to sow in *Letter from Siberia* was already there. In the new film, it grows to the dimensions appropriate to a feature film, and takes the weight.

### “A Documentary Point of View”

How to describe *Letter from Siberia*? Negatively, at first, in pointing out that

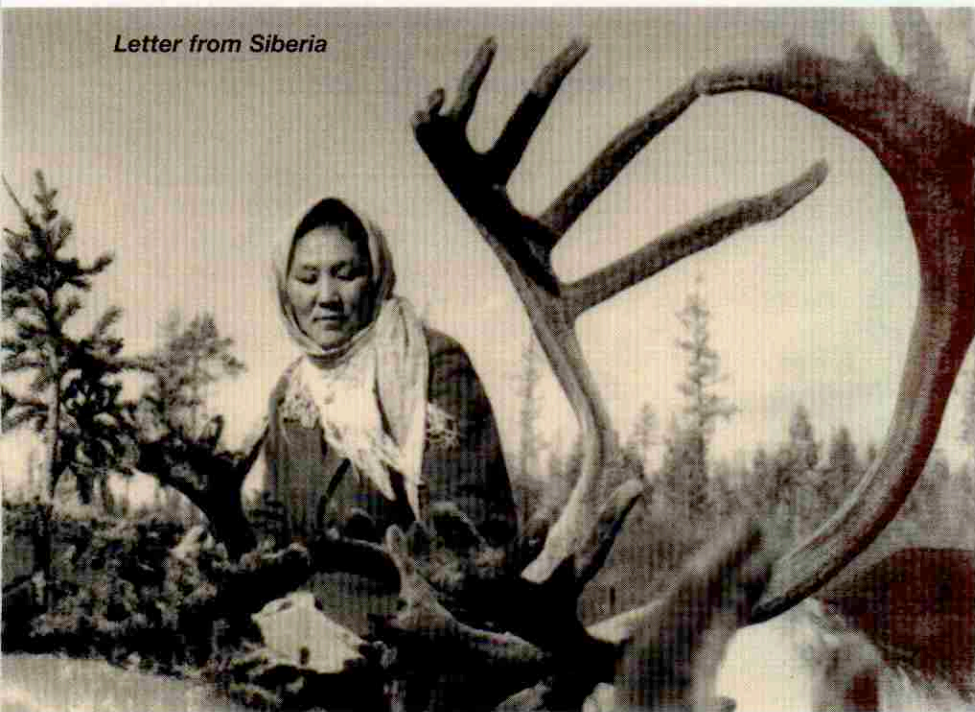
*Siberia* resembles none of them. So, we must take a closer look. I would propose the following approximate description: *Letter from Siberia* is an essay on the reality of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report. Or, perhaps, to borrow Jean Vigo’s formulation of *À propos de Nice* (“a documentary point of view”), I would say, an essay documented by film. The important word is “essay,” understood in the same sense that it has in literature — an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well.

Generally, even in politically engaged documentaries or those with a specific point to make, the image (which is to say, the uniquely cinematic element) effectively constitutes the primary material of the film. The orientation of the work is expressed through the choices made by the filmmaker in the montage, with the commentary completing the organization of the sense thus conferred on the document. With Marker it works quite differently. I would say that the primary material is intelligence, that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence. The usual process is reversed. I will risk another metaphor: Chris Marker brings to his films an absolutely new notion of montage that I will call “horizontal,” as opposed to traditional montage that plays with the sense of duration through the relationship of shot to shot. Here, a given image doesn’t refer to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow, but rather it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said.

### From the Ear to the Eye

Better, it might be said that the basic element is the beauty of what is said and heard, that intelligence flows from the audio element to the visual. The montage has been forged from ear to eye. Because of space limitations, I will describe only a single example, which

*Letter from Siberia*



has already profoundly altered the visual relationship between text and image. But his ambition was obviously even more radical, and it became necessary for him to make his own films.

First there was *Sunday in Peking*, which justly won a prize at the 1956 Festival of Tours, and now, at last, there is the extraordinary *Letter from Siberia*. Admirable as *Sunday in Peking* was, it was also slightly disappointing, in that the

it resembles absolutely nothing that we have ever seen before in films with a documentary basis —films with “a subject.” But then it becomes necessary to say what it is. Flatly and objectively, it is a film report from a Frenchman given the rare privilege of traveling freely in Siberia, covering several thousand kilometers. Although in the last three years we have seen several film reports from French travelers in Russia, *Letter from*



is also the film's most successful moment. Marker presents us with a documentary image that is at once full of significance and completely neutral: a street in Irkutsk. We see a bus going by and workers repairing the roadway, and then at the end of the shot a fellow with a somewhat strange face (or at least, little blessed by nature) who happens to pass in front of the camera. Marker then comments on these rather banal images from two opposed points of view: first, that of the Communist party line, in the light of which the unknown pedestrian becomes "a picturesque representative of the north country," and then in that of the reactionary perspective, in which he becomes "a troubling Asiatic."

This single, thought-provoking antithesis is a brilliant stroke of inspiration in itself, but its wit remains rather facile. It's then that the author offers a third commentary, impartial and minutely detailed, that objectively describes the unhappy Mongol as "a cross-eyed Yakout." And this time we are way beyond cleverness and irony, because what Marker has just demonstrated is that objectivity is even more false than the two opposed partisan points of view; that, at least in relation to certain realities, impartiality is an illusion. The operation we have observed is thus precisely dialectic, consisting of placing the same image in three different intellectual contexts and following the results.

### Intelligence and Talent

In order to give the reader a complete sense of this unprecedented enterprise, it remains for me to point out that Chris Marker does not restrict himself to using documentary images filmed on the spot, but uses any and all filmic material that might help his case—including still images (engravings and photos), of course, but also animated cartoons. Like McLaren, he does not hesitate to say the most serious things in the most comic way (as in the sequence with the mammoths). There is only one common denominator in this firework display of technique: intelligence. Intelligence and talent. It is only just to also point out that the photography is by Sacha Vierny, the music the work of Pierre Barbaud, and that the narration is excellently read by Georges Rouquier.

*This article first appeared in France-Observateur, October 30, 1958.*

*Continued from page 41*

### La Jetée (1962, 28m)

Presented (almost) entirely as a sequence of still images with voiceover narration, *La Jetée* tells the story of a man possessed by an image from his childhood who is subjected to time travel experiments after World War III. Marker's best-known film and one of cinema's most original and haunting works, *La Jetée* brings into pristine focus Marker's abiding preoccupations with time, memory, death, and the image. Remade by Terry Gilliam in 1995 as *12 Monkeys*.

### Le Joli Mai (1962, co-d. with Pierre Lhomme; Part 1: Prière sur la Tour Eiffel. Part 2: Le retour de Fantômas; 165m)

A revealing portrait of French society at the close of the Algerian War, made up of interviews with a cross-section of Parisians who discuss their hopes, fears, and beliefs. Marker's first venture into cinéma vérité, *Le Joli Mai* illuminates the sharp contradictions of French society by granting its subjects the space to voice their opinions, then uses montage to highlight and compare radically different experiences and values.

### The Koumiko Mystery / Le Mystère

#### Koumiko (1965, 54m)

A meeting with a young Japanese woman during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics leads to an extended correspondence when the narrator-filmmaker returns to Paris. As well as being an homage to the French New Wave, *The Koumiko Mystery* marks the beginning of Marker's fascination with Japan, and pokes gentle fun at the new trend of market research by asking in what terms we can really know another human being.



### If I Had Four Camels / Si j'avais quatre dromedaires (1966, 49m)

A photographer and two of his friends peruse and comment upon photographs taken all over the world during the previous decade. Composed like *La Jetée*, this meditation on what photographs mean and why they are taken is a prototype for later projects like *Sans soleil*, *Zapping Zone*, and *Immemory*, in which Marker offers a map of his own memory by sifting through images he has made in the past.

### Far from Vietnam / Loin du Vietnam (1967, 115m)

Marker organized and edited this collective anti-Vietnam War film, featuring contributions by Resnais, Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, and Claude Lelouche. Key

for its presentation of both the necessity and limits of political protest on the part of Western filmmakers and intellectuals, *Far from Vietnam* was the first film produced by SLON (Société pour la lancement des œuvres nouvelles). (Segments by Agnès Varda and Ruy Guerra were omitted from the final version, although Marker insisted that they receive onscreen credit.)

### The Sixth Face of the Pentagon / La Sixième face du Pentagone

(1968; co-d. with François Reichenbach, 28m)

This early SLON short documents the October 1967 march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam





# Time Immemorial

## CHRIS MARKER'S MAIDEN VOYAGE INTO THE UNCHARTED WATERS OF CD-ROM BY KENT JONES

I will admit that I have yet to explore every corner and crevice of Chris Marker's *Immemory*. I suspect that any fan would make the same guiltless admission. After you've browsed through Marker's first CD-ROM, you will want to leave areas of it unexplored. That way, you can extend your relationship with this precious object long past the point that you've thrown other relics of the all-but-obsolete medium into your deepest desk drawer. Without

*substance* of art. Proust and *Vertigo* (Marker's Portals of the Past). Resnais. Welles. Miles Davis. Chris Marker.

There's a hilarious interview with Brian Eno on the subject of CD-ROMs, included as an appendix in his published diary, a book that would surely please Marker. "There is not one CD-ROM I can think of that I would ever want to look at again," he says. "They are so tedious because they rely on this idea that you can move huge blocks of data around." Later: "Only people who have nothing else to do actually find it interesting to go and look at bloody pictures on a computer." He suggests a more interesting alternative, based on the idea of the screensaver: "What I want to suggest is that CD-ROM is the vehicle by which you plant all these seeds in the computer and it grows them."

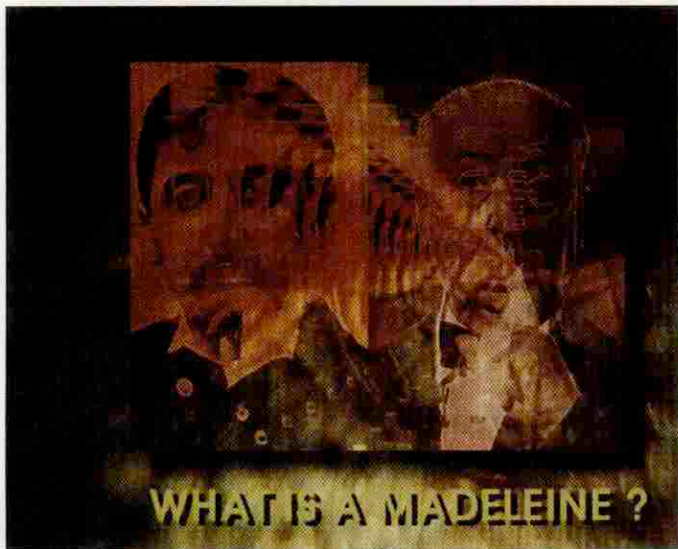
Although *Immemory* is guilty of following Eno's negative model—the user is indeed navigating his/her way through huge blocks of data—it also seems to me a rather eccentric prototype of his positive model. Marker immediately gets past the boring, static aspect of the medium. He assembles his postcards, photographs, cherished objects, film stills and clips, written commentaries, quotes, designs, superimpositions, collages, and musical passages within a structure that endows them with an afterlife. Like actual memories, they feel permanent and elusive at the same time. They invite you to keep looking. Many seeds are planted. They grow not in the computer but in the mind of the user.

There is no proper beginning or end to *Immemory*. We start with an introductory map, which gives us eight different zones: Travel, Museum, Memory, X Plugs, Poetry, War, Photography, Cinema,

all grouped around the center, the unclickable zone of *Immemory*. Far from exhaustive histories of the various topics, they are clusters of impressions and sensations around said topics, as experienced by the man who named himself Chris Marker. As we enter any given zone, we navigate with a cursor in the shape of a solid circle over a cross. When the cursor changes color, that means there's a tangent to follow; when the circle becomes transparent (suggesting the crosshairs of a camera, or a gun), there is yet another addendum/clarification/appendage to pursue, or not. Sometimes, the cursor becomes an eye; sometimes a yellow ball in a black square pops alive at the bottom of the screen with a ping—further "bifurcations." Moreover, sweeping the cursor across the screen often reveals a line of text, of which two or three words sometimes appear in negative, signaling yet another portal within a portal. In short, what appears to be a finite experience, if not a linear narrative, never is, largely due to the author's keen understanding of the rhythm of attention.

For me, the most thrilling aspect of *Immemory* is its ingenious use of the very finitude that Eno despises, endemic to the whole idea of the CD-ROM. You are indeed going over the same blocks of data every time you pop *Immemory* into your computer. Just as you keep going over the same memories and snatches of experience in your head, over and over, for a lifetime. Those constant, scintillating bifurcations strike me as perfect models of the little sounds and sensations that break up your train of thought: just when you think you're going down a straight, clear path, you veer off to the side and drift through another portal. Even the route back to the original map, the red arrow pointing up at the top center of the frame, feels emblematic of consciousness. Marker knows that the closer we think we've gotten to heaven, the greater the likelihood that we're back home.

Kent Jones is FILM COMMENT's Editor-at-Large.



apparent effort, Marker pulls off a remarkable feat: like Proust before him, he creates a template for the workings of memory itself as he's charting his own interior landscape. "My fondest wish," he writes in the jacket introduction to *Exact Change's* English edition, "is that...my *Immemory* should serve as a springboard for [the reader-visitor's own] pilgrimage in *Time Regained*." And so it does. Sympathetic users will feel their entire lives passing before them, the oceanic vastness of their pasts and the great unattainable object of Ultimate Knowledge forever on their collective horizon. "It's banal to say that memory misleads, and more intriguing to see its lies as a form of natural protection that one can govern and shape at will," writes Marker somewhere in the middle of *Immemory* (is there anywhere else but the middle?). "Sometimes that's called art." I'll say. And sometimes, less often, it's the



# Postcard from the Edge

J. HOBEBMAN ON MARKER'S IMPRESSIONS OF ISRAEL

"Modern adventure, Marker understands, is not updating lost paradises, but discovering new places ... no longer the Indies, but Communist China, no longer the Amazon, but Cuba, no longer Palestine, but Israel." So wrote *Cahiers du*



*Cinéma* critic Andre S. Labarthe on the occasion of the release of Chris Marker's 1961 *Description of a Struggle*. Today one might

call these places failed utopias. "Following the footsteps of Jesus on a scooter," another *Cahiers* critic enthused, "Marker returns with a science-fiction film. Israel '60 [is] a country making itself in front of a camera."

The state of Israel—then a feisty socialist country, populated largely by refugees, and scarcely more than a decade old—was indeed something new under the sun. *Cahiers's* prophet-explorer toured the world's most contested piece of real estate in late 1959, riding a Vespa given to him for that purpose by the philanthropist Wim Van Leer. Marker had met Van Leer and his wife Lia earlier that year at the Moscow Film Festival—notable, among other things, for being the first to include Israeli movies. The Van Leers, who accompanied those unprepossessing documentaries to the Soviet Union, were much impressed with Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (not least for its grasp of ideological sophistry) and invited the filmmaker to Israel to make his next film.

Just under an hour, *Description of a Struggle* was shot in 1959, even as Otto Preminger was himself in Israel, producing

and directing what would be Hollywood's defining Zionist epic, *Exodus*. Marker prepared by taking 800 still photographs; the epistolary narration was not written until after the footage was shot. In its insistence on Israel as a text to be decoded, Marker anticipates Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs* as well as his own *Sans soleil* (which strongly echoes some of its shots). The first "sign" is a destroyed tank in the desert. Marker soon finds evidence of his totem animals, the cat and owl, as well as a number of idiosyncratically pretty young girls.

Let it be immediately established that *Description of a Struggle* is a remarkably beautiful, even enthusiastic movie. Israel may never have a more glorious travelogue. The poetic voiceover annotates a mosaic of lovingly framed postcard images. Marker's Israel is an exotic place—the lunar Negev, the blue Mediterranean, the golden light falling on Jerusalem's shattered stones. Sheep wander the city, sephardim dance in the streets to celebrate their wonder rabbi. "Ghetto children still exist in Jerusalem's old quarter," the narrator explains with a trace of wonderment, adding that it is there and in the ultra-orthodox neighborhood of Meah Shearim that the fact of Israel is denied.

The nation's sci-fi aspect notwithstanding—manifest in the traditional prayer Marker finds at the modern Bauhaus Hebrew University, and accentuated by Lalan's clanging, whistling, mildly discordant score—pre-imperial Israel is almost cute. Marker visits a kibbutz—"a world where money doesn't count"—and documents the collective's contentious general meeting. ("How long will their purity last?" he wonders, stressing the isolation of these settlements, which might some day seem akin to Biblical towns long vanished from the shores of the Dead Sea.) It is late in the film before Marker acknowledges Israel's Arab and Bedouin minorities or its hostile neighbors.

This is Israel as existential adventure: A long lateral pan through a lively

Haifa bar might be the fantasy of some late-night underground French Resistance boite: "There were casualties on the border," the narrator notes conspiratorially. "Some of these young people have been called to their unit." Archival clips of the landscape after battle are followed by a version of the *Exodus* story, a newsreel of Jewish refugees being deported from Haifa to Cyprus (used in Meyer Levin's 1947 documentary *The Illegals*). World War II is sufficiently present for Marker to blame "civilized" Europe. Jewish normality is still novel. "She will never be Anne Frank," the narrator remarks as we watch a long-necked girl sketching at an easel. She is a sign creating a sign.

*Description of a Struggle* was praised in the Israeli press, won the Golden Bear for best documentary feature at the 1961 Berlin Film Festival, and proved to be an intervention in the Israeli film industry—inspiring the influential local documentarian David Perlov, among others. After the Six-Day War, Marker evidently let it be known that he no longer wanted *Description of a Struggle* shown. Nevertheless, the movie had its belated U.S. premiere at the 1982 New York Film Festival on a double bill with *Letter*



*from Siberia*. The generally hostile critical reception was likely colored by Israel's recent invasion of Lebanon, and the ensuing massacres of Palestinian refugees committed by Christian militias as enabled by then-general Ariel Sharon.

In Hebrew, *Description of a Struggle* is gnominically called *Hatsad Hashlishi Shel Hamatbea*, "The Third Side of the Coin." The movie's French (and English) title is from Franz Kafka's earliest extant piece of writing—an expressionist tale with a free-floating sense of victim and victimizer. Looking into a future that haunts his movie, Marker hazards prophetically that, for Israel, "the greatest injustice may well be the denial of the right to be unjust."

*J. Hoberman is senior film critic for The Village Voice; his pieces were recently collected as The Magic Hour: Film at Fin de Siècle (Temple University Press).*