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Favorite Hallucinations
By Barry Schwabsky



A still from La jetée (1962), by Chris Marker

“Chris Marker” was merely the most frequent of the pseudonyms used by the man who, at his birth in a posh Paris suburb in 1921, was named Christian Hippolyte François Georges Bouche-Villeneuve. With some fifty works on celluloid and video to his credit—more than sixty if you count the thirteen episodes of *L’héritage de la chouette* (The Owl’s Legacy), a 1989 television series on the history of philosophy, as separate works—his filmography alone suggests a kind of ubiquity, yet Marker was by choice an elusive figure. Has anyone whose life was lived with and through the camera’s eye ever been so averse to having it turned on himself?

Marker, who died in 2012, neither started nor finished his creative life as a filmmaker. He began as a man of the printed word—a writer and editor—and then, as he put it, “traded film for video and video for the computer.” As a student before the war and during the early years of the Vichy government, he threw himself—already using pseudonyms—into various editing projects, including a magazine of Pétainist hue. But Marker soon switched sides and joined the Resistance, later fighting for the US Army, according to one source, during “a brief period after the Battle of the Bulge [when] the Americans recruited Frenchmen directly into the American Army. He fought right through to the end of the war, and one of his most treasured possessions was the signed letter from Eisenhower thanking him for his service.” After the war, he fell into the orbit of Emmanuel Mounier and his magazine *Esprit*, which promoted a left-wing Catholicism. He published a novel, *Le coeur net* (translated into English as *The Forthright Spirit*) and a study of the playwright Jean Giraudoux, as well as translating into French the stories of J.F. Powers and James Thurber and E.B. White’s *Is Sex Necessary?* In 1954, *Éditions du Seuil*, which before the war had been founded as a Catholic imprint, hired

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him to edit a long-running series of travel books.

By then, however, Marker had become a man with a movie camera, directing *Les statues meurent aussi* (Statues Also Die) in 1950–53 with his friend Alain Resnais, for whom he would also serve as assistant director on *Nuit et brouillard* (Night and Fog), the famous documentary about the Nazi death camps released in 1955. Commissioned by the Paris-based magazine and publishing house *Présence Africaine*, *Les statues meurent aussi* is a ringing (if nostalgic and essentialist) denunciation of European colonialism and, in particular, European museums as the graveyard of African artworks. “An object dies when the living glance trained upon it disappears,” warns the film’s voiceover.

The exhortation applies as well to the big, pleasantly messy retrospective “Chris Marker: A Grin Without a Cat,” on view at at the Whitechapel Gallery in London through June 22; it travels to the Lunds Konsthall in Sweden early next year. Marker did eventually become a museum artist rather than a writer or (in the traditional sense) a filmmaker, and he was one of the first filmmakers to try his hand at multimedia installations: *Quand le siècle a pris forme* (*Guerre et révolution*) (When the Century Took Shape [War and Revolution]) dates from 1978. But it’s not clear whether the whole of his career lends itself to a museum treatment, or whether those of his works that take the form of what, in the end, he preferred not to call “installations” (“the word,” he complained, “has been applied to too much rubbish”) are his most representative.

The problem with showing Marker in a museum is one of distraction, which is really a problem of time. Museum exhibitions of other filmmakers’ work—Jonas Mekas at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2012–13, for instance, or Chantal Akerman at Bozar in Brussels in 2013—have suffered from the problem too, but I sensed it more poignantly at Whitechapel. Time—especially, to borrow a phrase from Marker’s 1982 masterpiece *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*), the inability to “repair the web of time,” and the anguish of being caught in it—is so much the essence of his art. Yet a museum demands that the contents of an exhibition be comprehended spatially, as part of an array in three dimensions. You can devote however much time you want to the works there, unlike a film, which must be followed at a pace set by its director. And then always, out of the corner of your eye,

another moving image beckons your attention away from the one you've just started to watch. A black-box theater with comfortable seats is the best way to see most films; at home, something of the same concentration can be mustered. But while milling around in a museum? Not likely.

As for *Ouvroir (Workshop)*, the domain that Marker built within the online virtual world Second Life, one should probably have joined him there in real time while it was still possible. He felt that this was something “absolutely new in the history of communication. It's not quite reality and yet.” It was a way of being Schrödinger's cat. But all of this is lost in the video recap. Nor is a work like *Immemory* (1997), which was originally conceived as a CD-ROM (and can now be accessed online), any more amenable to museum presentation. Surely, it is only in private that this “guided tour” of Marker's own recollections could somehow become one's own (or, as he wrote, “that the reader-visitor could imperceptibly come to replace my images with his, my memories with his, and that my *Immemory* should serve as a springboard for his own pilgrimage in *Time Regained*”).

Marker may have created this dilemma himself, through the very attempt to render “the fragments of memory in terms of geography. In every life we would find continents, islands, deserts, swamps, overpopulated territories and *terrae incognitae*.” That's Marker the traveler and editor of travelogues talking, and from the very beginning his camera roved worldwide: *Les statues meurent aussi* was followed by films made in Finland (*Olympia 52*, 1952), China (*Dimanche à Pékin*, 1956), the Soviet Union (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1957), Israel (*Description d'un combat*, 1961) and Cuba (*Cuba si!*, 1961)—none of them shown at Whitechapel—before finally turning to his home city with a discerning eye in *Le joli mai* (1963), which is excerpted in the exhibition. He soon enough resumed his peripatetic ways. But Marker's urge to roam may have been an escape from the deeper implications of his preoccupation with memory. His real desire was to be a time traveler.

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I don't mean to suggest that Marker should have stuck with filmmaking in the traditional sense. His work reflects an insatiable curiosity about the world that flourished undimmed through the decades, and so it seems only natural that he would have become curious as well about how to use the new ways of working with images that emerged in the course of his long life. Besides, he was never exactly a “pure” filmmaker. Early on, André

Bazin explained that whereas the image is the basis of most cinema, in Marker's essayistic films "the raw material is intelligence, its immediate expression the word, and the image comes in third position with reference to this verbal intelligence." For Bazin, the appeal of Marker's films lay precisely in the way he had allowed himself to remain the writer he had started out to be.

His writerly disposition may account for the ease with which Marker took to digital culture, where the word and the image coexist on an equal basis, being merely so many incarnations of information. At the same time, Bazin's observation should not obscure the fact that Marker's films also gravitate toward another pole that is equally foreign to most other cinema—the still image. Throughout Marker's cinema, there is a recurrent urge to fix an image, to hold on to it against the flow of time. In his most famous work, the science-fiction love story *La jetée* (1962), one of the few that at first glance seems quite distinct from his usual essayistic mode, every shot but one is a still. By the same token, his photographs—represented in the show by selections from those he grouped under the title "Staring Back," spanning 1952 through 2006—all seem stolen from some ongoing cinematic sequence. Some of them really are taken from his films, though they exist with equal vividness as separate images.

The French film theorist Raymond Bellour wrote of the "profound sense of unease generated by *La jetée*," but what is the source of this disquiet? The film is a work that eats its own tail, doubling back on itself to show that the desired return to a Proustian "lost time" could be possible only as a catastrophe—the return to a longed-for past entails witnessing one's own death—though it's no less desirable for that. Strangely, one knows this even before having seen the end of the film; the stillness of the images—all the more dramatically enhanced by the inexorable forward movement of the voiceover narration—suggests at every moment that the recaptured image must always be somehow alienated from its beholder.

The unease of *La jetée* is the same sort that Jorge Luis Borges was thinking of when he asked, "Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within the book of A Thousand and One Nights? Why does it disquiet us to know that Don

Quixote is a reader of the Quixote, and Hamlet is a spectator of Hamlet? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious. In 1833 Carlyle observed that universal history is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they too are written."

Did Marker also think history to be not only an infinite book but a sacred one? Whatever his early religious yearnings, they seem to have been forgotten or disregarded, at least by his critics, who pass over his early associations with a Catholic magazine and a Catholic publishing house, not to mention his having translated an American author best known for his acuity in writing about the lives of priests. And as late as 2003, in an interview with *Libération*, Marker spoke of how he'd been moved by a Japanese critic remarking that in both *La jetée* and *Sans soleil*, his goal had been to "overcome death by prayer." Marker seems never to have relinquished the hope that the ontological character of the image might hold some salvific potential; however irrational this hope might seem, it probably accounts for the poignant intensity of the gaze that makes his films and photographs unforgettable.

Unforgettable above all is the gallery of faces that Marker has left us—especially the female faces. It is impossible not to notice how his camera lingers more searchingly, even almost desperately, on the faces of women. In the *Petite Planète* series he edited in the 1950s, a woman's face appears on the cover of each book, as if this is the key to his attachment to the world. He speaks of women as one of "my favorite hallucinations," and it is impossible not to wonder if, in his Catholic days, he was particularly devoted to Mary. At the end of the film *Description d'un combat*, a long shot of a young woman at work on a drawing is accompanied by a voiceover that commands, "Look at her—until she becomes enigmatic, like those words that one repeats ceaselessly and that one no longer recognizes—until of all the incomprehensible things in this world, the most incomprehensible is that she is there, facing us, like a bird and like a cipher—like a sign."

Marker may be *sui generis*, perhaps even an insoluble enigma, but his example looms over contemporary video art and photography. Is it any

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surprise? For an art that has passed through conceptualism and come out the other end, the literariness of Marker's work—its passage from thought to word and then to image, but only “in third position,” as Bazin says—is irresistible. Yet some things do get lost in translation: the work of most postconceptualists won't prompt speculation about their theological proclivities, for example. But there can be progress too, such as no longer needing to see a woman as a sign taken for a wonder.

One of the more interesting artists working under Marker's sign these days is Moyra Davey, a New York–based Canadian with a show in London at the Camden Arts Centre (through June 29). Its self-effacing literary title is “life without sheets of paper to be scribbled on is masterpiece.” Bazin would have recognized as Marker's kin an artist who could write, as Davey has, “I want to make some photographs, but I want them to take seed in words.” Her work is most often about reading and writing, or about the point where they meet in what, in a 2003 essay, she calls “reading as creative work.” The show in Camden thus includes a charming series of photographs of people writing on the New York City subway. Marker, too, was an inveterate subway snapper. If only the Whitechapel show had included a few of his photographs taken in the Paris Métro, the connection between him and Davey would have been all the clearer.

Davey's photos have been folded and sent through the mail; the creases left in the paper create a two-by-three grid that interrupts the image, as do the little bits of colored tape that held the folded sheet together as it passed through the postal system, not to mention the labels showing the sender's and receiver's addresses. The imagery reflects a humanism akin to Marker's, a passionate interest in the human face and in the body's transient gestures—I can't help thinking of Degas's explanation for his love of taking public buses: “*On est fait pour se regarder les uns les autres, quoi?*” (We're made for looking at each other)—but Davey gives the image a formalist overlay, reminding us that a photograph is not only an image but a thing made of paper. The photograph is also a document of two different journeys, of Davey's through the transit system and the print's through the postal system. As for the substance of the scribbles, so pressing that the subway writer couldn't wait until she got to her desk to set it down on paper: we'll never know.

The videos by Davey in “life without sheets of paper” are meditations

on the likes of Jean Genet, Walter Benjamin and Mary Wollstonecraft. They are not only meditations on her own reading of these authors, but on other readers and their reactions to the books that fascinate her. All of this might be tedious to viewers for whom reading and writing are matters of indifference. It might be thought that my own sympathy for Davey's fascination with reading and writing is simply the reflection of a writer's *déformation professionnelle*. It's not unlikely. Yet I also sense that the intellectual activities of reading and writing are merely the means, for this artist, of capturing nuances that entirely transcend her mandarin subject matter. John Cage once referred to Robert Rauschenberg's all-white paintings as "airports for lights, shadows, and particles." Davey has such an eye for atmosphere and texture that, for her, I can't but think that paper, books, the rooms in which people handle them and even the people themselves are something similar: repositories of light and shadow, producers and gatherers of dust, remnants of time.

This becomes especially poignant whenever her camera fixes on old books, in which the physical impact of type striking the surface—the slight indentation of the printed page—is still, perhaps after hundreds of years, visible in a raking light. *Les livres meurent aussi*, she might want to say. *In My Saints* (2014), the piece inspired by Genet, the penultimate shot is of an old copy of one volume of the writer's *Oeuvres complètes* having its detached cover carefully taped back on, after which we see a young woman reading it on the subway.

In the video about Benjamin, *My Necropolis* (2009), the crux is a letter in which the German writer describes a clock seen from the window of his meager Paris apartment; he calls it "a luxury it is difficult to do without." One of Davey's interlocutors reads the passage and speculates that whereas Benjamin's writing affords him "a kind of suspension in time, a kind of suspension in timelessness," the clock "returns him to time." In the labyrinth of reading and writing, time and timelessness become indistinguishable. In her 2003 essay on reading, Davey quotes Italo Calvino's definition of a classic as "a book which even when we read it for the first time gives the sense of rereading something we have read before." Such reading must produce a Borgesian disquiet. It's one thing to sense that a book blurs the boundary between the reader's time and the writer's, or between the reader's time and the time in which the writer's fable is set. Calvino surmises that it can also blur the boundaries of one's own internal sense of time and timelessness. When art adheres to this blur, it tastes of mortality.