



## **Chris Marker. The political composition of the image. Introduction to the first image of *Sans Soleil***

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*Sans Soleil* starts from images recorded in Japan and mixes them with others from other countries and times. Behind its composition as an essay, Marker's film is a reaction against the separation of images and the world on the basis of some thoughts provoked by the haiku. The aim is to find a pure contemplation of images, outside the culture of the spectacle and symbolic interpretation. An extremely sensitive and intelligent film, it proposes a new conception of cinema that settles scores with the cinematic narrative of modernity. This article takes the opening shot of the film as a way of introducing some thoughts about the ontology of an image that is presented as a *spiral rewriting of memory*.

"The work of art is not an instrument of communication. The work of art has nothing to do with communication. The work of art does not contain any information at all. However, there is a fundamental affinity between the work of art and the act of resistance. In that sense, yes. As an act of resistance, the work of art has something to do with information and communication." (1)

*Gilles Deleuze*

Chris Marker composed and edited *Sans Soleil* in 1982. The film begins with a quotation from Racine: "The distance of countries makes up in some way for the excessive nearness of time." As it opens, the film shows a shot of three children walking together through a meadow in Iceland and a shot of an American military plane aboard an aircraft carrier. Both shots serve as visual interstices for a black screen. The voice of Florence Delay reads the following text (sec. 10): "The first image he spoke to me about was the one of the three children on a road in Iceland in 1965. He told me that for him it was the image of happiness, and that he had also tried on numerous occasions to associate it with other images, but it had never worked. He wrote to me: 'One day I must put it alone at the beginning of a film, with a long stretch of black. If they have not seen the happiness in the image, at least they will see the darkness.'" (2)

That beautiful opening introduces one of the keys to the singularity of the rest of the film: the opening of an image in which any interpretative imposition by the author is

discounted and a close relation is established between the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid (the image and the black screen; the voice over and the silence). Marker turns to a third person singular to introduce the text: "the first image he spoke to *me* about, he told *me* that for *him* it was the image of happiness ..."

The haiku, a Japanese poem consisting of seventeen syllables, is greatly influenced by Zen Buddhism, and the authors never try to impose an interpretation or to communicate their symbolic system. And so we find a first point in common with Marker's determination to erase the 'I' and yield the text to a third person, though it is true that in the haiku the verb usually appears without tense or person inflections. Moreover, let us remember that the writer of the letters, Sandor Krasna, is another name for Chris Marker. And lastly, how can we retain that idea of "erasure" when, as Olivier Kohn points out (3), the most obvious denial of that "white writing" lies "in the subjectivity defended by the commentary"?

The haiku is based on the passage of time through the theme of the seasons and the introduction of a mobile or dynamic element into the interior of a static landscape (permanence/impermanence). In the first act (the film is divided into four), the commentary points out (23 min. 30 sec.): "Poetry is born from insecurity. wandering Jews, trembling Japanese. They live on a carpet that nature can pull out from under them at any moment just to play a joke, which is why they have become accustomed to living in a world of fragile, fleeting, revocable appearances, trains that fly from planet to planet, samurai who fight in an immutable past: that is called the impermanence of things"(4). Marker introduces the idea of "impermanence", which is fundamental for an understanding of Japanese culture (5), which should be examined in the light of Deleuze's proposals to analyse the role of empty spaces in the films of Yasujiro Ozu (6).

Deleuze writes: "There is future, change, passage. But at the same time the form of what changes does not change, does not pass. It is time, time in person, 'a bit of pure time': a direct time-image that gives to what it changes the immutable form in which the change takes place" (7). That is when the Zen idea of permanence emerges, linked to immutable nature and the eternal now. In the third act Marker will speak of the electronic machine created by Hayao Yamaneko to decompose the clarity of images in these words (1h. 5 min. 36 sec.): "He plays with the signs of its memory. He pins them and decorates them like insects that have flown away from Time and which he could look at from a point located outside Time — the only eternity we have left. I look at those machines, I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend" (8). After that, he develops a beautiful reflection on *spiral memory* in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958).

That *outsideness* of time brings up a decisive question: how to tackle the dualism of Western language today in order to stand aside from it and enter a pre-symbolic, original and not dualistic Reality? The problem of the *spiral* runs through all Chris Marker's films.

In his article "Si loin, si proche", Olivier Kohn rightly points out that in Marker's films "the divorce between words and reality —a characteristic of modernity— never really takes place. Even at the risk of simplifying, we might say that it is possible to see words in his films as the last guarantee of the unity of consciousness, the last stretch before it bursts into irreconcilable fragments" (9). Liberation from the symbolism of language must be understood from Marker's reflection on the link between the film image and the poetic form of the haiku. In that attempt to return to pre-symbolic reality or to an original infinite and absolute state, images, like haiku, are more important for what they do not show than for what they do. Earlier we took the shot that opened the film and wrote that "a close relation was established between the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid". At the end of the film, Marker returns to the shot of the children in Iceland and says (1 h. 31 min. 30 sec.): "And here, on their own account, the three Icelandic children have come along. I have taken the shot again in its entirety, adding this rather indecisive end, this frame that quivers from the force of the wind that was battering us from the cliff. All that, which I had cut "to clean up" and which said far better than what I had left what I saw at that moment, because I held the camera at arm's length, at zoom's length, until the last 25th of a second... (...) So it was enough just to wait, and the planet staged the work of Time by itself (...) And then, in its turn, the journey entered the Zone. Hayao showed me my images which were already covered with the lichen of Time, freed from the lie that had prolonged the life of those instants swallowed by the Spiral" (10).

Let us examine that image, recorded in 1965, which Marker now reuses to begin the film. What does he intend to communicate? And even more, what does he intend to narrate? That "image of happiness" which perhaps "we cannot see" communicates nothing at all, or, to put it another way, has communication become impossible to grasp? The *impermanence* of things, that moving carpet, also conceals the chance to go *outside* time, in other words, to penetrate the spiral which leads us to the absolute eternity of the present moment. The images are no longer tracks or records; they become the object of the gaze: brought up to date (again) in a Time in which "what changes does not change". Later on, Marker points out (4 min. 14 sec.): "He wrote to me: "I would have spent my life wondering about the function of memory, which is not the opposite of oblivion, but rather its other side. We remember nothing; we rewrite memory in the same way that we rewrite history" (11). The image is a rewriting of memory, a story whose evolution turns into a permanent drift. When Marker returns to the shot of the children he points out that the inclusion of the cut material this time enables him to say "far better than what I had left what I saw at that moment." But those images are also "a lie", since in no event are they the past, nor do they even represent the permanence of the past. Once they have been decomposed in Hayao's Zone, that time-image can be seen in its pure state. Permanence is provided by perception, by that "rewriting" that is linked to the definition of the haiku given by the master Basho: "Haiku is simply what is happening in that place, at that moment."

We know that when, in modern times, the image was distanced from the world, filmmakers tried, as Deleuze points out, "to film, not the world, but a belief in this world, our only link" (12). In his search for pure contemplation, far from being anchored to

the interpretative symbolism of language, Marker finds a pre-symbolic reality when he says that "the Japanese secret, that *poignancy of things* that Lévi-Strauss spoke of, assumes a power to communicate with things, to enter them, to *be* them for an instant. It was normal for them to be like us: mortal and immortal" (13). Might that not be the best definition of a free consciousness which has avoided the traps of the symbolic world, which struggles against "the divorce of words and reality", and ends by defining itself as "cette poignance des choses" or, to be clearer: which knows like Malraux that the work of art is the only thing that can resist death?

The image of those Icelandic children can never reconstruct that impression of happiness, cannot be "the image of happiness", since its beauty lies precisely in what "is not said", in what "is not shown". It is one of the few moments in the whole film when Marker refers to being a film-maker: "because I held the camera ... until the last 25th of a second ..." In *Tout Va Bien*, Godard films a conversation in an office to show in an exciting tracking shot that it is just a room on a huge set made up of various rooms where the fourth wall has disappeared. Godard speaks of "a critique and transformation of dominant cinematic practice" (14), whilst Marker preferred to talk about his colleague Hayao Yamaneko, who (39 min. 35 sec.) "has found a solution: if the images of the present do not change, change the images of the past. He has shown me the brawls of the Sixties treated with a synthesiser. He says, with the conviction of the fanatic, that those images are less deceitful than the ones you see on television. At least they are presented for what they are, images, and not the transportable, compact form of a reality that is no longer accessible" (15). That condemnation of the camouflage of the image not only links Godard's *moral tracking shot* with Marker's whole work (is Hayao's zone where "an image is presented for what it is" not the same thing as the famous Godardian phrase in *Vent de l'Est*: "ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image?"), but furthermore it serves as a political criticism of a society in which, as Feuerbach pointed out, "the image is preferred to the thing, the copy to the original, representation to reality."

In another part of *Sans Soleil* we see Luiz Cabral, president of Guinea-Bissau, embracing Commander Nino, who is weeping with emotion. What is that image an image of? Marker explains that we have to move ahead one year in time to find out that Commander Nino led a *coup d'état* which overthrew Luiz Cabral. The commander's tears do not express the emotion of the old warrior, he tells us, but the wounded pride of someone who feels he is not sufficiently recognised.

It is a reflection on words (which reintroduces the influence of the haiku) (16) which enables us to focus the problem. Marker comments on the story of Sei Shonagon, a lady-in-waiting to Princess Sadako who wrote in her *Pillow Book* a list of the things that "make the heart beat faster." The book belongs to the *soshi* genre which, according to André Baujard in the introduction to the French translation of the book: "like the *nikki*, are intimate writings, but unlike diaries, do not respect chronological order nor any general plan; they are sketches in which the author pours out onto the paper, letting her brush move freely, all the ideas, images and thoughts which flow from her spirit." A definition which fits perfectly with the *drifting* (in the Debordian sense) construction



of the film. In that instant, the film-maker thinks of the power to "name" just so that "the heart can beat faster." In our society, he says, a sun is not a sun unless it is shining or bright. On the other hand, in Japan "to put adjectives would be as ill-mannered as leaving objects with the price tag still on them. Japanese poetry does not qualify. There is way of saying boat, rock, spray, frog, crow, hail, heron, chrysanthemum which contains everything. The press is talking these days of the story of a man from Nagoya: the wife he loved died last year, and he sought refuge in work, Japanese style, like a madman. It even appears that he made an important discovery in electronics. And then, in May, he committed suicide: they say that he could not bear to hear the word spring" (17).

Chris Marker, the invisible man, eventually defends that pure contemplation, which has nothing to do with the adjectives and labels that critics use to classify and pigeonhole. That defence does not seem far from Debord's thoughts about the "society of the spectacle" which dominates discourse and cancels out or swallows the observer. In his *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, Debord writes: "In the ways of thinking of contemporary people, the first cause of decadence is clearly connected with the fact that no discourse disseminated through the spectacle allows any chance of a reply; and logic has only been shaped through dialogue"(18). How can we fail to find a fair answer here to that displacement of narration to a third person, that is, to that "opening of the text" which we did not manage to place in relation to the haiku at the beginning of this article?

We said that Marker uses the film *Vertigo* to express a series of singular ideas about the construction of spiral memory and to talk about "the impossibility of living in memory without deceiving it. Inventing a double of Madeleine in another dimension of Time, a zone which would be only for him, and in which he could explain the inexplicable story that began by the Golden Gate, when he rescued Madeleine from San Francisco bay, when he saved her from death, before throwing her back. Or was it the other way round?" In a beautiful later article published in *Positif* (19), Marker insists on a reading of the film that gives pride of place to Scottie's chance to have a second chance, to *rewrite memory*. It seems to be a decisive text for understanding Marker's films: in them he only aims to have a "free replay", another chance (he writes: "What do video games offer us that tells us more about our unconscious than the complete works of Lacan? Not money and not glory: another game" (20). "What is happening in that place, at that moment," Basho said; the need for a new rewriting, Marker added. That is the meaning of the Zone (and Hayao is also another name for Marker), which plays with the signs of time, as happened in the prose of Proust (21). Marker, located in a "world of appearances" (22), reflects on television, on some advertisements that pretend to be haiku. In his search for art he finds dialogue, and in his encounter with dialogue a political composition. Perhaps television, whether in the bedroom or the living room, gives the fallacious impression of being "a window on the world". In terms of everyday life, it is switched on in the same way that the curtains are drawn. *Sans Soleil* responds to that situation by defending the need to show an image as an image (the children in Iceland: an "image of happiness" *recorded* in the *past* by the *film-maker* himself), revealing the mechanisms of construction, appealing to the

observer as the builder of the image, mistrusting, as with the image of Cabral, what we are shown, trying to unify the images with the world. Deleuze, concerned about the affinities between man's struggle and the work of art, writes: "What relation is there between man's struggle and the work of art? The closest and for me the most mysterious one. Exactly what Paul Klee meant when he said: "There are no people". There are no people, and yet there are. For there to be no people means that the fundamental affinity between the work of art and people who do not exist yet is not, and never will be, clear. There is no work of art that does not invoke people that do not exist yet" (23).

Now we can return to the quotation from Racine. (Further on the text says: "I knew that in the 19th century humanity had settled its scores with space, and that the challenge of the 20th century would be cohabitation with time"). There is a place where spaces come close to one another; a place where all the images that make up *Sans Soleil*, from different times and spaces, find their fusion: it is the absolute time of poetry. "He claims that electronic material is the only kind that can deal with feeling, memory and imagination" (24). Hayao's Zone will evolve in Marker's films as far as *Level Five*, but the search will still be the same: "to draw outlines on prison walls". That is the final meaning of that *poignance des choses*, that poignancy that seeks a reconciliation with a distant world. In one of his first works, the commentary for the film *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* (Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, 1953), Marker wrote about African culture and the "sign of a lost unity in which art was the guarantee of the pact between man and the world" (25). And at the beginning: "An object dies when the gaze that lights on it has disappeared" (26).

Marker's films, which he himself described as essays, are one of the decisive works in those Histories of the Cinema which seem to ignore him. As Debord said in *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, the cinema will become "historical analysis, theory, essay" (27).

Awaiting its "people", *Sans Soleil* is a film of resistance, since it appeals to the emotion of the word "spring", that is, to the pure image freed of symbolism of any kind. The political composition will be no other than granting the observer a place. Stripped of meaning, the shot of the Icelandic children and the other shots of *Sans Soleil* become drifting glances at the cracks in time. And how then can we fail to see that after Samura Koichi's beautiful words (28 min. 7 sec.) comes the lament for the separation of images and the world? "Who said that time heals all wounds? Time heals everything except wounds. With time, the wound of separation loses its real edges. With time, the desired body will soon be no longer, and if the desiring body has already ceased to be for the other, what remains is a wound without a body" (28).

I believe that is the most hopeful and honest thing I can write about the state of audiovisual narrative in the autumn of 1998. *Free replay* for modernity.

## Notes:

(1) Deleuze, Gilles. *Tener una idea en cine* in *Archipiélago*, n° 22, autumn 1995. (pp. 57-58).

(2) I would like to quote the original text, because of its beauty and literary quality. The integral text of *Sans Soleil* was published in the French magazine *Trafic*: "La première image dont il m'a parlé, c'est celle de trois enfants sur une route, en Islande, en 1965. Il me disait que c'était pour lui l'image du bonheur, et aussi qu'il avait essayé plusieurs fois de l'associer à d'autres images - mais ça n'avait jamais marché. Il m'écrivait: '... il faudra que je la mette un jour toute seule au début d'un film, avec un longue amorce noire. Si on n'a pas vu le bonheur dans l'image, au moins on verra le noir'". (p. 79).

(3) Kohn, Olivier. "Si loin, si proche". *Positif*, n° 433, March 1997 (the number includes an uneven dossier with texts about Marker).

(4) "La poésie naît de la insécurité: Juifs errants, Japonais tremblants. A vivre sur un tapis toujours près d'être tiré sous leurs pieds par une nature farceuse, ils ont pris l'habitude d'évoluer dans un monde d'apparences fragiles, fugaces, révocables, des trains qui volent de planète en planète, des samourais qui se battent dans un passé immuable: cela s'appelle l'impermanence des choses". (p. 83)

(5) About the idea of impermanence applied to the films of Yasujiro Ozu, there is one rigorous study: Ishaghpour, Youssef. "Formes de l'impermanence le style de Yasujiro Ozu où l'on va au Japon pour revenir dans l'Occident de la présumée fin de l'histoire." Paris. Yellow Now. 1994.

(6) Also called "pillow-shots" (Noël Burch. *To the distant observer: form and meaning in the Japanese cinema*. University of California Press. 1979), "still lifes" (Richie, Donald. *Ozu*) and "ecstasy" (Paul Schrader. *Transcendental style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. New York. Da Capo. 1972).

(7) Deleuze, Gilles. *L'image-temps*. Les Éditions de Minuit. Paris. 1985.

(8) "Il joue avec les signes de sa mémoire, il les épingle et les décore comme des insectes qui se seraient envolés du Temps et qu'il pourrait contempler d'un point situé à l'extérieur du Temps -la seule éternité qui nous reste. Je regarde ses machines, je pense à un monde où chaque mémoire pourrait créer sa propre légende." (p. 91).

(9) "Si loin, si proche", op.cit, p. 82.

(10) "Et c'est là, que, d'eux-mêmes, sont venus se greffer mes trois enfants d'Islande. J'ai repris le plan dans son intégralité, en rajoutant cette fin un peu floue, ce cadre tremblotant sous la force du vent qui nous giflait sur la falaise, tout ce que j'avais coupé pour "faire propre" et qui disait mieux que le reste ce que je voyais dans cet instant-là, pourquoi je le tenais à bout de bras, à bout de zoom, jusqu'à son dernier 25e de second... (...) Il suffisait donc d'attendre, et la planète mettait elle-même en scène le

travail du Temps. (...) Et puis le voyage à son tour est entré dans la Zone. Hayao m'a montré mes images déjà atteintes par le lichen du Temps, libérées du mensonge qui avait prolongé l'existence de ces instants avalés par la Spirale". (p. 96).

(11) "Il m'écrivait: 'J'aurais passé ma vie à m'interroger sur la fonction du souvenir, qui n'est pas le contraire de l'oubli, plutôt son envers. On ne souvient pas, on récrit la mémoire comme on récrit l'histoire.'" (p. 80)

(12) *L'image-temps*.. Further on, he concludes: "He often wondered about the nature of cinematic illusion. To restore our belief in the world, that is the power of modern cinema (...) Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia 'we need reasons for believing in this world'." (p. 230).

(13) "Il m'écrivait que le secret japonais, cette *poignance des choses* qu'avait nommée Lévi-Strauss, supposait la faculté de communier avec les choses, d'entrer en elles, d'être elles par instant. Il était normal qu'à leur tour elles fussent comme nous — périssables et immortelles." (p. 84).

(14) "Godard parle du groupe Dziga-Vertov", interview with Marcel Martin in "Politique et Cinéma", special number of *Cinéma 70* (n° 151, December 1970). Included in "Jean-Luc Godard y el Grupo Dziga-Vertov: un nuevo cine político." Edition and foreword by Ramón Font. Barcelona, Anagrama. 1976.

(15) "Mon copain Hayao Yamaneko a trouvé une solution: si les images du présent ne changent pas, changer les images du passé... Il m'a montré les bagarres des Sixties traitées par son synthétiseur. Des images moins menteuses, dit-il avec la conviction des fanatiques, que celles qu tu vois à la télévision. Au moins elles se donnent pour ce qu'elles sont, des images, pas la forme transportable et compacte d'une réalité déjà inaccessible." (p. 86).

(16) We must not forget that Japan has been a constant obsession in Marker's work. In 1965, for example, he made *Le Mystère Koumiko* and in his last film, *Level Five*, he returns to the battle of Okinawa. In 1994 he made three haiku-videos entitled: *Petite Ceinture*, *Chaika* and *Owl Gets in Your Eyes*, which unfortunately we have not been able to see. Most of Marker's work is unknown in Spain, and so it is some consolation to read the two beautiful volumes made up of the texts of some of his films: *Commentaires*. Éd. du Seuil, 1961 (which includes: *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, *Dimanche à Pékin*, *Lettre de Sibérie*, *L'Amérique Rêve*, *Description d'un Combat*, *Cuba Sí!*). *Commentaires 2*. Éd. du Seuil, 1967 (which includes: *Le Mystère Koumiko*, *Soy Mexico*, *Si J'Avais Quatre Dromadaires*). That ignorance of Marker's work seems to affect all Histories of Cinema, which only mention Marker as the author of an exquisite rarity entitled *La Jetée*.

(17) "Ici, mettre des adjectifs serait aussi malpoli que de laisser aux objets leurs étiquettes avec leurs prix. La poésie japonaise ne qualifie pas. Il y a une manière de



dire bateau, rocher, embrun, grenouille, corbeau, grêle, héron, chrysanthème, qui les contient tout. La presse ces jours-ci est remplie de l'histoire de cet homme de Nagoya: la femme qu'il aimait était-morte l'an dernier, il avait plongé dans le travail, à la japonaise, comme un fou. Il avait même fait une découverte important, paraît-il, en électronique. Et puis là, au moins de mai, il s'est tué: on dit qu'il n'avait pas pu supporter d'entendre le mot printemps." (p. 81).

(18) Debord, Guy. *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*. The text updates Debord's own thoughts in *La société du spectacle*.

(19) Marker, Chris. "A free replay; notes sur *Vertigo*". *Positif*, n° 400.

(20) "A free replay; notes sur *Vertigo*", op.cit., p. 84.

(21) There is an excellent study of the signs in *À la recherche du temps perdu*: Deleuze, Gilles. *Proust et les signes*.

(22) (1 h. 5 min. 2 sec.) "I am writing all this to you from another world, a world of appearances. In some way the two worlds communicate. Memory for some is what History is for others. An impossibility. Legends are born from the need to explain the inexplicable. Memories have to be content with their delirium, their drift. A fixed instant would cry out like the image of a film stuck in the projector. (p. 90).

(23) *Tener una idea en cine*, op. cit, p. 59.

(24) "Il prétend que la matière électronique est la seule qui puisse traiter le sentiment, la mémoire et l'imagination." (p. 88).

(25) *Commentaires*, op. cit. p. 10.

(26) *Commentaires*, op. cit. p. 11.

(27) Debord's texts on cinema are to be found in: Debord, Guy. *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes 1952-1978*. Paris. Gallimard. 1994.

(28) "Qui a dit que le temps vient à bout de toutes les blessures? Il vaudrait mieux dire que le temps vient à bout de tout, sauf des blessures. Avec le temps, la plaie de la séparation perd ses bords réels. Avec le temps, le corps désiré ne sera bientôt plus, et si le corps désirant a déjà cessé d'être pour l'autre, ce qui demeure, c'est un plaie sans corps." (p. 84).

