

Film also ages: time and images in Chris Marker's *Sans soleil*

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Abstract

Considered today as a seminal and essential figure for an understanding of the implications of our visual culture, Chris Marker and his films have only recently received widespread critical attention. However, many aspects of his work in non-fiction still remain under-studied, most notably his complex reflections on the temporal nature of cinematic images and their (in)ability to recreate past events, aspects that are essential to Marker's understanding of cinema. Focusing on what is arguably his most important non-fiction film treating this theme, Sans soleil/Sunless (1982), and drawing on the work of thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, this article examines the film-maker's ideas on time and cinematic representation, as well as the strategies used in the film to expose the profound range of philosophical meanings we have attached to film images over the last century. Central to Sans soleil is the space Marker terms 'The Zone', in which are found not only many of his insights into the possibility of using film as a valid document to access a contingent past, but also an original cinematic mechanism that attempts to restore to film images their own entity.

Keywords

Chris Marker
Sans soleil
Deleuze
time
Vertigo

My problem is to discover the fundamental nature of time and what power it has.

(St. Augustine 1961: 271)

Even after the sixth or seventh viewing, there is an unlikely image of Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (1983) that never fails to capture my imagination. The film pictures several curious, and now wonderfully outdated, mechanical devices: a robot that resembles John F. Kennedy, a clarinet that plays alone, musical stairs, etc. However, my favourite has to be the swimming pool, surrounded by a group of buildings, which incorporates a huge underwater digital clock in its floor, constantly displaying the time to onlookers from windows and balconies around it. What are we to make of this image in the context of a film that specifically deals with the subject of time? The commentary that accompanies this particular image is not much help, as it refers to the story of a mobster who appears regularly on Japanese TV to explain kindness to children, and explores the possibility of feeling at home among the 12 million inhabitants of Tokyo. Where does this clock come from then? How can we find a place for it in the myriad of images that inform the film? A single interpretation is not possible of course, but, at least for me, this clock functions mainly as a brisk reminder of the passing of time and of its inexorability. Or, more precisely, it stands as a beautiful

1. For the French version of the film Marker uses instead a quotation from Racine's *Seconde préface à Bajazet*: 'The distance between countries compensates in some way for the excessive closeness in time' (Racine 1955: 4, my translation).

metaphor for our everyday dealings with time, of how imperceptible seconds and minutes amount to months and years of our life, of time in the simplest of terms.

The central role that time plays in *Sans soleil* is highlighted from very early on in the film. In the English version, a quotation from T.S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' allows us to delineate from the outset the two axes that are going to sustain the whole film: 'Because I know that time is always time. And place is always and only place.'¹ Space and time are indeed the basic structuring principles of *Sans soleil*. For more than an hour and a half, Marker thoroughly exhausts their possibilities, using images from geographically distant places, and projecting the narrative onto multiple moments in time, from the Salamina wars to the imagined future of the year 4001, from early 1980s Japan to the anti-colonial wars in Africa, etc. However, only a few minutes into the film, over the image of a heron in – presumably – an African swamp, a single line on the voice-over offers an interesting insight into the relationship between space and time, connecting both, but placing the latter higher among contemporary concerns: 'He contrasted African time to Asian time, and also to European time. He said that in the nineteenth century mankind had come to terms with space and that the great question of the twentieth was the coexistence of different concepts of time.'

'He' is Sandor Krasna, traveller and cameraman whose video-letters, read by an anonymous female voice-over, provide the primary material for *Sans soleil*. Krasna writes from Japan, Guinea-Bissau, Paris, Iceland, the Cape Verde Islands, a place near the Dutch border and so on, portraying and reflecting on culturally different attempts to come to terms with the nature of time. For Krasna, Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958), Shei Shonagon's list of things that quicken the heart, the Japanese ceremony of the Dondo Yaki, or the carnival in the streets of Guinea-Bissau, are the place for cultural celebrations and, above all, poignant attempts to respond to the relentless flow of time. Most importantly, through the images of the film, Krasna himself remembers his journey. This locates him at the centre of an intricate temporal web where the Proustian pleasure of remembering coexists with the necessity to understand the functioning of time and memory, as well as their relation with the film image.

Marker's attempts in *Sans soleil* are, as we will see, twofold. On the one hand, the film offers a personal reflection on the nature of memory and cinematic representation, addressing the possibilities of cinema as a technology of remembrance. On the other, *Sans soleil* is also, and I would say above all, an incantatory, rhapsodic film, one that, as Marker himself has hinted, becomes an intimate and hopeless prayer against the implacable march of time and death. Its contradictory temporal topography suggests the impossibility of accessing the past while obsessively attempting to do so, retrieving memories by means of all kinds of technology (letters, film, digital media, photographs, etc.). Or as Christa Blümlinger puts it, the film is 'a memorial site in which the act of remembering questions memory itself' (Blümlinger 1998: 48, my translation). In fact, the film constantly stresses the impossibility of its own temporal perspective, finally investing *Sans soleil* with the same poignancy Marker encounters in the rituals he

portrays, as it naturally fails to come to terms with time and, almost immediately, starts 'ageing'.

The place where *Sans soleil* manages to revert this 'ageing' process is called 'The Zone', a cinematic space in which images are divested of their iconic quality in an attempt to turn them into the direct representation of human memories, that is, images that are temporally marked. These images are external to time; they have escaped the flow and remain frozen, ready to be rewritten and manipulated. Devised basically as a correcting mechanism, Marker calls for a new film image, or rather for a sort of 'restored' image, free from any obligation towards the real and any temporal linkage; an image open to the work of art and to the realm of imagination. Furthermore, by stripping the image of everything that has been added, 'The Zone' also exposes the profound range of philosophical meanings we have attached to film over the last century.



Sans soleil.

Drifting towards an impossible memory

Midway through the second volume of his extensive account of cinema, Gilles Deleuze poses the question of whether the present can stand for the whole of time as both the extreme of several regions of the past and the elusive limit of what is yet to come. He concludes that the present of any event contains in fact 'a present of the future, a present of the present and a present of the past, all implicated in the event, rolled up in the event, and thus simultaneous and inexplicable' (Deleuze 1989: 100, his emphasis). According to him, a time-image grounded in the past is also 'complex and valid for time as a whole' (Deleuze 1989: 98), so it is possible to think of a *past of the present, a past of the past and even a past of the future*. In a few words, a past as complex and unstable, as contradictory and impossible to grasp as the present itself.

The intricate, but equally unstable, 'architecture of memory' that Marker constructs in *Sans soleil* is almost completely anchored in an undefined past, but it readily projects itself in different temporal directions (a near past future,

an even more distant past, the historical present in which most of the film unfolds, etc.), conjugating almost each and every possibility within the past tense, and creating a sort of labyrinth that, as Borges imagined in 'The Garden of Forking Paths', not only extends in space but also offers infinite temporal possibilities. In fact, the image of the Borgesian labyrinth and its multiple, contingent, time yields several dividends when assessing *Sans soleil*, as in the film Marker attempts, among many other things, precisely a mapping of the twisted labyrinth that is memory in order to reveal its impossible mechanism. Marker's aims are not only to show Krasna's memories as depicted on the screen or evoked by the voice-over, but rather to chart the functioning of memory itself and its contradictions.

In this respect, *Sans soleil's* internal structure is carefully designed to reproduce the random drifts of remembering, rather than any narrative or conventional storyline. As some scholars have already explained, Marker sees memory in terms of 'branching', a memory with 'no ending and no beginning; coming back from the past, penetrating into the future, withdrawn in a present from which it inevitably escapes' (Bellour 2000: 72, my translation). In *Sans soleil*, geographical and conceptual 'branches' (Japan, Guinea-Bissau, Iceland, Levi-Strauss's ideas about the 'poignancy of things') trigger a series of concrete memories, taking the viewer from one branch to previous or new ones. However, instead of shaping a closed, fixed network, these memories also refer to extra-filmic events that complete or even contradict the existence of the images we are watching. At some point, for instance, the scene moves from modern San Francisco and a re-reading of *Vertigo* to a loose idea for a science-fiction film set in the year 4001; a film that, we are told, would never get made but that would have been appropriately entitled *Sans soleil*. By using the same name for Krasna's imaginary science-fiction film and for the actual film in which the statement is made, Marker subtly forces us to question our most solid assumptions regarding the stability of the past. Should we understand that the film we are watching never got made? Is it just a work in progress? An imaginary film? Could it be the case that the voice-over is talking about an altogether different film with which *Sans soleil* happens to share the same title, but whose reality only inhabits a past that never actually materialized? Whatever the answer, the film manages to convey the immanent contingency of the very same past it is representing, categorically refusing to fix it and even thwarting our attempts to do so.

Inside the labyrinth of memory, with its innumerable possibilities, Marker's strategy is what Bellour has termed 'wandering with precision' (as quoted in Barr 2004: 173). Instead of presenting a coherent and necessary version of the past, nothing but the profoundly personal drift that informs the film is certain, although it will also disappear as soon as the film finishes. The string of encounters, dreams, reflections, ideas and mental associations becomes a catalogue of things that never were, as they would have been lost without the presence of the camera. Marker's *mise en abyme* in *Sans soleil* constantly opposes the fragility of these intimate memories, the 'banality' of the people and events he portrays, against the tyrannical background of a fixed history, revealing the latter's arbitrariness and ruthlessness in full view; a history that, as the voice-over informs us, literally 'throws its empty bottles out the window'. As Burlin Barr has noted, the 'vertigo of time' that suffuses

the film directly stems from this stark contrast between history and counter-history, between personal stories, personal memory and the 'official version', between certitude and doubt (Barr 2004: 175), as in the scene in *Vertigo* in which Madeleine points at different rings of the sequoia cut, marked with historical events such as the 'Declaration of Independence' and the signing of the 'Magna Carta', stating 'Here I was born and here I died.' Developing an idea already used in *La Jetée* (Marker, 1962), the immediate consequence of this temporal 'vertigo' in *Sans soleil* is a primary impulse to preserve these personal but meaningful memories before they are 'swallowed up by the spiral' in an already thwarted attempt to implode the flow of time through cinema so as self-consciously to confront impossible memory.

In fact, Krasna's letters refer poignantly to this (im)possibility of memory at several moments during the film. Only a few minutes into the journey, the traveller outlines his intentions: 'I will spend my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting but rather its lining.' The introduction of forgetting as a concept necessarily contained within the realm of memory reveals the *trap* of time and, ultimately, the essential contradiction that underlines *Sans soleil*: a film that recollects bits of a journey, but whose memories recognize themselves as false and impossible. The inability to recall a memory is highlighted again only a few seconds later when, over the frozen image of an African girl in a boat, the voice-over questions: 'How can we remember thirst?' It is also Krasna himself who, much later on, also introduces the drift as the only possible solution when the voice-over reads: 'Memories must make do with their delirium, with their drift. A moment stopped would burn like a frame of film stuck in the projector.'

Catherine Lupton analyses this 'impossible memory' in *Sans soleil*, applying Homi Bhaba's conception of an exilic optic, and imagining a certain 'exile of remembering', as the film longs for

images that are no longer strictly speaking representations, images that do not mediate or translate, that carry no reminder of the erased context that produced them ... [Marker's] images have their source in loss, the unthinkable and the irrepresentable, and can do nothing but point inexorably back to them.

(Lupton 2004: 43)

In her analysis, Lupton exposes Marker's complex stance on memory as the interplay between a nomadic optic (based on exchange, adaptation and dialogue) and an exilic one, much more poignant, melancholic and introspective. Both contradictory impulses interact almost simultaneously at different points in the film, Krasna being at the same time a nomad and an exile. However, Krasna's wanderings have no actual centre, but they do not seem to go forward either. They do not apply to conventional forms of exile or nomadism, as he seems to be looking for the impossible centre of the labyrinth rather than for a way out of it, whether by effective integration or lyric rejection. On the one hand, Krasna is aware of the hopelessness of his efforts to understand time. On the other, he has no homeland and no place to come back to, but to a non-existent one where a democratic regime of remembering would be possible and, according to the film, 'each memory would finally create its own caption'.

It is within this context that *Sans soleil* becomes a sort of prayer for things past, or rather for things that never really existed as they have already disappeared, yielding a certain feeling of melancholy that is reinforced by the film's constant depiction of memorial rites and sites such as museums, temples, cemeteries, etc. The vantage point from which every event is contemplated is almost invariably a *memento mori*, a series of events and ceremonies that speak of memory from the narrow line that separates life and death. A couple praying for their lost cat, a group of children offering flowers to the soul of a recently dead panda, revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral waving goodbye to the shore of an island he would never visit again, or the kamikaze pilot Ryoji Uebara quietly speaking his mind before killing himself on his plane ... celebrations of memory that remain as hopeless as the film's own efforts.



Sans soleil.

The collapse of the image in 'The Zone'

In *Sans soleil*, the final collision between memory and the film image provokes an innovative space called 'The Zone', which embodies the final position of the film in relation to its own discourse. It warns us against our current use of images as an access to a fixed past, as well as against the simplification this process entails. Not created by Krasna himself (who at first is even reluctant to agree on the utility of 'The Zone'), but by his friend, Japanese graphic artist Hayao Yamaneko, 'The Zone' is a world where film images are treated by synthesizers that turn them into coloured shapes, making it difficult for the viewer to recognize them as iconic images any longer. It was not a new technique for Marker. In the video installation *Quand le siècle a pris forme: Guerre et Révolution* (1978), he had already used it with images from the First World War and the Russian Revolution, deliberately imposing on spectators a more active and, to some extent, 'uneasy' gaze, putting them in a position from which the historical events represented on the screen could not be readily assimilated.

Much more powerfully than words, the temporal collapse that generates 'The Zone' finally obliges viewers to confront their own temporal perspective on the images they have just seen, as the illusion of capturing the past is graphically denied. In her exhaustive account of the subject, Susan Sontag explains how photographic images 'give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal' (Sontag 1979: 9). In the iconicity of the snapshot we enjoy the illusion of capturing a single moment in the past, while film provides a feeling of possessing a specific temporal sequence that we can literally 'replay' over and over again. According to Krasna (who, in the last stages of *Sans soleil*, declares himself 'moved' by Yamaneko's 'Zone' and wholeheartedly endorses his friend's points of view), distorting the iconicity of film images becomes the only way to break this possessive illusion that consistently denies images their own entity as such. As the voice-over reads, Hayao's 'Zone' advocates images that are 'less deceptive' and that proclaim themselves to be 'what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality'.

'The Zone' would put then into practice what Carl Plantinga explains as the film-maker's capacity to 'short-circuit the photograph's usual iconic tendencies', revealing that iconicity 'is one function of the photographic image, not automatic and not the only function' (Plantinga 1997: 53). The conception of 'The Zone' also seems to be following Deleuze (or vice versa) when the French philosopher explains:

But sometimes ... it is necessary to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarefy the image, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we were seeing everything. It is necessary to make a division or make emptiness in order to find the whole again.

(Deleuze 1989: 21)

This 'whole' Deleuze mentions is none other than the image itself, or rather the sort of restored and self-conscious image Marker advocates in *Sans soleil*. In the film, non-fiction images travel the road from their often-misinterpreted documentary value towards a much more complex regime that inscribes them as the raw material of an artistic practice, open to manipulation and deception, a process described by Catherine Russell as 'an attempt to recognize the autonomy of images separated, finally, from their origins in history' (Russell 1999: 308).

The first apparition of 'The Zone' is self-explanatory to some extent, as it is presented as Yamaneko's solution to change the images of the 1960s conflicts in Narita (Japan), setting in motion a self-conscious mechanism to reinterpret images that have already been interpreted, and whose meaning has long been fixed by those who produced and commented upon them. The consequences are twofold. On the one hand, it exposes the utter insufficiency of images to preserve the integrity of a past event, which disqualifies them as straightforward 'documents' that bear an essential relationship to the real (it is in the image, ergo it happened). On the other hand, the process also reveals this integrity of the past as mere 'utopia'. The only possibility of assessing or reassessing the past is to do so from an external point of view, once its essential contingency has been deliberately obliterated in order to produce meaning. Therefore, 'The Zone' self-consciously situates itself out of

time, literally and in respect of the time of the film. The images that enter its world of synthesizers finally regain their status and stop their 'ageing' process, escaping the tyranny of the spiral – like, in the words of the film, 'insects that would have flown beyond time'.

'The Zone' is also conceived as a mechanism for resisting any attempt to romanticize the past. That is what happens, for instance, with the images of Japanese kamikaze planes. Here, the reading goes directly against the grain of Japanese history and war myths. The voice-over explains that kamikaze pilots have indeed become 'legends', but immediately, and quite brutally, counterbalances this fact stating that they were 'likelier (legendary) material ... than the special units who exposed their prisoners to the bitter frost of Manchuria and then to hot water so as to see how fast flesh separates from the bone'. The almost unrecognizable images of Japanese pilots saying goodbye to family and friends and of planes crashing into aircraft carriers gain a new dimension when Krasna informs us that not all of them were volunteers. However, any attempt at sentimentalism is systematically refused by the image. The shifting patterns of colour deny us the possibility of 'capturing' the picture and impose an insurmountable distance between the event and its representation. The same distance is underlined when Krasna addresses the marginalization of the Burakumin in Japanese society, a group that George DeVos termed 'the invisible race' (as quoted in Alldritt 2000), having no physical characteristics that distinguish them from other Japanese. 'The Zone' shows not only the Burakumin's existence but also their marginalization. It could not have been otherwise, as conventional images would have imploded the necessary distance between reality and representation. In the film the reasoning is clear: 'They are non-persons. How can they be shown, except as non-images?'

The whole process naturally culminates in an act of contrition when Krasna decides to alter the images of *Sans soleil* in 'The Zone' ('Yamaneko showed me my own images affected by the moss of time'), acknowledging once more the impossibility of recalling a complete memory through film, and the unfairness with which these images are themselves constructing 'History' as they pass, and privilege a certain version of past events, fixing them even when they try not to. Therefore, the only ethical option left to the film is to address this impossibility, exposing a sort of healthy uselessness to the whole exercise, but one that also questions the nature of the memories we construct using film. Hence the ambiguity of the final sentence of *Sans soleil* ('Will there be a last letter?'), where Marker subtly refers to his previous body of work and hints, probably for the first time in his career, of the demise of cinema.

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