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Adorno by the Pool

Chris Marker described himself as “publiphobic.” He gave few interviews, kept the details of his biography secret, and, whenever necessary, put forth a wide range of avatars and alter egos, the most dependable of which was his own cat. “Cats,” he wrote, “are never on the side of power.” The first time I saw his photograph, it appeared alongside his obituary in the *New York Times*. “Chris Marker” itself was a pseudonym he adopted because his real name, Christian François Bouche-Villeneuve, was cumbersome, or “not very easy to travel with.” In 2008, approaching his ninetieth birthday, he conducted one of his final interviews through the virtual medium of Second Life.

This elusiveness and self-effacement meant he was not always as famous as other members of the French New Wave, but it did secure him a loyal cult following. Best known for his 1962 film *La Jetée*, which consisted entirely of still images and inspired the Hollywood movie *12 Monkeys*, he was also admired in the art world for his experiments with various forms—from photographs to installations to CD-ROMs—and among leftist intellectuals for films like *Statues Also Die* (a critique of French colonialism) and *A Grin Without a Cat* (a history of the New Left after 1968). In the academy, film critics and scholars celebrated him as the pioneer of a new genre, the “essay film,” the origins of which can be traced back to the mid 1950s, when Marker abandoned his poetry and novels and took up the medium that would dominate his life for the next several decades. In at least two films from this period, *Sunday in Peking* and *Letter From Siberia*, Marker began experimenting with what would become his trademark style: a voice-over commentary that, in the way it exposed the threshold between observer and participant, resembled the novelist’s use of an unreliable narrator. In *Sans soleil*, the film that many critics have called his masterpiece, he uses this voice-over technique to explore one of his most elemental curiosities: the relationship between individual and collective memory—or the relationship between

one's self and one's history. It was this curiosity, he said, that kept him from being a political filmmaker: "What I'm passionate about is history," he once said, "and politics interests me only insofar as it is the cross-section of history in the present."

Sans Soleil is one of his strangest films. Basically, it is a fictionalized travelogue that documents what the film itself refers to as "the opposite poles of existence"—in this case, the extreme contrasts between hypermodern Japan and postcolonial West Africa, interrupted by brief stopovers in Iceland and San Francisco, where the viewer is asked to ponder the nature of film itself. The voiceover consists of a woman reading a series of letters that the fictional cinematographer has supposedly written "back home":

He used to write me from Africa. He contrasted African time to European time, and also to Asian time. He said that in the 19th century mankind had come to terms with space, and that the great question of the 20th was the coexistence of different concepts of time. By the way, did you know that there are emus in the Île de France?

This combination of philosophy, ethnography and personal whimsy—along with Marker's taste for "the fragility of moments suspended in time" produces some of the film's most poignant scenes: a couple visiting a shrine on behalf of their runaway cat, the comic book figures on the walls of Tokyo "voyeurizing the voyeurs," and the realization that Japanese poetry rarely modifies, because using too many adjectives would be "as rude as leaving price tags on purchases." Throughout, Marker is obsessed with the ways in which history encroaches upon a culture's most intimate spaces:

He spoke to me of Sei Shonagon, a lady in waiting to Princess Sadako at the beginning of the 11th century, in the Heian period. Do we ever know where history is really made? Rulers ruled and used complicated strategies to fight one another. Real power was in the hands of a family of hereditary regents; the emperor's court had become nothing more than a place of intrigues and intellectual games. But by learning to draw a sort of melancholy comfort from the

contemplation of the tiniest things, this small group of idlers left a mark on Japanese sensibility much deeper than the mediocre thundering of the politicians. Shonagon had a passion for lists: the list of “elegant things,” “distressing things,” or even of “things not worth doing.” One day she got the idea of drawing up a list of “things that quicken the heart.” Not a bad criterion I realize when I’m filming; I bow to the economic miracle, but what I want to show you are the neighborhood celebrations.

As the film moves swiftly from one image to the next—Marker’s version of “things that quicken the heart”—the audience is treated to lengthy meditations on the function of memory and the meaning of history; the result is something like a mix between a desultory Travel Channel montage and a self-indulgent modernist novel. In mapping the subjective consciousness of his fictional cinematographer, Marker uses real documentary footage—the revolutions of the 1960s are contrasted with shots of Japan’s technology boom, including the rise of early computers, which had already begun to “do our remembering for us.” When the film was first released, some saw it as a nod to the politically engaged aesthetic of the *nouveau roman*; others saw something different. In a *New York Times* review, the critic Vincent Canby wrote: “*Sans soleil* is less concerned with the quality of life on this planet than with its own desperate, much more private search.”

Still, it was clear that the film, for all its strangeness, deals with timeless and universal themes, including the boundary between life and art (or myth), and the link between curiosity and compassion. As for the tension between public record and private quest, this was nothing new; it has existed in literary works since at least the sixteenth century, when “prose” was first divided into the loose categories of “fiction” and “nonfiction.” The essay form, introduced by writers like Montaigne and Rousseau, was revolutionary because it brought the ‘personal’ into what had long been a mostly public sphere of discourse; it was this quality that led critics to call Marker an essayist as well as a filmmaker. Marker himself embraced the interpretation. “I am an essayist,” he wrote. “Film is a system that allows Godard to be a novelist, Gatti to make theater, and me to make essays.”

One of the distinguishing features of the personal essay is that it resembles a journey: the author, and therefore the reader, does not always know where he or she will end up. Marker's films have the same quality. They may be filled with historical facts and rich commentary, but they are fundamentally imaginative. They are also self-conscious. In *Sans soleil*, the subjectivity of the voice-over's commentary undermines the illusion of an impartial observer—one who is expected to make a final judgment on the nation in question or the issue at hand. There is no handsome BBC guide with a voice like too much aftershave, no scruffy American activist betraying righteous anger. What the audience experiences is not a personality but a consciousness—and a conscience.

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I first saw *Sans soleil* on a Wednesday night in the middle of spring, two months before I graduated from college. After the screening I joined a small get-together at a friend's apartment, where there was plenty of boxed wine and citrus-flavored sheesha. Then as now, I knew very little about film. I had gone to the screening for the same reasons I had gone to Julia Kristeva's lecture the week before: I wanted to think of myself as a genuine intellectual. The other motivation for attending such events was to avoid talking or thinking about the Iraq War, which was beginning to look as if it might never end. I had watched the "shock and awe" of the initial bombing in the common room of my freshman dorm while one of my hall mates, wearing sweatpants and slippers, heated a bowl of noodles in the microwave. That night, when I dreamt about my high school girlfriend, the scene took place in a kind of warped night-vision green.

Sans soleil was the first film that felt indispensable to my education. Perhaps I saw it at exactly the right time, just as my youthful idealism was starting to give way to the reality of sublets and health insurance. Or perhaps the film crystallized the question of what it means to be a writer. My friends were more serious and politically engaged than I was: they studied politics and economics, they took trips to Nicaragua, they read Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein, and they were well versed in the important issues of the day: environmentalism, sustainable energy, free trade agreements, the use of

torture. When it came to politics, I usually agreed with them, but I was never fully committed to their causes. I had given up on the Orwellian ideal of fusing good writing and good politics, and had begun to think of literature with the carefree anarchy of a poet. But then I discovered poets like Adrienne Rich, who wrote:

Suppose you want to write
of a woman braiding
another woman's hair—
straight down, or with beads and shells
in three-strand plaits or corn-rows—
you had better know the thickness
 the length the pattern
why she decides to braid her hair
how it is done to her
what country it happens in
what else happens in that country

You have to know these things

Knowing this—that the personal was political, and vice versa—made little impact on our daily lives, and it was difficult to have radical thoughts while eating a blueberry muffin. Frederic Jameson captured an element of this absurdity when he wrote “the question is not, who can write poetry after Austwitz, but who can read Adorno by the pool?”

There was something else as well. What kept me from subscribing to any single political movement was the sense I got, from Eric Hobsbawm to Christopher Hitchens and everyone in between, that what truly mattered was to have “been there”—at the birth of the Soviet experiment; throughout the Suez Crisis; in Paris in 1968, when the students marched together with the workers; or at Oxford or Cambridge when socialism died and Reagan-Thatcherism took the reins. I understood the contours and implications of these events, but they didn't grip me; I hadn't been there. Unlike literature, I never felt this history in my nerve-endings, and it seemed silly to pretend that I did. Ultimately, this is why I had a hard time taking seriously the self-righteousness of those who talked about their carbon footprint,

the shops they boycotted, or the precise origin of their eggs in the context of global revolution. It was this kind of atomized vigilance that produced the satirical backlash best represented by Christian Landers' *Stuff White People Like*. Idealism wasn't the problem. The problem was simply that there was too much personality involved in these convictions, and not enough conscience. For me, Marker came to represent a different alternative.

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The screening of *Sans soleil* happened around the time that I first registered a Facebook account and began to rely on YouTube for the clips that didn't make it on CNN. Facebook made it clear just how personality-driven a certain kind of politics could be, and it also fooled us into thinking we could be omniscient in our view of world events. I reached the pinnacle of my anxiety in graduate school, when I saw that a friend of mine had posted this excerpt from *Negative Dialectics*: "The introverted thought architect dwells behind the moon that is taken over by extroverted technicians." What was the proper response? Eventually, I came to see that my ambivalence towards Facebook and YouTube was similar to my ambivalence towards writing and filmmaking: each method of self-expression is simultaneously a forum for bourgeois sentimentalism and a tool for revolutionaries, and I could only ever conceive of the former. Marker, it seems, never had this problem. The lesson of his career is that whether one works with a spiral notebook or digital software, the measure of success—at least in terms of political or artistic authenticity—is whether or not one can sublimate one's ego into a vision that is larger than the self.

This is not an easy thing to do. The impulse to describe the world as precisely as possible, and the impulse to advance a moral vision—these are always in conflict. The former impulse might be the dominant one, I realized, when I laughed nervously while reading the essays of the Russian poet Mayakovsky, who accused T. S. Eliot of "sitting on a park bench and waiting for a pigeon to land on his bald spot." *Sans soleil* put these two impulses directly in contact with each other. The result is a haunted aesthetic quality one finds in the work Samuel Beckett, whose career as a playwright took off around

the same time as Marker's career as a filmmaker. Just as Beckett had done in his prose, Marker was announcing the failure of his medium to do what he wished it could do. The title *Sans soleil* comes from an extended reverie the cinematographer has about a film he wishes he could make, a film about a man who visits the Earth from another world and seeks to cure "unhappiness" in the same way "the youth of the sixties sought to cure injustice":

Of course I'll never make that film. Nonetheless I'm collecting the sets, inventing the twists, putting in my favorite creatures. I've even given it a title, indeed the title of those Mussorgsky songs: *Sunless*.

I have always assumed that this "visitor from another world" is Marker himself—not the man, exactly, but the perfect conscience of his fantasies, someone who could cure unhappiness and injustice with a single film. This alter-ego, we are told, has complete omniscience and perfect memory—he is the consummate intellectual, the God-like artist—but instead of drawing pride from this fact and being scornful of mankind, he looks upon the people of the world "first with curiosity and then with compassion."

If I learned anything from that first screening of *Sans soleil*, it was that part of being a writer meant coming to terms with failure. It meant knowing that you could never touch history, or truth, or beauty. No matter what your tools were, or how far you traveled, you would never be able to show people exactly what you wanted to show them. People fail; art fails; political movements fail. An image that passes through the mind passes through a darkness as total as a camera's chamber.