

## Chris Marker

b. Christian François Bouche-Villeneuve ([1](#))

b. July 29, 1921, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, Île-de-France, France

by Jaime N. Christley




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Jaime N. Christley is the editor, director, and chief contributor to [filmwritten magazine](#), and is enrolled in New York University's Cinema Studies program. He is a six-year veteran of the U.S. Navy.

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### "I write to you from a far-off country..."

Information regarding the early life of Chris Marker, photographer, filmmaker, videographer, poet, journalist, multimedia/installation artist, designer, and world traveler, is scarce and conflicting. The year to which his movies, videos, and multimedia projects are dated depends on which source you use, and in which country you live. Personal data is in a state of complete disarray: Derek Malcolm, writing about *Cuba Sí!* (1961) for *The Guardian*, reports that Marker was born in Mongolia, of aristocratic descent. Geoff Andrew of *Time Out London* isn't sure (Andrew, 146), and most sources, along with the Internet Movie Database, use the location I've listed above as his place of birth. Some say his father was an American soldier, others that he (Marker) was a paratrooper in the Second World War. Still others, that he comes to us from an alien planet. Or the future. Throughout his career, he has rarely been interviewed, and even more rarely photographed. It is said that he responds to requests for his photograph with a picture of a cat – his favorite animal. ([2](#)) I have to wonder, given the dry, unexpected, and off-kilter wit in much of his work, as well as his fascination with the malleability of information in the digital age, whether, if he is not the author of any of the above pieces of information and disinformation, would he at least support the creativeness (or strangeness) of their design? When Mikkel Aaland, an artist and web designer who wrote about meeting with Marker during the early '90s (while the filmmaker was working on *Immemory*, an interactive CD-ROM that explores the interpenetrative concepts of memory and understanding), wanted to record on tape his talks with the multimedia artist, he was told, "No interviews. Instead, if you must write something, use your imagination. Place us on a boat on the Nile. We are drunk. It's your story." It isn't that Marker supports lies and falsehoods – his chief fascination in his work has been, rather, the *nature* of truth, how it is perceived, understood, and most importantly, how it is created, for ourselves as individuals and as members of this or that community.

He is often credited with conceiving the cinematic essay form, with which such disparate filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, Orson Welles, Federico Fellini, Pier



Paolo Pasolini, Jon Jost, Chantal Akerman, Wim Wenders, Harun Farocki, Werner Herzog, Errol Morris, Jonathan Demme, Abbas Kiarostami, Nanni Moretti, Terry Zwigoff, and Agnès Varda have had varying degrees of success, and although the cinematic essay has its precedents in early work by Luis Buñuel (*Las Hurdes*, 1933), Alain Resnais, (3) and Georges Méliès, among others, Marker's placement within the context of the development of the essay should begin with *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957), which is not his first film, (4) but certainly the earliest case of his unique



*Le Joli Mai*

narrative style. Not that confirming his planting of any flags has been easy: he is mentioned twice in Pauline Kael's enormous review anthology, *For Keeps*, both times in conjunction with Jean Rouch, and subordinate to Godard, undoubtedly because Rouch, whose *Chronique d'un été* (1961) is a key work that gave birth to the *cinéma vérité* movement, and Marker, whose *Le Joli mai* (1963) is predicated on some of the same man-on-the-street interviews introduced by Rouch, were simply seen as documentarian-ethnographers or documentarian-anthropologists (Edgar Morin, who collaborated with Rouch on *Chronique d'un été*, is a leading French sociologist and philosopher), while Godard, who was and still is more of an international celebrity than Marker or Rouch or Morin put together, was beheld by Kael as a one-man band, a cinematic messiah, who knew no boundaries, and whose imitators would always know defeat when their imitations are uncovered or, as Kael suggested in her *Weekend* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967) review "we murmur 'Godard' and they are sunk" (Kael, 187). The similarities between *Le Joli mai* (a film which seems, in contrast to his later work, imbued with an uncharacteristically objective tone) and *Chronique d'un été* were undoubtedly great enough for a writer to set up Marker and Rouch as cinematographic coefficients, but the mere murmur of a film made in the year between the two primary specimens of *cinéma vérité*, the science fiction masterpiece *La Jetée* (1962), is more than sufficient to grant Marker his own corner in cinema history. But we will return to that one in a moment.

Film school textbooks and books on film history have arrived at a general agreement to treat any French filmmaker working outside of (or alongside) the French New Wave as secondary: exclusions include Jacques Tati – who, like so many other giants in the medium, worked on a wave of his own design – and the filmmakers who belonged to the Left Bank group. While one normally pictures such *Cahiers du Cinéma* graduates as Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer when discussing the French cinema of the late '50s and early-to-mid '60s, there also existed the Left Bank directors, who, according to Richard Roud, included three people: Agnès Varda, Alain Resnais, and Marker. Any division between the New Wave and the Left Bank cinemas became increasingly problematic as the '60s progressed, and as the French intelligentsia became more and more politicized. All of the things that were critical in the early part of the New Wave/Left Bank periods: *cinéma vérité*, jump cuts, the fixation on American *film noir*, the neighborhood (Champs-Élysées, *Cahiers*, Paris, Europe)-centric attitudes, were discarded or modified accordingly to suit an increasingly global, and increasingly anxious, worldview. A multi-episodic collaboration between Marker, Godard, Varda, Resnais, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, and Joris Ivens, *Loi du Vietnam* (1967), created as a means to express sympathy with the North Vietnamese, was both an explicit embodiment of this "new" consciousness, as well as – perhaps not coincidentally, as Roud suggests (Roud, 668) – a movie made during a period when Marker decided to



*Le Fond de l'air est rouge*

make films in collaboration with one or more other directors, rather than on his own: others included *À bientôt, j'espère* (co-directed by Mario Marret, 1968) and *La Sixième face du pentagone* (co-directed by François Reichenbach, 1968). This was also the period in which Marker founded the SLON (*Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles*) production studio, an on-again, off-again (when overcome by events) filmmaking collective devoted to making socially and politically conscious works. Marker was also involved with Godard and Resnais in making and distributing "cinétracts," 16mm promotional pieces intended as "news bulletins" for and about students and workers during and around the May 1968 revolt. (5) Marker would later make (and even later, modify) *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* (1977-1993), also known as *A Grin Without a Cat*, as a way to reflect upon the rise and fall of the left during the '60s and '70s; the collective this time was a chorus of narrators, similar in scheme to *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), surrogates for Marker, whose name does not appear in the credits, but whose hand is unmistakably omnipresent.

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Marker was in his late 30s when he made *Lettre de Sibérie*, but if it's possible to reverse the old saw and say that there are no authors, only works, then the brief, skeletal outline of data above truly forms the foundation of his "early life"; these were the formative years for the Marker who would go on to design and stage an installation exhibit called "Silent Movie" for New York's Museum of Modern Art, or before and after that, *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* (1992) and *Une journée d'Andrei Arsenevitch* (1999), or his second masterpiece, *Sans soleil* (1982). He is now the single author of his work, but now often credits himself, if at all, with "conceived and edited by..." instead of the usual "un film de..." or "written and directed by..." that we associate with contemporary French- and English-speaking filmmakers.

My association with Marker's work began when, as a lark, I picked up the New Yorker Films videotape of *Sans soleil*, based on praise by Geoff Andrew, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and others. That was in early 2001; that's how far Marker and I go back. I've since seen the essay – incontrovertibly the cornerstone of the form, far surpassing comparable works by Godard and Farocki – three more times, and each time it (cliché warning) remains utterly fresh. I've read a few reaction pieces by people who have been overwhelmed by the flow of information and



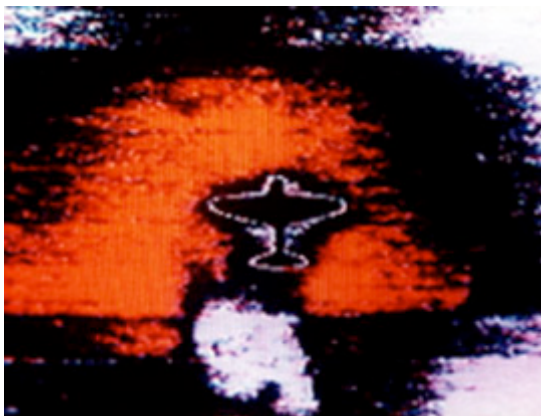
*Sans soleil*

introspection in *Sans soleil*, with its one-damn-thing-after-another structure shaped around Marker's meditations on travel, consumerism, Tokyo, West Africa, guerrilla warfare, fatigue, television, history, memory, nostalgia, images, Tarkovsky, and *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), to name just a few things. But that's precisely what I love about it – a recent capsule review in the *New Yorker* referred to it as "intellectually exciting," and it may be the most intellectually exciting movie ever made; it opens up discursive spaces in your head in such a way that you feel you're being electrocuted. One connection or reflection in the movie becomes four or five in your mind as you watch *Sans soleil* or think about it afterwards, as if the filmmaker has sent you on a mission to find out this or that idea or bit of information (the movie is inspirational in a very concrete sense), or to consider something from a different perspective, and still another, and so on; the cinematic equivalent of a stone being thrown into a pond, wherein *you are the pond*. All this, and Marker still finds room for a melancholy, weary, yet strangely optimistic, exhilarating emotional texture. It also happens to be very funny at times.

*La Jetée*

*La Jetée* is Marker's best-known work, thanks to *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), which adapted its premise to suit a 129-minute movie with high-profile stars (Brad Pitt, Bruce Willis, Madeleine Stowe) and a 29 million dollar budget. The original film is much more modest, obviously, but also much more graceful. The premise is familiar, probably: it's present-day Paris, where a young boy sees a beautiful woman at an airport, and then sees a man die of a gunshot wound from an unknown assailant. Years later, following an apocalyptic disaster that has driven a decimated mankind into underground bunkers, the boy – now grown – is afflicted by his memory of the beautiful woman so strongly that government scientists wish to use it as a means for time travel, with the hope of finding a key to restoring the world to its former condition. Naturally, he meets the woman and falls in love with her. Clocking in at 28 minutes, *La Jetée* is one of the strangest movies ever conceived, and also one of the most beautiful and sad. It's made up almost entirely of black and white still photographs, depicting the events of the narrative. (There is one single, haunting exception – the woman, in repose, fluttering her eyelids open.) These stills are governed by a third-party narration – the only voice we hear – as well as music, and sound effects.

Other key works by Marker include two excellent pieces of film criticism, *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre*, covering the life and times of the forgotten Soviet filmmaker Alexandre Medvedkin, and *Une journée d'Andrei Arsenevitch*, a 55-minute video profile of the exalted Russian movie director, Andrei Tarkovsky, made for the French television series "Cinema de Notre Temps," and the aforementioned *Le Joli mai* and *Le Fond de l'air est rouge*. His documentary on Yves Montand, *La Solitude du chanteur de fond* (1974; aka *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Singer*) is entertaining and wonderful to listen to, although it's probably fueled more by affection than thought. A subtitled print or video copy of *¡Cuba Sí!* eludes me, as does much of his lesser-known work, including the cinétracts. His only disappointments, I think, are *A.K.* (1985), an unsatisfying homage to Akira Kurosawa that was made during the production of *Ran* (1985), and *Level 5* (1997), a dreary shell of an essay that fails to capture Marker's supposed fascination with online culture (along with his usual themes of memory, history, etc) and drifts too often into self-parody.

*Le Tombeau d'Alexandre*

In a recent American movie, *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), a character discusses a futuristic computer interface, a console for police officers to examine evidence in a way that makes them look like orchestra conductors, and refers to a specific investigative routine as "scrubbing the image." (6) I don't know how much Spielberg or his screenwriters know about the work of Marker, or Farocki, or even late-period Welles (*F for Fake* [1974] and *Filming 'Othello'* [1979]), but my mind immediately made

**Level 5** the connection between the high-tech investigative process – which is rooted in mental images and memories, coincidentally – and the work done by these essayists. Taking an image, a simple image, like the shaking hand-held cameras in some of the *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* footage, and "scrubbing" it – closely examining its nature, its context, its subject, or any other aspect, in order to develop a relevant discourse – is what Marker does best. Scrubbing the image is Marker's bread and butter. One of his more recent subjects, Tarkovsky, remarked in his *Sculpting in Time* book that:

*It is obvious that art cannot teach anyone anything, since in four thousand years humanity has learnt nothing at all. We should long ago have become angels had we been capable of paying attention to the experience of art, and allowing ourselves to be changed in accordance with the ideals it expresses. Art only has the capacity, through shock and catharsis, to make the human soul receptive to good. It's ridiculous to imagine that people can be taught to be good...Art can only give food - a jolt - the occasion - for psychical experience. (Tarkovsky, 50)*

I'm of the mind that, in this regard, art *can* make the world a better place, that it can create a fertile environment for the human mind to evolve in its sense of self, its environment, and its place in the global culture, and I don't think it's naïve to suggest that there are certain great works of art that should be viewed as tainted goods if they in any way promote destructive ways of thinking and acting, like racism, colonialism, sexism, and the preservation of ignorance. How unusual is it, then, that Marker has that rare quality that doesn't make him more *than* a journalist as it makes him more *of* a journalist than his colleagues – the ability to find, extract, reflect upon, and use as the binding element of his theses, the elusive poetic quality, the *vital force*, of the persons, places, and things he sees.


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*Endnotes:*

1. His pseudonym is said to have been taken from the Magic Marker pen. That's the only explanation that I'm aware of. ▲
2. No, I haven't tried it. Not yet, anyway. ▲
3. Marker assisted Resnais on the landmark 32-minute Holocaust documentary, *Nuit et brouillard* (1955). ▲
4. That would be *Olympia 52* (1952), a document of the World Olympics in Helsinki. ▲
5. It's interesting to note the connections between the cinétracts project and the much better-known (thanks to publicity and recentness) Dogme 95 "vow of chastity". The differences, of course, grow from the motivations of each; the technical restrictions of the cinétract are far more demanding – in fact, they closely resemble the parameters for the *Lumière et compagnie* (various world filmmakers, 1995) project: each "unit" of 16-millimeter black and white film measured only one hundred feet in length, and at 24 frames per second ran for only two minutes and fifty seconds. The subjects would truly

have been "in the here and now," and most interestingly, the directors were *not credited*, and there were no international film festivals or *Variety* articles to render that bid for anonymity moot. This information comes courtesy of a Master's Degree thesis by Gary Elshaw. 

6. It's quite fantastic, this machine, but what's striking about it is that one gets the notion that Marker had a hand in its design – it's that kind of interface. On the other hand, in 1996, Mikkel Aaland talked about how Marker – reputedly a consummate tech-hound – sang the praises of the nigh-primordial Apple II GS system, "and then complained bitterly about Apple's abandonment of what he considers a wonderful machine." 

## Filmography

Chris Marker's art has made itself manifest in films, videos, installations, and CD-ROM, to name only a few media. Because of this, any attempt made to draw up his "filmography" inevitably runs into strange and wonderful complications. For simplicity's sake, this will be a limited account of his work in the cinema, restricted to feature and short films for which he worked *directly* as a significant – or as the solitary – creative mind (*12 Monkeys* doesn't count, for example), videos that are treated in a similar manner as those films (an index of his experimental video works exists on the [silverthreaded presents Chris Marker](#) web resource), and anything else that would qualify first as "cinema," and all other media second. As I said at the beginning of this essay, information on years and running times seems to change from source to source. You are thus encouraged to confirm or counter, on your own, the information contained in the following list, which was assembled from data on the *silverthreaded presents Chris Marker* web site, Adrian Miles' Chris Marker resource (last update: 1995, but still quite formidable), the Internet Movie database, as well as miscellaneous articles and reviews.

***Olympia*** (1952) 82 minutes

***Les Statues meurent aussi (Statues Also Die)*** (1953) 30 min. [codirected by Alain Resnais]

***Nuit et brouillard (Night and Fog)*** (1955) 32 min. [assistant to Alain Resnais]

***Dimanche à Peking (Sunday in Peking)*** (1956) 22 min.

***Lettre de Sibérie (Letter from Siberia)*** (1957) 62 min.

***Les Astronautes*** (1959) 15 min. [codirected by Walerian Borowczyk]

***Description d'un combat (Description of a Struggle)*** (1960) 60 min.

***¡Cuba Sí!*** (1961) 52 min.

***La Jetée*** (1962) 28 min.

***Le Joli mai*** (1963) 165 min.

***Le Mystère Koumiko (The Koumiko Mystery)*** (1965) 54 min.

***Si J'avais quatre dromadaires*** (1966) 49 min.

***Loin du Vietnam (Far from Vietnam)*** (1967) 115



min. [a "group" film, with segments directed by Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, Joris Ivens, Alain Resnais, and others]



*Le Mystère Koumiko*

***Rhodiacéta*** (1967)

***À Bientôt, j'espère*** (1968) 55 min. [codirected by Mario Marret]

***La Sixième face du pentagone*** (1968) 28 min. [codirected by François Reichenbach]

***Cinétracts*** (1968) [a political film project with Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais; the scant information on *Cinétracts* gives me the impression that structurally they resemble newsreels]

***Jour de tournage*** (1969) 11 min.

***On vous parle du Brésil*** (1969) 20 min.

***Le Deuxième procès d'Artur London*** (1969) 28 min.

***La Bataille des dix millions (The Battle of the Ten Million)*** (1970) 58 min.

***Les Mots ont un sens*** (1970) 20 min.

***Carlos Marighela*** (1970) 17 min.

***Le Train en marche (The Train Rolls On)*** (1971) 32 min.

***Vive la baleine*** (1972) 30 min. [Adrian Miles reports that this may be the re-release title of *Les Hommes de la baleine* (1956) by Marker's S.L.O.N. studio; in any case, some sources list Mario Ruspoli as director, with Marker as narrator/writer, while others list Ruspoli as codirector with Marker]

***L'Ambassade*** (1973) 20 min. [unreleased Super 8 project]

***La Solitude du chanteur de fond (The Loneliness of a Long Distance Singer)*** (1974) 60 min. [portrait of Yves Montand]

***Le Fond de l'air est rouge (A Grin Without a Cat)*** (1977) 180 min. [some sources list the running time of the French release as 240 min.; Marker revisited this project in 1993 and updated it; the updated version, called simply *A Grin Without a Cat*, was released in the United States in 2002]

***Junkopia*** (1981) 6 min.

***Sans soleil (Sunless)*** (1982) 100 minutes [video listing...other sources have it at 110 min.]

***2084*** (1984) 10 min.

***A.K.*** (1985) 71 min. [portrait of Akira Kurosawa]

***Hommage à Simone Signoret (aka Mémoires pour Simone)*** (1986) 61 min. [a compilation piece dedicated to the French actress Simone Signoret]

***L'Héritage de la chouette (The Owl's Legacy)*** (1989) 13 segments, 26 min. each [made for television]

**Berliner Ballade** (1990) 25 min. [made for television]

**Le Tombeau d'Alexandre (The Last Bolshevik)** (1992) 120 min.

**Le 20 heures dans les camps (Prime Time in the Camps)** (1993) 28 min.

**Casque Bleu (Blue Helmet)** (1995) 26 min.

**Level Five** (1997) 110 min.

**Une Journée d'Andrei Arsenevitch (One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevitch)** (1999)  
55 min. [portrait of Andrei Tarkovsky]

**Le Souvenir de l'avenir (Remembrance of Things to Come)** (2001)

**Chats perchés** (2004)




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## Articles in *Senses of Cinema*

[Platonic Themes in Chris Marker's \*La Jetée\*](#) by Sander Lee

[Letter from Siberia](#) by Adrian Miles



## Web Resources Compiled by the author

### [Chris Marker WWW Site](#)

One of the standard resources for researching Marker's work online. Adrian Miles hasn't updated it since 1995, but it commands attention and contains invaluable information on Marker's work – for instance, the spoken narration for *La Jetée* is reproduced in text form – as well as images, links, bibliographical information, and miscellany.

### [silverthreaded presents: Chris Marker](#)

This one is a real delight - an exhaustive and well-designed Chris Marker resource that contains biographical, filmographical, and mediagraphical information. It's updated frequently and contains links to other web sites, reviews, and online stores that offer his films and videos at low prices for retail consumers, or high prices for academic institutions and libraries.

### [Cinematic Essay Film Genre](#)

An exploration of the essay form in movies.

### [The Left Bank Revisited](#)

Notes from a 2000 festival of Left Bank films, held by the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, in New York, USA. Many interesting short pieces on key works by Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda.

### [French artist Chris Marker and O.W.L.](#)

Mikkel Aaland relates his encounter with the friendly, eccentric, and sly multimedia artist. An entertaining and insightful read that includes a small number of Marker's artworks, reproduced for the web.

### [Chris Marker at Auteur.de](#)

An encyclopedia entry that contains a filmography, sketchy biographical data, and links. In German; uses much of Mikkel Aaland's material.

### [The Act of Sorting Out: Chris Marker's Immemory](#)

An article on Marker's CD-ROM project, *Immemory*, written by Guillaume Ollendorf and translated by Adrian Martin.

### [Jean-Louis Schefer on \*La Jetée\*](#)

A meditation on Marker's landmark science fiction film.

### [Cinétracts](#)

A section from a research paper on Jean-Luc Godard on the cinétracts project, for which Marker was a key participant.

### [Where Do Statues Go When They Die](#)

Amy H. König's meditation on Marker's *Les Statues meurent aussi*.

### [Critic With A Camera](#)

Four-star review of *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* by Jonathan Rosenbaum.

### [One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevitch](#)

A review by Jaime N. Christley.

### [Sans soleil](#)

A review by Jaime N. Christley.

### [La Jetée](#)

A review by Jaime N. Christley.

### [¡Cuba Sí!](#)

Review by Derek Malcolm for the *Guardian Unlimited*, 16 December 1999.

### [First Run/Icarus Films](#)

Rent or purchase *A Grin Without a Cat*, *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich*, or *The Last Bolshevik* on video. Expensive (for individuals) but invaluable beyond words.

### [New Yorker Films](#)

Produces the best and only video reproduction of *Sans soleil* that I'm aware of.

### [Electronic Arts Intermix](#)

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