

« Interview with Chris Marker » by Dolores Walfisch, *The Berkeley Lantern* (nov. 1996),  
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**Dolores Walfisch: This may not be an Oscar-winning question, but can I start by asking, why Okinawa ?**

Chris Marker: There's been a great deal of talk, recently, about a CD-ROM on World War 2. Look up Okinawa. It says, "There were about 100,000 casualties, including numerous civilians...", which is doubly wrong. Japanese military casualties certainly totalled about 100,000. But the civilians were Okinawans, a separate community, with its own culture, annexed first by China and then by Japan... The number of Okinawan dead is estimated at 150'000, one third of the population of the island – a snip. Take the Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia. It says "The Americans lost 12.000 men, the Japanese 100,000." No mention of civilian dead. And many of those were mass suicides, even after the battle was over, because people had been brainwashed into not surrendering. The case is unique, one of the maddest and deadliest episodes in the Second World War, bypassed by history, erased from our collective consciousness, and that is why I wanted to bring it to light.

**DW: That sounds like some kind of historical documentary. Which is not what it seems like at all...**

CM: Television has made a big difference. The entire Okinawa chapter in *Level Five* is based on eye-witness account. Picture that in some kind of documentary (I've always hated the world, but the fact is that no-one has come up with anything better, though the Germans are a little more elegant with their *Kulturfilm...*), slotted into the average viewing day, between some personal tragedy in Bosnia and a Holocaust survivor's story. How many successive tales of suffering can the average television viewer take in without losing a sense of the uniqueness of each ? There had to be another way.

**DW: Meaning a video game, computer graphics and a lady?**

CM: My favourite hallucinations, yes. I use what I've got. Contrary to what people say, using the first person in films tends to be a sign of humility: "All I have to offer is myself."

**DW: Laura is a kind of blade runner, a missing-link between the audience and the absolute horror of war?**

CM: She is honest enough not to be self-conscious about placing her own personal tragedy within the abysmal tragedy of warfare, because every tragedy is unique. A woman imbued with petty bourgeois guilt would not have been able to do that, and not because she thought her tragedy was the less important (if anything she'd think it was more important). Laura knows that suffering confers no kind of status. She places her own suffering beside the suffering of the Okinawa victims, like one of those bunches of flowers which the parents of the drowned children throw into the waves. For my part, I expect it is easier for the audience to identify with Laura's suffering than with the feelings of a man who massacred his entire family. I am willing to bet on that. And so help the audience attain a level of compassion akin to hers as she plunges into the tragedy of Okinawa. But it is a bet.

**DW: Is that level you refer to as *Level Five*?**

CM: There are various levels in the Game, used as a metaphor to classify people and things. And there is the way in which she enters into the game. What exactly she means at the end, I have no idea. The audience will have to decide for itself.

**DW: Is that a form of respect for the audience, or a way of ignoring it?**

CM: I never have a potential audience in mind. I've been told this is contemptuous. Well, that's debatable. Complying with an imaginary audience, meaning one has so high an opinion of oneself that one believes oneself capable of delving into that audience's mind and adapting oneself to suit it; or simply thinking that one is not so exceptional that what moves and

amuses one couldn't move and amuse others in the same way – which shows the greater contempt?

**DW: Why Catherine Belkhodja?**

CM: Obviously the obvious choice.

**DW: Laura's workspace where – almost always – she appears, seems to embody the place where the film itself is manufactured.**

CM: Correct. One of the niceties of the set-up was that the location was itself a tool in the formal process. The special effects were achieved on the computer which appears on screen – a good old Power Mac. The control panel visible in the foreground is part of my editing kit. Except for the Japanese footage, the film is a duet, manufactured by two people house in a room six foot by ten, with no crew, no technical assistance. Recently Lelouch was quoted as saying he longed to make a film without technicians. I can't think what is stopping him. If all he needs is a bankrupt producer, I can recommend one.

**DW: So is this a manifesto for *cinéma pauvre* so unfashionable in film schools nowadays?**

CM: A manifesto for one kind of cinema, one of several possible kinds of cinema, that's all. To call it anything else would be foolish. You could never make *Lawrence of Arabia* like this. Nor *Andrei Rublev*. Nor *Vertigo*. But we possess the wherewithall – and this is something new – for intimate, solitary film-making. The process of making films in communion with oneself, the way a painter works or a writer, need not be now solely experimental. My comrade Astruc's notion of the camera as a pen was only a metaphor. In his day the humblest cinematographic product required a lab, a cutting-room and plenty of money... Nowadays, a young filmmaker needs only an idea a small amount of equipment to prove himself. He needn't kow-tow to producers, TV stations or committees.