

# The Woven Fabric of Time: In Praise of Chris Marker

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There is no-one less suited to the phrase “declining years” than Chris Marker. A few years ago, when he was almost 90, Chris Marker put out a book of photographs called *Passengers* that absolutely astonished me. It was impossible to conceive of the endurance, courage, dynamic visual acuity, and curiosity that made this photographic collection possible as the work of an “old man” in his “declining years.” We can easily imagine how full of risk this project was, boarding the Paris subway and taking point-blank images of passengers. Yet we can only stare in mute astonishment at the profusion of photographic images of women’s faces one after the other, each with their own expression, that the collection contains. Unlike Marker’s earlier photographs, these were in color and the images were subjected to extreme digital processing. Is this even what we have come to mean by a photographic collection?

The corporal being of the person known as Chris Marker has left this earth and been absorbed back into the energy of the cosmos, but conversely we are only now discovering the *possibility* known by the name Chris Marker. The prophecy Foucault made 40 years ago in his introduction to Bataille’s *Collected Works* — “His works will grow to great importance in the future” — is the appropriate expression for what is now coming true all around us. This Fall, first in Yamagata and then in Paris, there will be large-scale retrospectives of Chris Marker’s films. But this word “retrospective” does not suit him. He ignored the conventional way of regarding time, past to present or present to past arrayed along a single line. That is why there is no connection between his work and the idea of a “late style.”

The beautiful expression “fabric of time” first appeared in *Sans soleil* (1982). This was the theme of Sandor Krasna, whose narrated letters wove together the disparate times of Asia, Africa, and Europe in the film. Chris Marker’s travels also aimed at taking up that task. In that sense, *Passengers*, which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, is also something birthed by travel. The texture of the fabric constituted by the warp and woof of the space and time of Asia, Africa, and Europe becomes visible in the faces of the

women that we encounter in the carriages of the Paris subway.

If we go back 30 years from the publication of *Passengers* we find another book of photographs, *Le dépayés*. Many of the photographs that he took when he first came to Japan appear in this book, which contains so many elements of *Sans soleil* it should be called a sister publication to that film. People sleeping in carriages, beckoning cat statues, and real cats, cats and more cats. On the one hand it arranges photographs that seem to trace a journey that detours again and again, on the other Chris Marker contributes documentary-style text that does not limit itself to explaining the photographs. At the same time we can glimpse a double consciousness of the slippage between the time of taking the photograph and the time of writing the prose. Here too the issue of the “fabric of time” comes to the fore.

On the inside flap of the book, as if responding to the question Who is Chris Marker, four verbs are listed as if to profile the author: makes films; takes photographs; travels; loves cats. Surely those four actions by themselves are what formed Chris Marker’s Japan. In addition to recalling the decisive dates of the Battle of Okinawa — of which Marker will attempt a full reconstruction in *Level Five* (1996) — *Sans soleil* features a space of image manipulation called “The Zone.” From the seemingly trivial story of a cat, through its name “Tora,” we are connected to the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Zone is also said to be an homage to Tarkovsky, but perhaps this space in between life and death is that part of the netherworld called Limbo. He has already fed many historical images into this confused intermediate space. Images of a Zero fighter on fire, of a young Emperor Hirohito on horseback are processed through an image synthesizer until they reach a state of near indiscernibility, trembling and struggling in the netherworld of images. Images of the past are not consigned to the safe space called the “past” but undergo deformations and return charged with feeling, like ghosts. To take past images and transform them into ominous visions; this is Chris Marker’s unique and unrivalled achievement. (Translated by Michael Raine)