

Crossing Chris: Some Markerian Affinities

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Abstract (E): This essay creatively explores a group of artists, writers, and other special individuals whose work or life story can be described as having an intriguing affinity with the protean career of Chris Marker. Avoiding the ‘usual suspects’ (such as Godard or Sebald), it discusses gossip columnist Milt Machlin, record collector Harry Smith, painter Gianfranco Baruchello, writer-filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky, and several others. From this constellation, a particular view of Markerian poetics emerges, touching upon the meanings of anonymity, storytelling, history and archiving.

Abstract (F): Cet essai brosse de manière créative le portrait d’un groupe d’artistes, d’écrivains et d’autres personnes particulières dont le travail ou la biographie peuvent être décrits comme montrant une étrange mais certaine connivence avec la carrière protéiforme de Chris Marker. Evitant les lieux communs (comme Godard ou Sebald), cet article trace des références moins attendues : le pigiste Milt Machlin, le collectionneur de disques Harry Smith, le peintre Gianfranco Baruchello, l’écrivain et cinéaste Edgardo Cozarinsky, et quelques autres. De cette nébuleuse, émerge une vision particulière de la poétique markérienne, en rapport avec les significations de l’anonymat, de la narration, de l’histoire et du travail de mémoire.

keywords: Biography, anonymity, archive, quotation, history, Chris Marker.

Article

*I trust, too, that there is something promising in this strangeness,
for where but in the most overlooked corners,
and in the briefest moments,
does one expect to find something like the past?*

– Alexander Nemerov (11-12)

An intriguing obituary appeared in some newspapers around the world in early 2007. In the Australian newspaper where I stumbled upon it, the editorial title was “Spook spoke more than 50 languages”. The notice was about a man named George Leoni Chestnut, “a spy by day and translator of Biblical Greek by night”, dead at 89. Beyond his extraordinary career as a translator – compiling Serbian and Afghan dictionaries, rendering children’s poetry from Chinese into English and Spanish, and producing Biblical texts in Dinka, the language of southern Sudan – Chestnut worked for more than thirty years as a “civilian director of the analytic section” of the National Security Agency. The obituary contains this anecdote:

Although he never discussed his work at the NSA, family members could often determine how things were going in Czechoslovakia or other world hot spots by how many Bach cantatas Chestnut played when he came home at night. A three-sonata night meant a crisis somewhere.

Most of us are likely never to encounter anything more about George Leoni Chestnut than what is recorded in this story. His life – already so covered over with secrecy – exists for us only in this flash, this scrap rising up from the ceaseless, churning oblivion of news-media biography. Yet, by the same token, I will probably never forget this beautifully dramatic/cinematic formula for the intersection of art, life and politics: “A three-sonata night meant a crisis somewhere”.

All things considered – and government espionage set aside – the fleeting, condensed life-story of George Chestnut sets me thinking about Chris Marker. Something that is rarely said about his films, videos and installations is that they each seem to be many works compacted into one, a collage of notes, anecdotes and projects through which Marker has managed, miraculously, perhaps by chance or impulsiveness, to draw the provisional, connecting line. How often I have watched some television or cinema documentary – ninety minutes or two hours broiling over one topic, one place, one person – and thought: Marker could have got that down into a crisp ten-minute vignette in the midst of some unexpected mosaic (or better, *constellation*). An example would be the Australian documentary *Eternity* (Lawrence Johnston, 1994), about Arthur Stace, the mysterious man who elegantly chalked the word ‘Eternity’ on every available street surface in his hometown of Sydney – a little, indeed, like the smiling ‘Mister Cat’ stencilled enigmatically everywhere above Paris rooftops (and in cyberspace), bearing his enigmatic message of playful hope, in Marker’s *The Case of the Grinning Cat* (2004).

There is a democratic sense in Marker’s work that everyone deserves to have their story told, even if it is in the condensed form of such a flash – or *illumination*, as Walter Benjamin would have called it. As Marker drolly observed in 2003: “That the unknown writer and the brilliant musician have the right to the same consideration as the corner storekeeper may be too much to ask”(39). Much has been made, in vexed biographical speculations down the decades, about Marker’s penchant for secrecy, his playful fake names, the paucity of photographs of him, and so on. Beyond any personal issues, however, this fog is strategic: Marker wishes to place himself at the level of every ordinary, more or less nameless-faceless person, the kind of citizen who may pierce public consciousness for only a brief moment – that is, if someone else (in most cases) bears the responsibility of artfully compressing and transmitting their tale in a lively, witty way. Marker’s art depends on *anonymity* – only secondarily his own anonymity, but rather the anonymity of most of us; precisely that Prufrockian pathos that comes down to us in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, which is the spur and subject of the installation *Owls at Noon Prelude* (2005).

As with the case of George Chestnut, Marker's work has become inextricably reflected, for me, in a colourful little paperback about the history of tabloid journalism, deleted copies of which once flooded the secondhand bookstores that I haunted during the late 1970s. *Gossip Wars: An Exposé of the Scandal Era* is by Milt Machlin (died 2004), whose surprising bio-note itself has the contours of a Markerian vignette: served in the Pacific theatre during World War II, graduated from Brown University and attended the Sorbonne, studying in the Cœur de Civilisation; editor of *Argosy* magazine and author of numerous books (fiction and nonfiction) about crime, international politics, the laying of pipes, the Holy Land... and the history of scandal and rumour-mongering. *Gossip Wars* is a book filled to bursting with ultra-short accounts of briefly memorable individuals – almost a pop-trash equivalent to Michel Foucault's poignant archival project (also very Markerian) called *The Life of Infamous Men*, which aimed to collect the single, fleeting traces, in some bland legal or bureaucratic document, of the dramas of otherwise unremarked-on, unrecorded ordinary lives. "What shall be read here is not a collection of portraits", wrote Foucault. "They are snares, weapons, cries, gestures, attitudes, ruses, intrigues for which words have been the instruments. Real lives have been 'played out' in these few sentences..." (78-79).

In *Gossip Wars*, there is one such story about a workaholic freelancer who, like so many who toiled in this journalistic field, wrote anonymously, with no byline (as did, years later in the context of '60s *Time* and *Newsweek* journalism, another famous recluse: Terrence Malick.) This particular writer, who filed his gossip scoops furiously, hit upon a novel way of immortalising himself, even if no reader ever knew how to read his graffiti-like gesture: he would somehow work in, quite meaninglessly, his own name, in the course of some quoted rhetorical flourish, or curse.

The poetic charge of Marker's art has much to do with what turns up, for a moment, from the anonymous flux of social information and rumour: a story, a face, a single photographic frame. His own profuse creativity of framing and recording deliberately confuses itself (like Orson Welles' in *F for Fake* [1974]) with the seeming proliferation of 'samples', quotes, found objects from another's hand (as in *Remembrance of Things to Come*, 2001) or no one's hand: anonymous art, provenance lost, no signature. This is explicitly the data-bank supporting *Owls at Noon*, as he described the project in 2005: "Objects, images that don't belong, and yet are there. Leaflets, postcards, stamps, graffiti, forgotten photographs, frames stolen from the continuous and senseless flow of TV stuff". In Marker, this work of collecting, sifting and connecting fragments is a specific work of memory (or 'immemory'), and of how remembered time constructs what he calls a "subjective journey", within and against a more massive, official History.

Marker, however, takes that textbook timeline seriously as well. This much is clear from his incessant pondering of “the generation that rose with the great wave of 1917” (as he wrote in the 1997 postscript to his 1959 collection *Coréens*) – this fabulously idealist but “tragic generation” of, for instance, Soviet director Alexander Medvedkin, to whom Marker devoted several films including his epic *The Last Bolshevik* (1993) – and its difference to his generation, “born on the other side of the black hole”, who “cannot ignore the depth of its failure”, and must obsessively bear the responsibility of bringing the dreams of the socialist and capitalist Utopias, alike, to account. As Ross Gibson, the noted Marker specialist from Australia, once remarked: Marker, now 88, can lay claim (whether he likes it or not) to some “serious history” (60).

This essay is an exercise in drawing Markerian affinities. This means neither those who influenced Marker (from Jean Giraudoux to Jean Cocteau), nor those whom he has come to influence (from Jean-Pierre Gorin to Jem Cohen). Rather, it means those whose thought processes and working methods come close, in some (perhaps odd) way, to Marker’s. Every artist seeks precisely these affinities – according to a logic which can be quite secretive and mysterious – in order to nourish his or her own work, expand his or her own universe; we could call such affinities ‘spiritual’, if we agree, for this moment, to purge from the word any religious connotation. Some Markerian affinities are already well-worn in the burgeoning critical literature: Marker and Jean-Luc Godard, Marker and Walter Benjamin, Marker and W.G. Sebald. But we can be still more inventive in the lines we draw, the connections we make. Marker himself surprises us, all the time, with such connections – to high art, popular culture, *fait divers*, personal encounters. Can we manage to surprise him, with some entirely unexpected shadow of his creativity in a totally foreign domain? Then again, we would have to end up asking what, indeed, is foreign to the imaginary universe of Marker, what could count as its inside and its outside, its borders? As he remarked in 2009, in the course of his cyber-adventures in the ‘Second Life’ realm (accessible at <secondlife.com>): “I chose a pseudonym, Chris Marker, that is easy to pronounce in most languages because I intended to travel. You need search no further than that”.

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Time and Memory: this couplet governs at least a hundred scholarly commentaries on Marker’s best-known film works, *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sunless* (1983), as well as the interactive archive which bears the title of *Immemory* (1997). Actually, we may need to restore to these words some of J. Alfred Prufrock’s classic banality: both time and memory are, in one sense, bland, unremarkable phenomena; time flows by, and recall is inevitable, for all of us. Time-and-memory is, in itself, no magic formula for art-making – as a mountain of banal contemporary art attests. But Marker’s art reaches for the poetic (even Utopian) moment when time and memory become, precisely, *inventive*: when time doubles back or springs forward, layering itself; and when memory creates a living (rather than dead)

archive, and a collective connection. Hence his fondness for temporal paradox, as in the primal, disquieting plot of a child witnessing his own death in *La Jetée*, or the proleptic, prophetic visions recorded by Denise Bellon's photographs of the Surrealists in *Remembrance of Things to Come*. This is what Gorin means when (in a video extra on the 2003 Criterion DVD of *Sunless* and *La Jetée*) he speaks of Marker's relation to his own life as a scientist working a time machine; he is both close and distant from his own experience, and can portray or explore himself as someone who (in the words of Gianfranco Baruchello – to whom we shall soon return – describing Marcel Duchamp as a time machine) “ignored some kinds of changes in the world and perhaps accelerated others” (35).

What is Marker's work of memory? Again confusing what he himself shoots (“images taken apparently at random”) with what he collects (“from every country I visit I return with postcards, newspaper cuttings and posters which I tear off walls”), Marker in 1998 reflected on the life-long creative project of a catalogue of images. He presents his “subjective journey through the Twentieth Century” as a characteristically modest “small study of classification of my archive of images”. And he concludes: “I am sure if I study my documents systematically, I shall find, hidden in that disorder, a secret map, like the map of the treasure in a tale of pirates” (150).

“Any reasonably long memory (like every collection) is more structured than it seems at first sight”, wrote Marker in the same text (150). On this level, the free associations that structure Marker's work resonate with the artistic practice of Italy's Gianfranco Baruchello, as traced in his protean projects in many media (drawing, painting, sculpture, filmmaking, farming) and expressed in his remarkable book *Why Duchamp*. All of Baruchello's works and reflections take the form of an almost Surrealist juxtaposition. He works with elaborate, unruly files, gathered over many decades, covering the most disparate topics: feminism, agricultural tools, the class struggle... Another obsessive collector of everyday fragments, Baruchello summed up, in *Why Duchamp*, the purpose of his quest in this way: to place his objects side by side – simply set them in some kind of loose but charged relation – in order to one day find “the secret of what all of them can mean together” (38). This is something like the years it takes for a psychoanalytic free association to eventually form some pattern, reveal some logic – and, until that moment, one must pursue, armed with all the fragments, the poetic art of setting side by side, the building of fragile bridges, the forming of striking shapes.

Let us return to the category of anonymous art – and the project of time as rendered by another great photographic artist, Walker Evans. In her superb 1995 biography of Evans, Belinda Rathbone emphasises the significance of all the anonymous art forms that he assiduously collected and cultivated: everything from unsigned letters and postcards to cigar-box art and freight-car emblems. This practice often took precedence over the artist's conventionally ‘creative’ output, which was relatively slim in terms of books and exhibitions. Evans, in a sense, ended exactly where Marker

began: with the art of graphic editing and lay-out of pictures and text in juxtaposition, at *Fortune* magazine in Evans' case, at the publishing house Seuil in Marker's. But aren't contemporary digital, computer-based, multi-media art projects (Marker's included), with their sampling and treating, really an update on such revolutionary design projects of the Twentieth Century?

Evans, like Marker, also developed a specific attitude towards time, memory and history: while being contemptuous of nostalgia (the kind that gushes over, as George Alexander once memorably put it, "the price of milk fifty years ago" [12]), he nonetheless sought to *freeze*, through obsessive and stately image-documentation, a certain period, a certain sensibility, which he felt to be imperiled, on the verge of passing away ("Before They Disappear" was the title of one of his magazine features). In fact, when Evans framed the scenes of his present day through his camera lens, he wanted to fix each thing "as it might be seen at some future date" (247), that is, how subsequent generations would see and remember the significance of that era. Another kind of 'remembrance of things to come', another ghostly, uncanny layering... This is the kind of cultural work which today's students associate more readily with Walter Benjamin and his *Arcades Project*: Benjamin, Evans and Marker are all alike in their attachment to 'their time' – which happens, as for all of us, to be the time of their youth – as well as their conviction that the lesson of this time is about to pass into oblivion ("then will a whole world of cherished association have been destroyed", wrote Walker [227]), and that its essence can best be caught by netting the tiniest and seemingly most banal traces of the period's ephemeral manufactured culture, its matchboxes and beer coasters and nightclub handbills...

So let us add another name, another very Markerian figure, to this rhizomatic list of affinities: experimental animator and wild musicologist Harry Smith, who (as Paola Iglori's heartbreaking 2001 documentary *American Magus* records) suffered the agony of his lifelong, uncatalogued ephemera collection being taken to the tip by a disgruntled landlord. And yet Smith also lived long enough (as he said on stage at the Grammys, in a clip used by Iglori) to see his famous curated selection of eccentric American folk music recordings "change the world". That, too, is the Utopian dream that gives Marker's work its finest, most lyrical and moving flights of fancy: when a morsel of poetry or whimsy, a 'cat listening to music' (the title of a short 1993 video, inserted as an *entr'acte* in the original television broadcasts of *The Last Bolshevik*) or a sudden delightful or surprising conjunction of images and sounds, can change the world... These are just the sort of "little personal October Revolutions" celebrated by Baruchello, "something really eternal, at least as material and stimulus for reflection" (41).

Marker has expressed his fondness for the work of another border-crossing essayist-filmmaker, Argentine-born Edgardo Cozarinsky, specifically the 2001 story collection *The Bride from Odessa*. In Marker and Cozarinsky (whose films include *One Man's War* [1982] and *Citizen Langlois* [1994], and

whose other books include *The Moldavian Pimp* [2004] and *Tres fronteras* [2006]), we find a very similar conception of what it means to represent, and comment upon, history – in both its social and personal forms. And in particular, what it means to fashion a narration (in the broadest sense of the term) from the scattered, archival materials of history: a story, anecdote, vignette, telling connection, or surprising epiphany. In the story “Christmas ‘54” from *The Bride from Odessa*, Cozarinsky writes:

This story has no plot, other than that of History itself. It is barely more than the impression left by an instant, a spark produced by two very different surfaces rubbing together. (101)

Marker and Cozarinsky may love the grand traditions of storytelling but, in their own works, they shy away from full-blooded fiction, and usually prefer to dwell (like their contemporaries Harun Farocki in Germany and Jean-Pierre Gorin in the US) amidst the many possibilities of the loose essay-documentary form. Sticking close to the facts and traces of history – which they happily embroider with myriad imaginative speculations, metaphors and puns – they require only the merest spark of a fictional intrigue: a chance encounter, a momentary crossing of two life-trajectories, a street poster glimpsed, a song overheard... Both filmmakers hold, in this sense, to what the Argentine theatre creator Vivi Tellas (with whom, in recent years, Cozarinsky has collaborated) calls the ‘Minimal Threshold of Fiction’ (Umbral Mínimo de Ficción, or UMF), a condition most suitable to the interweaving of fact and fancy, autobiography and narration. “My premise is that every person has, and is, an archive, a reserve of experiences, knowledge, texts, images”, Tellas has stated. She “adds nothing” to the personal worlds or archives she puts on stage; she does not “produce” but “postproduces” them, treating them like “surrealist *objets trouvés* or Duchamp’s ready-mades”.

Cozarinsky, too, postproduces his characters and plotlines. Another story by Cozarinsky from *The Bride from Odessa*, “Days of 1937”, presents the tale of its central character’s curious death as a secret allegory of the art of turning history into a narration, or an essay. At its conclusion, it conjures the possibility that there comes into being, at the moment of a person’s ‘passing over’ to the other side,

like islands floating in a nighttime sea, fragments of awareness, memories, voices and images, remnants of the gradually dimming existence, temporary baggage the traveller clings onto for a brief but imprecise length of time that our instruments cannot register. [...] Perhaps all that clings to [those islands] is flotsam from a shipwreck. It would be useless to expect that these scraps, which crumble even as we name them, could provide us with a portrait of the person crossing the divide. Perhaps it is only precisely as shards that they can catch the attention of any improbable observer who stumbles across them: their condition as brief fragments of a truncated story, the random pieces of a jigsaw that will never now be completed. (62-63)

In this allegory, the historian-storyteller is the ‘improbable observer’ who tries to pull together the mute, often seemingly meaningless traces of the past. Marker’s powerful installation *The Hollow Men* – revisiting the historical life-span that begins (as Raymond Bellour reminds us in his essay “Marker’s Gesture”) with the First World War that profoundly touched the artist’s childhood, with T.S. Eliot’s poem, suitably fragmented, as an aid – throws up deliberately ‘corrupted’ documents, undated and unidentified, that are endlessly reshuffled in the digitally programmed combinatory system of the piece. (As usual, Marker uses the simplest computer technology available.) One feels while watching it (in an appropriately darkened space and with Toru Takemitsu’s “Corona” for piano echoing loudly) that anything, grabbed from any time or place, could be made to signify World War I in this work – and, conversely, that all the time-bound signs of this terrible event stand a chance of being freed into our present-day cyber-ether. Today, as I write this piece, Marker is taking this liberation of his ‘immemorial archive’ still further in his Second Life interventions.

A final association. It seems like a joke, but it is not: Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, two old pals of the pre-Nouvelle Vague Left Bank group of filmmakers, are today great fans of certain very slick American TV shows. Where Resnais’ taste runs to *Millennium* (1996-9) and *The X Files* (1993-2002), Marker goes for the likes of *The Practice* (1997-2004), *Deadwood* (2004-6), *Firefly* (2002-3) and *The Wire* (2002-8). The maker of *La Jetée* and *Level Five* (1997) sets us straight:

I feed my hunger for fiction with what is by far the most accomplished source: those great American TV series... There is a knowledge in them, a sense of story and economy, of ellipsis, a science of framing and of cutting, a dramaturgy, and an acting style that has no equal anywhere, and certainly not in Hollywood. (2003: 37)

Two men in their eighties, watching their favourite series on DVD sets and computer monitors, in their separate homes, just as once they watched certain Hollywood musicals (*An American in Paris* is remembered) together in London, during their collaboration on *Statues Also Die* (1952). In Resnais’ lovely 1956 essay-doco about the Bibliothèque Nationale, *All The Memory of the World* (which contains the immortal credit to ‘Chris and Magic Marker’, no doubt for the use of his ‘Petite Planète’ travel guide to Mars!), there is a moment which is in fact pure musical, pure Kelly/Donen/Clair/Lubitsch: three workmen deliver the day’s journals to the library, marching in synchronised steps... But what is there in these modern American fictions of gruesome death and forensic detection, alien invasion and paranoid conspiracy, that attracts our two Eternal Modernists?

The American television program that makes me flash onto Marker the most is *Crossing Jordan* (2001-7), about the investigative work of autopsy experts in a city morgue. Like many shows of its ilk – about profilers, vice cops, psychic detectives – *Crossing Jordan* often builds to grand dramatic

recreations of crime or murder scenes that are in fact more like visionary projections: our inquiring heroes suddenly walk around inside images of the imagined past, sometimes magically animating still photos, computer schematics or police sketches in order to do so. This is interesting enough already as a cultural phantasm, but *Crossing Jordan*, in particular, brings this taste for revivification, this remembrance of things past or ‘time re-edited’ (as *The Case of the Grinning Cat* puts it) to an especially urgent and poignant point. So many of its plotlines, large or small, are precisely about reconstructing, in a flash, the life-stories of largely anonymous people: children, the homeless, loners, ordinary folks either below the radar or entirely off the map of society’s record of itself. And the flash that matters most, the pivotal moment for *Crossing Jordan*, is the exact moment of death: how someone fell, was hit or shot, how long their body has been left to decompose; and what history can be read once the body is scanned for its surface marks and then opened up to its archaeological and geological levels of trace-experiences...

Is this so far from Marker’s own poetic-political project as he described it in 2005, of “bringing into the light events and people who normally never access it”?

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