



Sans soleil

‘By the way, did you know that there are emus in the Ile de France?’ This is surely not the most pertinent question in Chris Marker’s monumental *Sans soleil* – a time-and-space-hopping travelogue that may be one of the most ardently searching movies ever made – but it perfectly encapsulates the film’s M.O.: the sly, conspiratorial tone that collapses the literal and figurative distance between the images on the screen and the epigrams on the soundtrack, and the viewer doing his or her level best to keep up with the racing pace of both. Allusions to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Khmer Rouge and the revolutionary history of Guinea-Bissau are heady stuff, but who can resist a glancing close-up of a puffed-up bird bobbing its way through a botanical garden?

Rigour and discursiveness – or perhaps a uniquely discursive rigour – are the most potent weapons in *Sans soleil*’s arsenal. Shot by Marker under the pseudonym Sandor Krasna and narrated (in both its English and French-language versions) by an actress pretending to be this cipher’s closest correspondent – and thus a vessel for conveying both his footage and his thoughts to the audience – the film is unique in the documentary canon for its simultaneous embodiment of both documentary’s most classical and radical qualities.

At its core, the work is an exercise in ethnographic filmmaking, with Marker-as-Krasna decamping to locations in Japan and Africa to observe the environments and rituals therein. But the highly mediated presentation – the adoption of a fictional framework and the relentless manipulation and juxtaposition of the images into a kind of audiovisual labyrinth – gets so far away from Flaherty that it actually laps him: depending on one’s perspective, *Sans soleil* is either an *hommage* to the observational ethos of *Nanook of the North* or an ardent repudiation.

It’s a cliché to say that about a movie – that its true shape or texture is in the eye of the beholder – but it’s true of *Sans soleil*, which not only withstands multiple viewings, but never seems to be the same film twice. It addresses memory even as its different threads seem to forget themselves; it parses geopolitics without betraying any affiliation; it might be Marker’s most elaborately self-effacing film, or his most plangently personal. It’s quite telling that the emu that shows up seemingly apropos of nothing near the start returns at the end, and that even though he’s barely recognisable through the video-artefacted veil of Japanese artist Hayao Yamaneko’s electronic imagery – a visual space that the narration refers to as ‘the zone’ – he feels like some long-lost old friend. An emu in the Ile de France is a rare bird, and so is *Sans soleil*.

Adam Nayman, *Sight and Sound*, September 2014

Trying to remember Chris Marker’s *Sans soleil* after seeing it for the first time, a viewer might recall nothing but how they feel at the end – dazed and excited, overwhelmed by a smooth, rapid flow of images and ideas. Or they might recall only vivid, random moments: the face of an African woman and a porcelain cat with one paw raised; an emu on the Ile de France and sleeping

passengers on a Japanese train; a carnival in Guinea-Bissau and a volcano erupting in Iceland. And if, as an *aide-mémoire*, they have taken notes as the film unrolled, their impressions will be more concrete, but perhaps more confused. Did they really manage to take in, during the first ten minutes of the film, an epigraph from Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday', a shot of three children on a road in Iceland in 1965, a short sequence on a train in Hokkaido, shots of women on the Bissagos Islands off West Africa, a prayer for the soul of a lost cat in an animal cemetery outside Tokyo, a dog on a deserted beach, a bar in a rundown district of Tokyo? How did they assimilate, at the same time, the lyrical, aphoristic commentary – in the form of letters from a traveller we never see, read by a woman we don't see, either – and how did they get their bearings in this no-man's-land of documentary images and oblique fiction? Finally, recalling the vertiginous speed of the film's transitions, they suspect that their notes are incomplete, inaccurate, a distorted memory. They'd have to see the film again.

The creation of the need, and the desire, to see things again is part of the method of *Sans soleil*, and also, perhaps, its real subject. What Marker means to communicate to us is the solitude of the film editor at his machinery, his reverie over the footage he's shot (or that has been sent to him by friends), the scenes he watches over and over again. He wants to explain why he returns to Japan, the subject of his 1965 film *The Koumiko Mystery*, why the images of the emu, the porcelain cat (called *maneki-neko*), the children in Iceland won't go away, why they keep bobbing up in the course of *Sans soleil*, how it's possible to see *Vertigo* 19 times; how images are replayed as memories, as obsessions, and as the troubled dreams of travellers.

This film has so many showpieces of montage, under such imaginative and varied pretexts – a visit to San Francisco intercut with scenes from *Vertigo*; a deserted island in the Atlantic where the narrator 'can't believe the images that crop up', shots of Tokyo crowds mixed with the lush Impressionist landscapes of the Ile de France; an imaginary science fiction movie in which images of poverty and desolation are linked by the consciousness of an investigator from the year 4001; a sequence on a Tokyo train in which the sleeping faces of commuters are cut with television images of samurai films, horror movies, erotic entertainment, all attributed to these exhausted travellers as their dreams – so much virtuosity, in fact, that *Sans soleil* risks being seen as no more than an exercise in the art of editing, a highly conscious miming of the involuntary processes of memory.

In a sense, it is that. But there's something else in Marker's work, something which distances him even from his own models, like Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein. It's in those qualities that aren't easily transcribed as notes: not simply the juxtaposition of shots but the rhythms of their juxtaposition. The sequences in which disparate times and places are made to correspond have the speed and urgency of passionate argument. Other scenes, like a Tokyo festival with dancers whose hands seem to be telling a story we don't quite understand, are rapt and quiet, as if the editor and commentator were simply transfixed. *Sans soleil* is an editor's film, worthy of the Russian masters, but its undulating rhythms – rushing forward, stopping to gaze, following, corresponding across great distances, returning to the same places – are those of a melancholy, obsessed lover.

Terrence Rafferty, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1984

SANS SOLEIL (SUNLESS)

Director: Chris Marker

©: Argos-Films

Producer: Anatole Dauman

Assistant Director: Pierre Camus

Written by: Chris Marker

Photography: Chris Marker

Photography: Sana Na N'hada (*carnival in Bissau*); Jean-Michel Humeau

(*Ranks Ceremony*); Mario Marret, Eugenio Bentivoglio (*guerrilla in Bissau*);

Danièle Tessier (*death of a giraffe*); Haroun Tazieff (*Iceland 1970*)

Stills Photography: Martin Boschet, Roger Grange

Special Effects: Hayao Yamaneko

Editor: Chris Marker

Assistant Editors: Anne-Marie L'Hôte, Catherine Adda

Sound Recording: Antoine Bonfanti, Paul Bertault

Electronic Sound: Michel Krasna

Friends/Advisers: Kazuko Kawakita-Shibata, Hayao Shibata,

Ichiro Hagiwara, Kazue Kobata, Keiko Murata, Yuko Fukusaki (*Tokyo*);

Tom Luddy, Anthony Reveaux, Manuela Adelman (*San Francisco*);

Pierre Lhomme, Jimmy Glasberg, Ghislain Cloquet (*Paris*)

Sandor Krasna's Letters Read by: Florence Delay

France 1982©

103 mins

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Rear Window Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

Stalker Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

Casablanca Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

Psycho Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

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The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

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Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

Barry Lyndon Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

Some Like It Hot Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

The Third Man Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

Killer of Sheep Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

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