

Chris Marker's Real and Unreal Japan —*Sans Soleil* as Intercultural Document

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Abstract

This paper examines the work of the French filmmaker Chris Marker, focusing on his film, *Sans Soleil* (1983). Chris Marker's distinctive work is difficult to categorise, but he has had a long association with Japan. For the purposes of this paper, I concentrate on the theme of Japan and its representation in *Sans Soleil*, discussing how true a picture it paints of the country, its people, and its culture. In particular, I analyse one particular sequence to show that Marker's Japan in some respects shows these elements in a way that reflects reality, whilst in other respects it provides a false representation.

1. Background

The French filmmaker Chris Marker cannot be easily introduced as simply a “filmmaker” as such, but for the purposes of this paper, it should suffice to start with this description, as his reputation rests solidly, though not wholly, on two landmark films, one of which is the main subject of discussion here, *Sans Soleil* (1983), the other being *La Jetée* (1962). When we think of Chris Marker, more than with most filmmakers, we immediately enter a mystery or puzzle world revolving around the identity of Marker himself. Indeed, it is a wonder that he bequeathed this very un-French name to the general public at all: some of the many identities by which he is known include Chris Villeneuve, Sandor Krasna, and Chris.Marker¹⁾. As has been remarked by various commentators, despite this seeming anonymity, Marker’s imprint is very much that of an individual; David Thomson writes of his “unaffected independence”²⁾. Nevertheless, despite an enormous output of work which includes feature films, photography, a novel, commentaries³⁾, film reviews, art installations, and a recent revival of interest in his work, it is probably safe to say that for the most part only those specifically interested in film and art will recognise his “name” or body of work as belonging to the same artist.

Standing head and shoulders above the rest of his eclectic oeuvre are the two particular aforementioned works, *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil*, separated by almost twenty years. These are the key works for which he is known, despite his intense engagement with left-wing politics throughout his career. *La Jetée* is exceptional for being a motion picture made up almost entirely of still frames and for telling a fictional story, whereas *Sans Soleil* is perhaps more typical of Marker because it tells a fictional story under the guise of looking like a documentary. These two assertions hold true despite the fact that Marker is principally known as a film-essayist, which is to say a maker of essays on film, and as a documentary filmmaker. We thus already have in his filmography the two poles of the real (documentary) and the unreal (fiction).

The above reservation about Marker’s disputed name and biography notwithstanding, we can nevertheless piece together some minimal details about the trajectory of his life as revealed through his career. His earliest work is rooted in his writings and associations with the periodical *Esprit*, the publishing house Editions du Seuil, and with Parisian Left Bank intellectuals; his interests can be characterised as very eclectic. Even before he became involved in film, he showed an “interest in transposing conventions and techniques across media”⁴⁾.

For the purposes of this essay, the above background could be said to be both necessary and unnecessary, given the title. For those who want to know more about Marker’s other works, there is no doubt in my mind that the deeper one looks into those,

in many cases, hard-to-find works, the more understanding one will take away from any individual work. However, if we consider the true subject of *Sans Soleil*, there is a case for an interesting contradiction. The subject of *Sans Soleil*, discussed in this paper, can be said for the most part to be Japan, and Marker has shown a consistent interest in Japan and other Asian countries throughout his career; *Le Mystère Koumiko* (*The Koumiko Mystery*, 1965) and *Dimanche à Pékin* (*Sunday in Peking*, 1956) are just two examples of this interest. At the same time, we have to ask ourselves how “real” the Japan that is portrayed in his works is and how far Marker attempts to go in conveying such a reality.

I think there are two obvious ways of looking at this question as a viewer. One way would be as an outsider with little or no connection with Japan who looks upon Marker’s description of Japan as an intercultural text, if we consider Marker to be engaging with another culture by being there and interacting with it, even if it is only by observing. This is the unreal side. Another way would be as an insider, a Japanese person or someone who has spent most of her or his life in Japan, and thereby gauge his or her reaction to this more “real” Japan as presented in the film. This would be the real side. My interest straddles the two options. I am interested in the film for its experimental (unreal) content, but I am also interested in how far the representation of the *idea* of Japan can be said to be real, or truly representative.

2. *Sans Soleil*

To even those already intimately in love with the cinema, *Sans Soleil* on first viewing is a puzzle film and probably continues to be that over several viewings, even when the viewer has availed himself of the wealth of research materials available on the Internet, in books, articles, and other media. Setting aside formal concerns over whether *Sans Soleil* is a documentary, an experimental film, or a fictional entity, or all of these together, we must first and foremost wrestle with the basic narrative.

Sans Soleil was perfectly summarised by Marker himself in a contemporaneous press release, reprinted in the American Criterion DVD and Blu-Ray⁵⁾ editions of *Sans Soleil*, as well as on the site devoted to Chris Marker hosted by Daniel L. Potter⁶⁾, so I will quote this in full here:

‘An unknown woman reads and comments upon the letters she receives from a friend – a free-lance cameraman who travels around the world and is particularly attached to those “two extreme poles of survival”, Japan and Africa (represented here by two of its poorest and most forgotten countries, even though they played a historical role: Guinea Bissau and the Cape-Verde Islands).

The cameraman wonders (as cameramen do, at least those you see in movies) about the meaning of this representation of the world of which he is the instrument, and about the role of the memory he helps create. A Japanese pal of his, who clearly has some bats in the belfry (Japanese bats, in the form of electrons) gives his answer by attacking the images of memory, by breaking them up on the synthesizer. A filmmaker grabs hold of this situation and makes a film of it, but rather than present the characters and show their relationships, real or supposed, he prefers to put forward the elements of the dossier in the fashion of a musical composition, with recurrent themes, counterpoints, and mirror-like fugues: the letters, the comments, the images gathered, the images created, together with some images borrowed. In this way, out of these juxtaposed memories is born a fictional memory...'

In its simplest guise, *Sans Soleil* is framed as a letter written by a travelling cameraman by the name of Sandor Krasna, actually the name of Marker's own grandmother, to a female friend who can see and show us the various scenes he has filmed from around the world as she reads the letter. We must, however, be careful to consider that, although we do not find this out until the end credits, Marker – or "Krasna" – has certainly not filmed everything that we have seen. It is obvious that many still and moving images have been taken from movies and television programmes of every kind, many of these from Japanese television, of varying original or transfer quality, and that some are excerpts from others' artistic works whose quality is much better than those taken from television broadcasts. The sentences as read from the letter in general echo or reflect in very thoughtful, often poetic ways, the various images or filmed sequences found by Krasna. We should also take into consideration a comment by Marker made outside of the film, perhaps disingenuously, that he views *Sans Soleil* as "nothing more than a home movie"⁷⁾ and that his "main talent has been to find people to pay for my home movies"⁸⁾.

However, there is certainly an element of truth to the above claim in so far as one could walk away from a viewing of *Sans Soleil* with the impression that a very talented amateur filmmaker has thrown together his own filmed scenes with pieces of found footage and overdubbed these with a loosely-narrated story. At the same time, this would involve discarding completely any knowledge we have of Marker's previous work in many fields and the fact that *Sans Soleil* is ultimately, at the very least, a highly-structured and professional work. It is also a mesmerising film by the well-travelled Chris Marker himself which displays a vast amount of experience in piecing together and contributing to others' works, in many cases that of now very famous filmmakers in their own right, Alain Resnais being one of these, a French director of the 50s and 60s New Wave who started

out as a documentary filmmaker, but, unlike Marker, gravitated towards fiction, where he has mostly stayed throughout his career.

We should try to gain a general picture of the movement of scenes and the reflections on offer in this film without going into too much detail, as that is beyond the scope of this paper, before looking in detail at one particular sequence which for me sums up the theme of unreal versus real.

Sans Soleil begins with a quotation from T.S. Eliot in Marker's English version of the film – there are also French, German, and Japanese iterations – and an assorted series of images interspersed with sections of black screen (“film leader”) and shots of children on a road in Iceland and a glimpse of fighter jets on an aircraft carrier. This prologue soon gives way to the main thrust and situation of the film, scenes from what we might term the “real” Japan. We are introduced to that country as we observe, guided by the letter being read aloud by the female narrator, various people sprawling and resting on seats on a ferry on which the narrator has been travelling on his way from Hokkaido; we are told that the scene reminds him of wars past and future. The obvious impossibility of the phrase speaks to one of Marker's main concerns in the film, memory, as well as the mutability of time. We soon find ourselves in Tokyo, but we are whisked off in quick succession to the Île-de-France in Paris, the Bissagos Islands in Guinea-Bissau, and back to Tokyo. We are treated to small, seemingly trivial pieces of information, basically Krasna's memories of places, for example a couple's attending a temple for cats, homeless people in the streets in Namidabashi, the sight of an emu in Paris, an African girl smiling, some landscape scenes, then a bar in Namidabashi. We should note that almost every utterance that is attributed to the cameraman is introduced by the phrase “He told me”. Gradually, the narration begins to take on weightier issues.

The first direct parallel that is made to link the ex-Portuguese colonies with Japan is that these countries have a deep knowledge of survival. To images of space technology and then a sustained sequence of a Polaris nuclear missile being launched from a submarine, we are given a history lesson on power in which Krasna describes how during the Heian period power resided not in the Emperor's court but with certain hereditary regents, leaving literary work to flourish in such works as, for example, Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. It is hard to resist the message here that real power resides with the West; we should note that for a large part of his career Marker was associated with supporting struggles for independence that were often of a Marxist, anti-US bent, but I would not say this is an overt theme of *Sans Soleil*. Indeed, *Sans Soleil* itself is a kind of pillow book, a list of various, seemingly unconnected things. In keeping with this Japanese theme, we witness a long sequence showing a street festival in Japan that concentrates on traditional music and dance, this part without commentary, although there are very quick

shots of someone rowing a boat, an emu from Paris, and what looks like an African ritual intercut with the main street festival sequence.

After a very brief flash of an African desert scene, we have a sense that the cameraman's story proper – and I stress that this is always narrated or voiced by a female narrator, making the term of narrator somewhat ambiguous – now begins. He writes of returning to Chiba, and we accompany him on a bus journey, soon arriving in Shinjuku, where he speaks of his "reunion with Tokyo". There follows a series of shots of well-known landmarks such as the Ginza owl, a locomotive train in Shinbashi, a temple devoted to foxes in the Mitsukoshi department store, along with various fairly mundane street scenes, followed by a number of more unusual sights such as a robotic panda, and a monkey on a lead, culminating in a series of shots of Tokyo's omnipresent mode of transport. Over this, the female narrator reports, "He wrote, Tokyo is a city crisscrossed by trains; tied together with electric wire, she shows her veins". We also have references to the world of media, to people reading manga in the street, and to television, which will take on an increasing importance as the film continues. The narration links manga by turns to the strange modern architecture, statuary, and giant voyeuristic faces on billboards around the town before returning us to quieter locales such as local cemeteries as night falls. In particular, we are shown the inside of a bar which in actuality was owned by Marker himself; the bar is called *La Jetée*, after Marker's film, and even has stills from that film clearly visible on the walls.

The traveller now spends the rest of the day in front of the television, referred to as a "memory box", experiencing the first of a number of sustained television images and excerpts, images of deer in Nara, commercials, and a programme showing gruesome drawings of atrocities in Cambodia perpetrated during the Vietnam War, shown to the soundtrack of Marlon Brando expatiating on the nature of horror from the American film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), although we cannot know whether the sound proceeds from the television set or is in some way mixed in by Marker-Krasna. Through the female narrator, Krasna characterises these scenes as, for the most part, quintessentially Japanese, the dominating feature being that of horror and pain. To reinforce this point we see a series of still television images from Japanese horror and samurai films to a treated soundtrack. There is some brief relief from the harrowing soundtrack when these images give way to various items of news coverage from home and abroad, including an election, linked to a tradition of blacking out the eye of a *daruma* doll followed by mention of an earthquake that has just occurred in Tokyo and Krasna's meditation on how poetry follows from insecurity and that in the case of the Japanese in particular they have survived the fragility and impermanence of life by attaching themselves to superficial things and to an unchanging world of fantasy represented on television by samurai dramas and animated

trains that can fly. He prides himself on watching everything, including “wide shows”, whose obvious censoring of nudity he derisively views as “mutilation” as it at the same time reveals nudity and hides certain parts of the body, mainly pubic hair.

Moving away from television, the traveller visits an exhibition of treasures from the Vatican, then jumps to a sex museum at Jozankei in Hokkaido which features gigantic penis sculptures and copulating animals, marvelling that at this location one can visit a museum, a chapel, and a sex shop. The narrator here seems to be both empathetic towards, and critical of, Japanese society in that he sees this egregious depiction of the sexual act as something that can only be explicitly shown with animals and is therefore a way around the censorship that prohibits the graphic depiction of sex between humans. By way of some brief comments about Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde’s political history, our traveller returns to Tokyo and displays his fascination with various technological, mainly robotic, inventions in and around the Mitsukoshi department store. However, he rarely leaves radical politics out of the picture, visiting the anniversary of a famous 1960s protest against the building of the new Narita Airport. At this point he also introduces the character of his friend Hayao Yamaneko, an alter ego of Marker, who has developed a form of visual representation through a combination of a synthesiser and computer images which purports to represent the world more truthfully.

3. Train sequence and conclusion

I would now like to go to a detailed discussion of the sequence that for me is at the heart of the unrealness of Marker’s Japan. It starts at 00.47:26 minutes into the film and lasts for about ten minutes. Over successive shots of customers sitting in restaurants from both inside and then outside, the female voice states, “One day he [the cameraman Krasna] writes to me: ‘Description of a dream – More and more, my dreams find their settings in the department stores of Tokyo, the subterranean tunnels that extend them and run parallel to the city; a face appears, disappears, a trace is found, is lost ... I begin to wonder if those dreams are really mine or if they are part of a totality, a gigantic collective dream of which the entire city may be the projection.’” These words are enounced over a mixture of shots of ordinary scenes of people commuting and shopping in the underground areas which link the train lines to the department stores, with the occasional shot of what to a foreigner might seem very unusual, such as a window display of two giant masks either side of a kimono. After a little more information about the mundane aspects of the building complex, the voice continues: “The train inhabited by sleeping people puts together all the fragments of dreams, makes a single film of them, the ultimate film. The tickets from the automatic dispenser grant admission to the show”.

This last sentence is the perfect introduction to a mesmerising sequence of footage taken by Marker, along with found footage from various sources. A long take of hands in close-up depositing tickets as people pass through a ticket barrier to the trains is accompanied by intense, otherworldly synthesiser music which creates an alienating, almost stressful effect. A brief shot of truncated arms placing money in coin lockers shot through a narrow space as if the filmmaker is spying adds to this disembodied effect; we only see a few heads or parts of heads edging themselves into the frame here. The right-to-left rhythm of the people passing through the barrier like a flowing river is picked up by a shot of a train filmed from a parallel moving train looking slightly down at it from an angle. This train carrying the cameraman seems to be moving to the left, though this could be the result of parallax. However, disorientatingly, in the next cut the train being filmed with the same passengers is moving to the right. It is of course possible that the train being filmed simply stopped for some reason and changed direction, but we do not have enough information to know this for sure. In addition, we catch the occasional reflections of passengers reflected in the inside of the carriage from which Marker is filming. Whether this was intentional or not, we cannot know, but given the conditions in which Marker filmed, it was probably unavoidable. Soon after this, we see the same train moving to the left, and this is followed by a different train moving to the right.

At this point we have the first of many inserts from different sources: an animation that shows a train moving up some tracks to a dark background and the title of the programme in kanji (銀河鉄道999, also known as *Galaxy Express 999*); receding train tracks shot from the back of an overground train; passengers entering an overground train on a crowded platform; a shot from inside a train of a man holding on to a hand strap; a dozing woman who briefly opens her eyes as if aware of being filmed; another sleeping woman; a middle-aged man covering his eyes; a younger man reading a newspaper; a shot of the crowded interior of the train with people standing and holding the hand straps; close-ups of hands hanging on to the hand straps; a woman reading a book; a young woman listening to music through headphones; a man wearing sunglasses and a surgical mask; a young woman who yawns; someone playing with a Rubik's cube; a dozing man; the very pale, almost ghostly face of a young woman; a dozing middle-aged woman; another dozing older man; a woman in a kimono; an old woman sleeping; an insert of the animated train we saw earlier now flying into the sky; a woman falling asleep as her head lolls around; the floating decapitated head of a young girl saying "okaasan" (mother) from a horror film; a gigantic eye presumably taken from a film; another shot of the same woman falling asleep; a middle-aged man whose face we cannot see; a man from a horror film who is taking off a latex mask to reveal a horribly mutilated face; another shot of the same man whose face we could not see earlier because it was in

shadow, albeit we now see he is sleeping; a shadow of what we can guess is some kind of monster or ghost on the ceiling of a dark room, quickly followed by a shot of a garment billowing in a draft, and then a child's doll-like face, all three shots in all likelihood being from the same horror film or even the same original sequence; a different middle-aged man falling asleep; a shot of the Japanese monster known as *rokurokubi*, which is characterised by a woman's head on a long, snake-like body, and her confronting a person, again from a horror film; a return to the previous sleeping man; another young man sleeping; a fighting sequence from a samurai film; a sleeping young man; a woman whose throat is impaled by a sword; a return to the same sleeping young man; back to the same woman whose throat has been impaled in which she is screaming and then is at rest; two more sleeping passengers; brief shots of their hands on their laps; a shot of a naked man making love with a naked woman; a longer shot of the same sleeping passengers we saw before the love-making scene; a return to the couple making love; a cat meowing on a television screen; a sleeping older woman in the train just waking up; and, finally, a billboard sign from an American movie looking over the train as it passes by.

As we arrive at a station and people exit, the narration returns and, as if to counterpoint some of the seemingly negative images that we have just seen from Japanese culture, the voice continues with Krasna's thoughts: "He told me that this city ought to be deciphered like a musical score. One could get lost in the great orchestral masses and the accumulation of details. And that created the cheapest image of Tokyo, overcrowded, megalomaniac, inhuman. He thought he saw more subtle cycles there – rhythms, clusters of faces caught sight of in passing...as different and precise as groups of instruments". From here the visuals and narration move on to the dizzying plethora of television sets and their accompanying images that can be seen around the city in different places, then on to video games, but we must note that his narration is not critical of these modern forms of technology and tends on the whole to delight in all the particularly Japanese cultural elements that are reflected in these machines.

For me, the sequence on the train that I have outlined is the most important section of the film. It is certainly true that in that sequence Marker homes in on clichéd images of Japan: the emphasis on sex, nudity, and violence, as well as the customary habits of people sleeping in trains, which in many cultures is still extremely unusual.

Looked at more closely, some interesting aspects are revealed about the train sequence. We have twenty shots of realistic scenes of everyday passenger life followed by a mixture of forty-eight shots of everyday shots and fantasy scenes, taken mainly from television and film. However, Marker gently prepares us for this change of focus by interspersing in the first sequence of shots two realistic scenes that have a bizarre, though

perfectly plausible, quality: the man wearing the sunglasses and the mask and the woman with the extremely ghostly, pale face. These real-life scenes foreshadow the sequence of increasingly bizarre, dream-like shots already mentioned, though we should note that the latter are interrupted every one or two shots by real scenes from the train car. The longest sequence of scenes from popular culture is three, and these decrease in number as the train slows down and enters the station.

We also notice that the scene depicting a child's levitating head from a horror film is squeezed in between shots of the woman with the lolling head in real life. Similarly, the shot of the man removing a mask to reveal his damaged face is bracketed by real shots of a man in the train whose features very much match that of the man with the mask. Following this, the shots of the sleeping young man are matched by the shots of the impaled woman, implying a psycho-sexual dream on his part. Finally, shots of a couple in the train who might be together are matched by the gentler scene of a couple making love on film. The fact that we see a film poster as the train arrives in the station is perhaps a telling nod to the fantasy element we have just witnessed in this sequence.

Anybody who has lived in Japan for any length of time will know that the Japanese are extremely hard-working and that there is very little random crime, whilst there are a plethora of ways of diverting oneself with forms of entertainment that are not bound by Christian values. These three points alone go some way to explaining why someone in Japan can feel relaxed enough to fall asleep on a train and let his or her mind wander. What the real people seen in the train carriage are thinking or dreaming is of course impossible to know, but Marker's linking their oneiric moments with scenes taken from different media that reflect how foreigners often see the Japanese world represented is entirely reasonable to me from a sociological point of view. What we cannot say for sure is that this is a real portrait of Japan, though it makes one question the essence of "realness" and "unrealness", as it is completely dependent on the perspective and life of the one making the interpretation. As I have stated before, the whole film, although it is framed as a realistic collection of images put together by a cameraman, is more specifically a collection of memories of a fictional cameraman who has the same interests as Marker the filmmaker. To this extent, Marker's representation of Japan is "unreal" in the sense that this view of Japan comes to us through the eyes of a fictional character, yet rings true to many, perhaps even Marker himself, and yet it appears untruthful to others who may not wish to see the truthfulness of the fiction.

Some Japanese viewers might conclude that Marker's Japan is 'unreal', although I regard this position as somewhat unfair. I would say unfair because it is obvious to me and to many outsiders who have praised this as Marker's masterpiece that *Sans Soleil* shows a deep love and fascination with other cultures, in this case predominantly Japan.

In addition, it is hard to resist the feeling that in *Sans Soleil* one is watching a documentary film. The viewer has this feeling in spite of the fact that it is actually very clear from the beginning that the form of the film is in essence fictional and highly organised. I personally believe that the Japan that Marker the filmmaker and person makes available to us is both not completely real in the sense that not every Japanese person will recognise the Japan that she sees in the film as representative of the Japan that she knows. Yet, it is real enough to provide the viewer with insights into the essence of both the Japan of today and of the past.

Notes

- 1) Lupton, 2008, p. 12.
- 2) Thomson, 2010, p. 625.
- 3) These are essay-style books accompanied by photographic stills from films he has made or been involved in.
- 4) Lupton, op. cit., p.14.
- 5) *La Jetée/Sans Soleil*, The Criterion Collection, 2012, Blu-Ray edition.
- 6) <http://chrismarker.org/chris-marker/notes-to-theresa-on-sans-soleil-by-chris-marker/> (Retrieved, 06.09.16.)
- 7) Chris Marker, "Letter to Theresa by Chris Marker – Behind the Veils of Sans Soleil", <http://chrismarker.org/chris-marker/notes-to-theresa-on-sans-soleil-by-chris-marker/> (Retrieved, 06.09.16.)
- 8) Ibid.

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