

## An interview with Chris Marker – October 2010

CHRIS MARKER One of the remarkable things about *Sans Soleil* is that we did it with four different voice-overs, in French, German, English and Japanese, and we found almost the same voice in each language. It was Volker Schlöndorff, who was in charge of UFA, who found the German voice, but the funniest story was the Japanese. There was a programme that I watched a lot in Tokyo. It was on the Fuji channel in the morning and it was a kind of female confession programme, with games and very often crying; because the Japanese cry a lot on television, the Japanese love to see women crying on television (well everyone to their humour).

Well, on this morning in question the lady, who of course I knew nothing about, after crying a lot began to speak – and it was exactly the kind of voice I wanted. Immediately I called a friend and I said, 'Look on the Fuji channel – who is this lady?'

And it turned out that she was a very famous comic-strip author specialising in that long Japanese tradition of cross-dressing stories. A girl passes for a boy because for some reason she has to hide her identity, and then another girl falls in love with her, who doesn't realise that she is a girl so there is a hint, a flavour, of lesbianism, although nothing is said. And then at the end everything is revealed and there is a happy ending. There is a theatre company specialising in this type of plot in which all the actors are women and so you have a girl playing a boy who looks like a girl. It turned out that one of these plots, which was called *La Rose de Versailles*, a story of a girl during the French Revolution who has to hide as a boy, was turned into film by Jacques Demy – the most unknown of his films, I'm not even sure it has been shown here, which he made in Japan to make money.

So all my gang in Tokyo organised the recording. I couldn't control the text of course but I totally trusted the girl who was in charge, and finally we found this woman and she was living in a room full of animals – furry animals, teddy bears and that sort of thing, completely my

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This interview was conducted at the request of the German artist-filmmaker Christopher Roth for his project with the journalist Georg Diez, *80\*81*, which attempted to trace the present in the events of the period 1980–1981.

universe, you know. Love at first sight. So I can say that all four versions had practically the same voice – unique in the history of cinema.

COLIN MACCABE I've been asked to start this interview by asking you what you first think of when you think of *80\*81*.

MARKER It is my re-encounter with Japan, which began in 1978 when I went to scout for Reichenbach, that triggered my old love for Japan which I had developed in sixty-four when I was there for the Olympics. Suddenly I felt that I must go back to this country and then I invented a movie for Anatole Dauman, which I didn't know if I would ever do, but I took the money and ran to Japan. And that was the beginning.

And then, of course, eighty-one is Mitterand. Of course.

You can guess which is the best for me.

MACCABE But *80\*81* is not just re-engaging with Japan it is also Guinea-Bissau. How come?

MARKER Pure coincidence. It is the moment when my friend Mariel asked me to help them to build the pompously named Institut du cinéma. I couldn't say no. So it didn't start as a sub-plot of *Sans Soleil* – it was just one of those things, it wasn't planned. I happened to spend half the year in a comfortable hotel in Tokyo – a real palace – and half the year in a former military barracks in Guinea-Bissau, which was also a sort of a palace because it had a shower. That transition was, for me, very exciting – the movement from one place to the other was happily dialectic.

MACCABE What were you doing in Guinea-Bissau, in this Institut du cinéma?

MARKER I was helping those youngsters to develop a little knowledge of cinema. I couldn't teach anything, but as these youngsters had practically come out of the jungle I could for once assume that I knew a little more than they did. For I never wanted to teach anything to anyone, but there I could try.

MACCABE But wasn't that also the end of the Guinean revolution, with Nino's bloodless coup of 1980?

MARKER Yes, it was already the beginning of the end.

MACCABE At the beginning of the film you say that the important thing now is to understand the different times. What is European time? What is Asian time? And what is African time? And the film seems to do that.

MARKER Yes of course.

MACCABE *Sans Soleil* is made after *Le Fond de l'air est rouge*, when the hopes of the sixties and early seventies are over.

MARKER Yes.

MACCABE But in *Sans Soleil* the demonstrations at Narita and the Guinean revolution continue to stand for a kind of hope – you do not want to give up on those struggles.

MARKER At the first level you can say that at that moment which is the moment of *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* everywhere the left was in crisis. But in Guinea-Bissau there was still something I could believe in, in spite of the coup. Now, nobody cares for Guinea-Bissau any more except the Mafia. It seems to have a family disease of coups and armies in which all anyone wants is to make a little money by getting a cut of the drugs, which makes it the most despairing experiment in all Africa. When I shot *Sans Soleil* the situation was not like that. Luís was not a genius but he was carrying still the image of Amílcar Cabral. There was still something of the initial idealism.

MACCABE I'm just trying to imagine going from Guinea-Bissau to Japan and back again.

MARKER Yes, it was very exciting.

MACCABE Did you do it every month?

MARKER No, it was practically half the year in one and half in the other but not mechanically. I was going from one to the other, and to Paris as well. I split the year between them. It was kind of fun.

MACCABE You'd promised a film to Dauman – when did you decide to make it?

MARKER By doing it. To my surprise I looked at the footage I'd taken and I thought perhaps this could make a movie.

MACCABE How long did it take you to make it?

MARKER What is the final date of the film?

MACCABE In the filmographies, 1982.

MARKER Well, let's say four years. Now I was always doing many other things but let's say four years from the initial moment in 1978 of going around meeting people, establishing networks; filming a little bit here and a little bit there. And then finally it was in 1981 that I thought that after all there might be a movie. So the final stage was one year.

MACCABE There is extraordinary footage in the film but it is difficult to believe that you shot it knowing how you would use it.

MARKER No, I did as I always do. When I shoot I do not know at all what I am doing.

MACCABE So it is in the editing that you find the film.

MARKER Yes. In my usual way, beginning at the beginning and ending at the end practically in real time. I build the film in my brain but once I am familiar with the material do it as if it is one shot from beginning to end.

MACCABE And the narration?

MARKER That was the worst nightmare. It is always a nightmare but with *Sans Soleil* it was particularly difficult. For more than a month I did not know what to do and I was working in the present tense, and then I tried the past tense and it worked.