

Chris Marker  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 168

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Frame enlargement from *Silent Movie*, 1995



*I claim, for the image, the humility and the powers of a madeleine.*

—Chris Marker

In the seminal 1962 sci-fi film *La Jetée*, time travel may make it possible for humanity to survive a cataclysm. However for this escape through time to succeed, a person must be found who has a specific memory so fixed in his mind that it can serve as a compass pointing toward the past. This remarkable idea is the invention of Chris Marker, the inimitable French filmmaker whose lifelong investigations of culture and history have cut a singular path through cinema.

Marker's new video installation *Silent Movie* at first glance seems to be a reverie of a past aglitter with ineffable gestures, shadowy emotions, and a longing delicately attached to the silent screen. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts on the occasion of cinema's centenary, *Silent Movie* recalls the allure of early cinema through a pastiche of resonant moving images, many composed for the installation, others borrowed from pre-thirties American and French films. Enclosed in a steel tower reminiscent of Constructivist design, Marker's five-channel videowork evokes a past that is not a denial of the moment: memory and its compact with the present looms as a source of intrigue in Marker's filmic ruminations.

Having virtually reinvented the essay film, a playful form that relies on intertextual reference and exhilarating leaps of imagination, Marker's elegantly formal films and tapes are encyclopedic interrogations of time, death, and history and their meanings in the lives of individuals. The complexity of his philosophic reports, as in the incomparable *Sans Soleil* (1983), requires that he break with convention. Thriving on startling textures and serendipitous

associations, at their most inventive these works in form "resemble the logics and biases of memory itself," Wexner media curator Bill Horrigan observed.

*Silent Movie*, too, emulates memory, revealing charmed reconnoiterings of the past. Or as Marker suggested for a proposed CD-ROM, *Immemory*, "The idea would be to immerse myself in this maelstrom of images to establish its Geography." Marker employs five-channels of video, each a thematic exploration of early cinema. Film images disclosing "The Journey," "The Face," "The Gesture," and "The Waltz" occupy four of the monitors while on the fifth (and middle) monitor is a collection of ninety-four silent-era intertitles, "telling short, mysterious pieces of unknown stories." These moving images travel through a computer interface that assembles an ever-changing array of sequences. At any given moment, each passage is in unique juxtaposition with the other images passing across the surrounding monitors. Coloration, tone, and association are governed by chance contiguities; even the intertitles narrate across a field of fluid relationships.

What the viewer encounters is the complex act of remembering, allowing *Silent Movie* to confound its own narrative. No sequence of images, no set of associative references is repeatable and therefore emblematic of the whole. But all is not unbridled flux. Throughout the installation, Marker has included anchoring passages with Catherine Belkhodja, an actress who seems to capture the mute elegance of the silent era. Her continual reappearance in *Silent Movie* appoints her the *de facto* star of this monochromatic past, and by

extension, Marker's alter-ego—the dreamer of his "Ur-Kino." Still other elements help anchor *Silent Movie*. A music track recalling the piano accompaniment once heard in silent film theaters draws on such diverse sources as Bill Evans, Alexander Scriabin, Billy Strayhorn, and Nino Rota. The "music doesn't create emotions, it fixes them, like you fix color," Marker remarked. Also part of the exhibition are ten computer-drafted posters advertising films that never existed, but should have. A silent version of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* starring Greta Garbo and Sessue Hayakawa; Ernst Lubitsch's *Remembrance of Things Past* starring Gloria Swanson, John Barrymore and Ramon Novarro ("The first movie where the captions take more space than the image"); and Oliver Stone, Sr.'s *It's A Mad Mad Mad Dog* make up just part of Marker's alternative cinema history. These speculative posters are accompanied by eighteen photographic blow-ups of images drawn from the laserdiscs.

More than an engaging fantasy of the silver screen, *Silent Movie* evokes what Chris Marker has called a "pre-historic state of film memory"—his own vivid yet indecipherable recollections from silent cinema; and earlier still, a state pre-dating knowledge and reason: the "cinema of origins."

Steve Seid  
Video Curator

#### About Chris Marker

Chris Marker, born near Paris in 1921, began his filmmaking career in the early 1950s, working in close

collaboration with the "Left Bank" filmmakers which included Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and George Franju. In the late '60s and early '70s, he experimented with collective filmmaking as a member of SLON (Society for the Launching of New Works), completing, among others, *Far From Vietnam* (1967) along with Jean-Luc Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda. Several of his best known works are *La Jetée* (1962), one of the great speculative fiction films, *Sans Soleil* (1982), a singular meditation on global culture, and *The Last Bolshevik* (1993), a portrait of Russian director Alexander Medvedkin. Many of Marker's films and tapes have been screened at the University Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, including *Letter from Siberia* (1958), a travelogue that examines its own structure, *The Owl's Legacy* (1989), a video symposium on the continuing resonance of classical Greek culture, and *Primetime in the Camps* (1993), an incisive look at media in a Bosnian refugee camp. Two current projects are a feature film, *Level Five*, and a CD-ROM, *Immemory*.

#### Work in MATRIX:

*Silent Movie*, 1995, five-channel video/sound installation with five 25-inch monitors, housed in a 12-foot modular steel tower; five laser discs players, computer, and computer interface; audiotape, 18 videostills, 10 computer-generated film posters. Lent by the artist.

Selected Film/Television:

*Statues Also Cry*, co-directed by Alain Resnais, '50; *Olympia 52*, '52; *A Sunday In Peking*, '56; *Letter From Siberia*, '58; *Le Joli Mai*, '62; *La Jetée* (released 1964), '62; *The Koumiko Mystery*, '65; *The Train Rolls On*, '71; *A Grin without a Cat* (Le Fond de l'air est rouge), '77; *Sans Soleil*, '82; A.K. (Portrait of Akira Kurosawa), '85; *The Owl's Legacy*, '89; *Primetime in the Camps* (Le 20 heures dans les camps), '93; *The Last Bolshevik* (Le Tombeau d'Alexandre), '93; *Level Five* (work-in-progress).

Selected Multimedia:

*Quand le siècle a pris formes* (video installation), '78; *Zapping Zone* (video installation), '90; *Silent Movie* (video installation), '95; *Immemory* (CD-ROM, work-in-progress).

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