

Travelling Through the Layers of Time

Review: Sarah Cooper (2008) *Chris Marker*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

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My idea was to immerse myself in this Maelstrom of images to establish its geography.

- Chris Marker, *Immemory*

Chris Marker (b. 1921), the enigmatic French multimedia-filmmaker, has as many aliases as the media he works with. Nomadic and mysterious, he travels the world with his camera and brings that same language of nomadism to his works. Marker has navigated through an array of different media that he approaches with similar familiarity: he has worked in film and photography, video and installation, digital imaging, and, more recently, has created a virtual museum on Second Life.¹ Notwithstanding, what remains constant, and establishes lines of continuity throughout his work, is the way in which he keeps a connection to film and cinematic memory.

Sarah Cooper's book on Chris Marker, part of a series that Manchester University Press has been editing on French Film Directors, focuses on an extensive analysis of Marker's work on film. In spite of having begun her love affair with Marker 'in the unlikeliest of settings and on the most inappropriate of screens,' (Cooper 2008, 185) a computer terminal at

¹ Chris Marker has recently created on Second Life, in a joint initiative with the Museum of Zurich and in collaboration with the architect Max Moskowit, the archipelago of the Ouvroir. Coordinates for teleporting to the Ouvroir can be found here: <http://slurl.com/secondlife/Ouvroir/189/64/40>

the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cooper is clear in her purpose: ‘The aim of this book is to provide detailed readings of his directed and co-directed films made for cinema and television, along with his unsigned works of the late 1960s and 70s’ (4). In the same year in which Marker signs his *Farewell to Movies*, Cooper’s approach, focusing on an extensive and chronological framework to Marker’s short and feature-length films, brings a different perspective into account.² There are three other published works that address Marker’s multimedia work.³ Framed within this context, it seems to me that it is precisely by focusing on Marker’s lifelong commitment to cinema that Cooper is able to establish a relation between his film and multimedia work in such a way that they enter into a dialogue without replacing one another, evolving in layers that she maps out by establishing important lines of continuity and difference that are essential in order to understand how Marker’s passages across media are shaped.

The Five Levels: Mapping Continuity Through Difference

Cooper approaches the entirety of Marker’s filmography in a chronological order, beginning with his first film, *Les Statues meurent aussi*, co-directed with Alain Resnais (Marker and Resnais, 1950), and concluding with his most recent work on video, *Chats perchés* (Chris Marker, 2004). The book is divided into five sections, each corresponding to a chapter that groups Marker’s films under common themes that reflect what Cooper understands as being the five different periods of his work. She begins by commenting on

² Accompanying the exhibition at the Museum of Zurich, Marker has written an essay that bears the same title of his exhibition ‘A Farewell to Movies’, in which he comments on his idea of a ‘cinematographie sans films.’ Marker writes: ‘The original French title, *Cinematographie sans films* (an assonant play of words with *telegraphie sans fil* - aka TSF, the same of radio broadcasting in its pristine youth) was impossible to translate.’ In this sense, the statement of a ‘Farewell to Movies’ bears a more dramatic tone. However, Marker states that he is interested in things that can be done *outside* movies that still relate to cinematic practices, cinematic spectatorship and film history. And, just in case, he finishes by advocating the right to contradict himself, assured by Baudelaire’s project for a constitution, by stating that we should not be surprised if next month he decides to direct a blockbuster.

³ Norma Alter’s book on Chris Marker, part of a series on contemporary film directors and published in 2006; Catherine Lupton’s book, entitled *Chris Marker, Memories of the Future*, published in 2004; Guy Gauthier’s ‘Chris Marker: écrivain multimedia ou Voyage à travers les médias’, published in 2001.

Marker's early years (1950-61), focusing on his more obscure films. The fact that this period of Marker's work is difficult to access, and that Marker himself is known for censoring his early work and refusing public screenings of it, highlights the importance of Cooper's extensive readings as a resource.⁴ However, while providing detailed descriptions of the films and the context of their production, she also inscribes them in the larger framework she is developing. In this sense, without leaving behind a complex descriptive analysis, she is also from the start engaged in pointing out Marker's most important traits: his status as a globetrotter concerned with countries in transition, how he shapes an emotional geography, or how he engages in a different dialogue with film theory in relation to time.

The second chapter, 'A Second Beginning' (1962-66), marks the beginning of a more consolidated period in the filmmaker's career. Cooper develops her thesis concerning Marker's treatment of temporality. I would like to argue that Cooper's organic framework moves at the pace of the works she is taking into account, and that this is what makes us able to notice, from the beginning, lines of continuity and difference that are common both to Marker's work and her approach. In contrast to the other books published on Marker, that develop main theses that divide both the books and the works they approach, the fact that Cooper presents the films in a chronological order makes us able to see precisely how these main lines remain inscribed and are mapped; to have a sense how they enter an ongoing dialogue. The fact that the films are grouped does not mean that these chapters impose boundaries. In fact, the lines of dialogue and change she establishes are also lines of transition, and Cooper is able to maintain their echoes from one section to the other. In addition, she is not merely establishing a chronology or a descriptive analysis, but framing Marker's oeuvre in a larger picture that manifests his (and her) main concern with creating a dynamics of temporality. She is able to sustain an important

⁴ As Cooper writes: 'At the retrospective of his films held at the Cinematheque Française in Paris in 1998, Marker was not prepared to show any work prior to 1962. The films of the previous chapter thereby enter a shadow zone of self-censorship created by their maker who considered them, in retrospect, to be stages in an apprenticeship not to be screened publicly' (38).

balance between the close reading of each film and the ongoing construction of a coherent thesis. This is evident specially through the ways in which the last three chapters are approached: the analysis of the collective endeavour of Marker's films from the period between 1967-1977 will have an important impact in the way she analyses in the last two chapters ('Continuity and Change' and 'Beyond Level 5') how time is reframed within the recent shift to the electronic image, video and the introduction of the computer as a central subject.

I would like her to focus here on Cooper's treatment of temporality through Marker's work. Cooper's thesis on time is the pivotal focus of the book (4). It is also how she inscribes the structure she uses within a larger framework, one that binds together her very detailed readings of his films and that brings forward the complexity of her approach. There are three main moments concerning this relation to time that she analyses, and in spite of the fact that she explores them through the whole of Marker's filmography, I will here try to map them out through three films that function as pinpoints not only in Marker's work but also within Cooper's book: *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1982) and *Level 5* (Chris Marker, 1996). These films form a loose trilogy that Cooper takes into account as mapping, and transforming, Marker's concerns with time, memory and history.

Interruption of movement: La Jetée

Cooper's thesis is mainly concerned with Marker's relation to temporality in relation to death and stasis: her argument is that Marker puts in place a rethinking of film time, one that implies a move beyond the idea that stasis is associated with death and implies a movement to the future. For Cooper, Marker puts in place the materialisation of a different way of seeing and being, one 'that gestures forwards, even as we glance back' (186). She claims that Marker complicates the relation between mobility and immobility, as well as the crossroads between indexicality embalment, and the digital image, in such a way that goes beyond a nostalgia for the past or a static idea

of temporality. In this sense, she inscribes Marker's work not only in the main discussions within film theory, but also in recent issues that have been raised concerning the transition from film to digital media.

In a first instance, and in the first part of the book, Cooper understands the interruption of movement as forming the basis for approaching Marker's film treatment of temporality. She works on Marker's fascination with stillness in its relation to materiality and the freezing of time. This can be seen from his first film, *Les Statues Meurent, Aussi*, in which the camera animates the inanimate, to the way in which stillness in its relation to statuary is understood in a more self-reflexive way in *L'Héritage de la Chouette* (Chris Marker, 1989).⁵ Throughout her book, she will return to this tension between stillness and film flow, but reorienting the way it has been understood in relation to Marker's work, defending that what is at stake is not the implication of stasis but putting in place a relational thinking that goes beyond the limitations of the static individual image.⁶

La Jetée is conceived as a photo-roman, a series of still images, about a man haunted by an event he has lived twice: what he has lived in the past will be repeated in the future, and only then understood. Stillness lingers here across the idea of time travel, of a circulation between different times, and not as an exclusive link to the past. In this sense, Cooper argues that

⁵ *L'Héritage de la Chouette* is a series of episodes Marker directed for the TV-channel ARTE about the relation between ancient and modern Greece, ends by taking into account the relation between television and indexicality. Cooper writes, considering that Marker works again with the inscription of still images, that he now frames through the television screen, that the 'television image is as concerned with the imitative aspects of statuary as it is with multimedia creation through pixels.' She argues that Marker is using television to reflect on film and photography through another medium 'Fleetingly, and in episodic manner, past and present animate one another, as television permits reflection on a legacy that will never die, while also marking out its own role in contributing to how the owl's heritage may live into the future' (141).

⁶ More specifically, in the chapter on 'A Second Beginning', the relation to stillness is directly analysed through three films: *La Jetée*, the most extended analysis, *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (Chris Marker, 1966), a photo-film, but also the ways in which *Le Mystère Koumiko* (Chris Marker, 1965) is shaped through still images that are placed in a direct relation to the expression of emotion. However, the relation to the photographic image is a main concern throughout the entire book and will return in Cooper's analysis of his later periods, for instance in *Sans Soleil*, or in one of Marker's latest films, about the photographer Denise Bellon, *Le Souvenir d'un Avenir* (Chris Marker, 2001).

Marker's relation to immobility is not understood as manifesting the dualism in which film represents duration and life, and photography is understood as manifesting stasis and death. She is here entering a dialogue, to be continued throughout, with both Barthes and Bazin, while placing Marker within one of the most important debates concerning film theory.⁷ Very briefly, and focusing on Cooper's argument, if both Barthes and Bazin are concerned with the relation of the indexical image to death (to the transcendence of death, in Bazin's case, or to the impossibility for Barthes to escape the encounter with it), what both are not questioning is the sole relation to mortality, and here is where Marker differs significantly. Cooper argues that Marker challenges fixity, as photography does not embalm its subjects in order to make them live after death, but is directed to the others who will continue on living, making out of the image a mode of connection to unknowable future generations. There is an understanding of time that goes beyond the time of the subject to a collective time. Cooper feels that it is as if Marker would accept death as a function of time and move beyond it towards a future that has to be reinvented, whereas those who remain on the images are inscribed too but that does not imply that we must long for the past, or direct our nostalgic gaze to those who remained embalmed.

The dialogue between Marker's films and film theory is continued throughout, as the concerns with photography and mummification, with embalming a moment in time, are reconsidered with the introduction of the new technologies. Cooper enters here into a discussion with both Godard

⁷ In fact, the way in which Marker is inscribed in the context of debates in film theory is evident throughout Cooper's book. Barthes and his theory of photography is a constant presence in her thesis on time, along with Deleuze's reflections on the time image, or the discussion with Bazin's theory of indexicality and mummification. But she also establishes a dialogue, that unfortunately I do not have here the opportunity to focus deeply into, with theories of film concerned with the relation between word and image. For instance, taking into account *Déscription d'un Combat* (Chris Marker, 1960), she comments on the way in which the film deals with modes of communication while deconstructing a structuralist approach (focusing particularly on Saussure). Moreover, and taking into account Rancière and Steiner, she works on the ways in which Marker seems to travel across the hierarchical relation between word and image, privileging at a point one over the other, and at another by moving beyond subordination to more peaceful accords that bring forward the reconfiguration of a relation to memory.

and Laura Mulvey, as they both connect the relation between mobility and immobility to cinema's temporal progression. Marker, on the other hand, seems to be moving beyond a concern that remains bound to a mechanical or technological nature of cinema. For Cooper, Marker implies a rethinking of temporality, occasioning a broadening out of the relation between stillness and mobility as currently conceived in existing theoretical writings.

The time of the others: Sans Soleil

La Jetée seems to introduce the dynamics of temporality within the relation to utopia and dystopia: the dystopia presented by the film, and the utopia of time it creates:

Reintroducing the subject and the image to time that stretches out prior to birth and after death, but without positing a linear progression between the two, my study labels such temporality the time of others. This term aims to register both the ethical and the political disjunctions and solidarities that Marker charts throughout his explorations of mortality. (8)

Politically engaged from his early days, the will for a change permeates Marker's oeuvre.⁸ Cooper argues that the idea of an ongoing revolution, beyond the individual and with the focus on a collective time that lingers in-between past and future, will shape the way in which Marker approaches *Sans Soleil* and its relation to memory. While *Sans Soleil* implies, as she states, the loss of revolutionary romanticism that is still present in his other

⁸ Before moving to the relation between continuity and change in relation to electronic images, Cooper dedicates a chapter to Marker's collective works, and the way in which Marker became more concerned not only with the relation between the individual and the collective but also and with the power of collectivity in an ongoing revolution. Between 1967 and 1977, Marker was engaged with the heightened militancy that was felt in France and elsewhere, and played a key role not only in SLON (Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles; Society for Launching New Works) but also in the creation of the Medvedkin groups (groups of factory workers that made their own films; the name was even suggested by Marker, as an homage to Medvedkin.) Extending the themes she has already pointed out, Cooper comments on the way in which his politically engaged films establish a relation to time that implies a treatment of death that goes beyond individual loss towards the promise of a better future, establishing a link between Marker's collective works, the rest of his filmography and the thesis on Marker's treatment of temporality she is developing.

films, it is not pessimism or the image of death which pervades (111). *Sans Soleil* extends the idea of the creation of a collective time, while at the same time it seems to be Marker's film which is more concerned with the individual as it dwells upon the images taken by the cameraman Krasna in his travels across the world and on his personal relation to them. While this may seem paradoxical, Cooper's reflection on the way in which the film moves from space or place to time, from geography to a more abstract idea of temporality, and from the collective to a greater concern with the individual, brings forward the ways in which these relations are interwoven.

For Cooper, that collective time is created through the lines of communication the film establishes across the globe. While *La Jetée* or *Junkopia* (Chris Marker, 1981) create a kind of atopia of space and time, she argues that *Sans Soleil* will re-establish spatio-temporal coordinates. But in doing so, it also complicates them, as it is by establishing a geography through filming that Krasna seems to be able to travel towards a more abstract time, a time outside time, at the same time this is *our* time (115). Cooper claims that *Sans Soleil* intends to intervene in the images in order to change something, by connecting them, and us, to one another, in a common space in which 'people and places are positioned beyond the viewing self's perspective' and time enters a different Zone.⁹ This Zone is made of common textures that Krasna inscribes in his own skin, the skin of the film, a pattern he shapes through the contact he has with everyone and everything he relates to: 'It is this final move into a timeless dimension that is relevant here, narrated as the tactile experience of carrying the skin of others with him into eternity' (123).

Sans Soleil begins with film images and with loss to end with 'electronic texture as the only eternity we have left' (125). Cooper's reflection on Marker's work on space and time, that goes from materiality to the creation of a more abstract, common space, parallels his passage across different media, looking back in order to move forward. This moving to a

⁹ This 'Zone' that I am here commenting upon, also enters in a dialogue with Tarkovsky's 'Zone' in *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979), a space where one's wishes are projected.

common texture shaped by different media, one that links matter and mind, mapping continuity and communication without erasing difference, will be then explored in her last approach to Marker's film treatment of time, through *Level 5*.

Traveling between Past and Future: Level 5

With *Level 5*, the logic of cyberspace and video games enters Marker's work and implies a decisive move to the future. However, it never leaves behind an idea of projection of the past.¹⁰ While coming at a point of transition, in which the turn to electronic, and later digital, images, will imply a displacement of the apparatus of projection, Cooper argues that Marker inscribes the computer within a logic of projection and repetition, bringing forward its relation to time and history.¹¹

In the CD-Rom *Immemory* (Chris Marker, 2002), after a friendly warning that those who do not know *Vertigo* by heart would do better in returning immediately to the contents menu, Marker writes, over an image of Scottie facing the Golden Bridge:

Scottie will have received the greatest joy a man can imagine, a second life, in exchange for the greatest misfortune, a second death. What else is offered us by video games, which say so much more about our

¹⁰ *Sans Soleil*, as seen, was already dealing with a multivalent sense of projection, in which texture, reflection and skin are interwoven and exchanged from one to the other. In the end of her section on *Sans Soleil*, Cooper writes: 'Through its manipulation of time (both within and between images) and a multivalent sense of projection (looking to the future and the projection of images onto screens and bodies), its Janus-faced position between images of the past and future also reflects its forward- and backward-looking place in Marker's work.' (127) In addition, the works Marker had directed for television are already placed by Cooper in a transition between film and the computer, as she believes that the role of television within Marker's work complexifies the ontologic relation between photography and film. For instance, in the case of *L'Héritage de la Chouette*, Marker works again with still images that he re-inscribes in the television screen, using this to reflect on that relation between film and photography through another medium.

¹¹ Cooper never states the sense in which she may be taking into account a Freudian idea of projection when she analyses *Level 5*, but this seems to permeate her analysis: the Freudian notion of projection is dependent on an idea of repetition, a familiar repetition as something that can bring back what was previously repressed; and it is through this relation that it establishes an intertwined temporality, in which past and future are brought to an extended present.

unconscious than the complete works by Lacan? Neither money nor glory: another game. The possibility to start playing again. 'A second chance.' A free replay. (Marker 2002)

Cooper relates this possibility of playing again to the opening of a space for anamnesis. In *Level 5*, Laura, the main character, is playing a video game, designed by her dead lover, that revolves around the battle of Okinawa. Cooper insists on the fact that, no matter how hard she tries, and how often she repeats, Laura cannot rewrite the past, relieve the trauma. However, by replaying it, Laura re-opens it, re-inscribes it into the present, and opens it to the future, working on the disruption of the linear progression of historical time in order to reinstate history's polyphony (104). In that sense, reinstating what was previously put in place through *La Jetée*, while the embalment that guards against the passage of time prevents a relation to the future, here the drive for repetition is related to a process of discovering and opening up lines of difference.¹² Also here, as in *Sans Soleil*, multimedia is put in an intrinsic relation to memory and survival: both in the ways in which film and electronic media dwell in the relation between remembering and forgetting and the ways in which they can be used to relate to others. In its relation to the creation of a third frame for temporality, that is not disjoined from, but works in a relation to the previous two, *Level 5* is placed again in the dynamics between circularity, repetition and stasis, while it is of all three the film that more evidently moves towards the future.¹³ It dwells on the possibility of envisaging another future, one that takes into account, but does not repeat, the past, a possibility that is created at the crossroads of the

¹² Cooper's comments on Laura's unwillingness to accept death also reflect Marker's defying of the associations between death, embalment and the cinematic image. Marker is again inscribing himself in the history of the media he works with, in the sense in which his move to multimedia does not mean he abandons the concerns with stasis or indexicality. (165)

¹³ The fact that Laura is transported from the actual to the virtual, as Cooper notes, when, at the end, she becomes part of the virtual space, is also related to the placement in a space beyond the individual, the same space she has argued for in relation to *Sans Soleil*. However, in this case it is also a space beyond the present, an impossible future space that 'opens out to other viewing positions' and makes us able to replay in different terms its relation to trauma, history and memory. *Chats Perchés* (Chris Marker, 2004), the film that for now closes Marker's career, and also Cooper's book, is dedicated to those who are looking for reconstructing the future. (177)

inevitability of time and the logic of a second chance. Closing the trilogy, *Level 5* is said by Cooper to be the film that more evidently creates a different temporal and spatial logic, 'one that is not so rooted in the tragic ontology of the image and its links to death' (163). Working on the creation of a non-hierarchical space for time, Marker is opening up the space to project the time for change.

Conclusion: A Montage of Echoes

Cooper's interweaving of Marker's creation of different temporalities reflects also the way in which the book is constructed. She is able to frame it through the same approach she takes into account concerning Marker's work: establishing lines of continuity without erasing difference, moving within a dynamics that emphasises the dialogue the works establish with one another without undermining the changes they put forward, emphasising communication without implying sameness. On a personal note, I must state that if I have extended so much the larger framework Cooper puts in place, concerning the original treatment of temporality she proposes through Marker, this is due to my initial scepticism in relation to works that display long, closed readings of filmographies, since they are often unable to move to a more consolidated approach that goes beyond pointing out how the main traits are worked through in each film. Cooper's book, in spite of also fulfilling its function as a reference book as she includes an extensive filmography and bibliography, is however concerned with mapping out an original framework through which she approaches Marker's films: one that deals with film, new media, philosophy and social theory, and that implicates Marker's work within the larger context of film theory.¹⁴ Cooper's concern

¹⁴ The only thing I would like to point out concerning Cooper's book as a reference text, that however does not undermine its accuracy, concerns the way in which she deals with translation. Cooper maintains the titles in their French version, without providing their English title. However, the fact Marker is so careful with the translation of his titles to English, and the fact that his works have been recently edited or re-edited in English versions (in the U.S., in the first period of 2009 five of Marker's films were released on DVD), and finally that sometimes they even add new approaches to the films (as in the case of the play with two of the titles: *Le Fond*

with extending Marker's interest in the circulation between images, and across times, brings forward a reframing not only of the key debates on indexicality, but also of the relations of history and memory to film.

Cooper takes into account how Marker's work is open-ended, a continuous remake of itself, and she reinvents these passages from one to the other, while the way in which they are presented promotes our own recollection.¹⁵ She concludes her book by returning to the epigraph, from Marker's novel *Le Coeur Net*, promoting the same logic of circularity.¹⁶ However, as before, the emphasis is not in what ends, but in the promise of what is yet to come, what can enter and continue a dialogue with it. If Cooper approaches Marker's work within a montage of echoes, I would say that her book inscribes itself in that logic of communication, on a relation that goes from one to the other.

de l'air est Rouge, translated as *A Grin Without a Cat*, and *Chats Perchés*, translated as *The Case of the Grinning Cat*), would justify their translation.

¹⁵ For instance, in 1971 Marker has directed a film that focuses on the early work of Medvedkin, *Le Train en Marche*; in 1993, he returns to his relation to Medvedkin, and directs *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre*. Cooper also takes into account the sense in which Marker's work is in a continuous dialogue as it is a constant remaking of itself: for instance, Marker uses images from his films in his video installations, as it is the case of the images from *Berliner Ballade* (Chris Marker, 1990) that he re-edited and included in *Zapping Zone*.

¹⁶ The epigraph reads: 'Death is no more than the antonym of birth. The antonym of living remains to be discovered.' Cooper comments on it, closing the book, by stating that 'film becomes the search for this other to life - an indelible marker of hope and generosity to something that lies beyond our reach, and which yet has no name, but which some may call the future.' (186)

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