

HE WROTE ME

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“The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965.” This recollection, introduced by a female voice’s leveled narration, is spoken into a silent, black screen. Filmed footage of the children, shot by the male addresser, interrupts the black expanse as the narrator’s recitation continues, describing it as the image of happiness. Along a rolling greenway the three children stroll hand-in-hand, leading one another in a deliberate yet peculiar composition illustrative of the constant play afforded by childhood, where the routine act of walking can be reinvented as a game. As they move along, their identically blonde heads glowing against the green, each child’s gaze catches the camera’s eye, provoking hesitant smiles. The scene only lasts a few seconds, which is just enough time for the narrator to relay the filmmaker’s inability to “link” it to other images, despite his attempts. “He wrote me: one day I’ll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don’t see happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the black.” The black leader reappears as she speaks, followed in silence by the film’s title. Thus begins *Sans Soleil* (1983): a deluge of images that unfold, like memory, in happiness’ wake.

“He wrote me.” Intimate yet distant, the phrase repeats throughout the film like a heartbeat, where language instructs the rhythmic pulse of its images of distant places. *Sans Soleil* comprises the letters of a fictitious cameraman named Sandor Krasna, read by their recipient (voiced by Alexandra Stewart in the film’s English version, titled *Sunless*) who synthesizes his words over visual souvenirs shot in Japan, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, San Francisco, Paris, and Iceland—the site of the image that haunts him. And, in turn, the man behind the mask of Sandor Krasna is the specter of his own film. Chris Marker’s name does not readily appear in the credits, yet his presence saturates every frame. Decades worth of film, captured during his anonymous travel (with few exceptions of borrowed footage) are paired with the narration he himself authored, and he even composed the subtle cacophony of music that occasions *Sans Soleil*’s erratic pace. When we look closely to see Marker’s touch in every fiber of his film, we find a man who looks toward the images of his past in an attempt to understand the very nature of memory represented in the present:

I’m writing you all this from another world, a world of appearances. In a way the two worlds communicate with each other. Memory is to one what history is to the other: an impossibility.

Legends are born out of the need to decipher the indecipherable. Memories must make do with their delirium, with their drift. A moment stopped would burn like a frame of film blocked before the furnace of the projector. Madness protects, as fever does.¹

Often referred to as “the best-known author of unknown movies,”² Marker (born Christian-François Bouche-Villeneuve in a suburb of Paris in 1921) was a traveler through and beyond history, intent on communicating his own method of seeing to those willing to engage with its codes, playful and adventurous. Relayed through his camera, his experiences translate into images recognizable even to the most unfamiliar viewer who might witness his vision in a far-distant future. He was never in these images himself; they only revealed what his eye could take in. Instead, he orchestrates the past’s spontaneous manifestation into something tangible, relatable. Film scholar Ian Christie called him a techno-shaman.³

He was a writer first. He wrote travelogues for *Petit Planète* and film criticism for *Cahiers du Cinéma* before disrupting the very conventions of medium with his innovative ciné-roman *La Jetée* (1962). He wrote poetry before capturing its gaze in the eyes of every man and woman who would stare back into his lens. He even wrote a novel, *Le Cœur Net* (1950), which prefigures his mode of address in the filmic work that would follow, repeating the phrase of sentimental distance, “Somewhere, a long way off...” In Marker’s cinema, in the many forms it takes, he upheld the mystique of language by using its powers to further illuminate his visual images. In his five-channel video installation *Silent Movie* (1994-95), he combines thematic images from silent films with a collection of silent-era intertitles, “telling short, mysterious pieces of unknown stories”⁴ through the text’s abstract illustration of the quiet moving images—empty signifiers of familiar codes of movement and gesture. With *Sans Soleil*, he juxtaposes the documentary film he took on a 16mm silent film camera and digitally manipulated images composed through a synthesizer with letters containing his musings, associations, and reverence for the future, disguised as inclinations of a fictitious other.

1. Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1983).

2. As a strategic move to perpetuate the myths about his elusive nature, Marker invented this title himself. Critics and scholars continue to reference it in discussions of his work. The quote appears on the first page of the exhibition catalogue: *Chris Marker, A Farewell to Movies*. Abschied vom Kino (Zürich: Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, 2008).

3. Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 12.

4. Steve Said, *Chris Marker: Silent Movie exhibition brochure* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1996).

Nonetheless, he writes to us. He writes of distant wars, of the captivating faces found in every culture, of lore, of a temple consecrated to cats, of the memories these shrines evoke within him. He considers the images he sees and how each signals a historic moment that transpired in the same place, perhaps imperceptible yet undeniably imbedded in the land, such as the site of an airport built in Narita in the 1960s, which the city's peasants revolted against. He visits the city on the occasion of a gathering to honor one of the victims of the struggle, and imagines being there then, participating in the protest, and how nearly indecipherable the scenes of past and present might have been (aside from the addition of the airport itself). This thought breeds a desire to devise a treatment for these images—not to better portray reality, but to make evident its fission at the site of memory:

My pal Hayao Yamaneko has found a solution: if the images of the present don't change, then change the images of the past.

He showed me the clashes of the sixties treated by his synthesizer: pictures that are less deceptive he says—with the conviction of a fanatic—than those you see on television. At least they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality.⁵

Whether Marker is situating us as viewers within his own unique perspective or offering fragmented metaphors for the most nuanced experiences of being human, he provides us with media that provokes and complicates our memories of past events, tantalizing the means by which they are summoned: where language is the woof and images the warp.

It's not that cinema failed Marker, for he would continue making films throughout the six decades of his career, but his preoccupation with looking—and specifically looking toward the future, toward society's unknown possibilities—called for consistent engagement with technology and its advances. When the first Apple computer was released in 1978, Marker saw opportunity for potential, using this apparatus to create innovative compositions through now-primitive digital

5. Marker, *Sans Soleil*.

techniques. Manipulated from his preexisting filmic and photographic footage, these semi-abstract technological creations seem to exist outside space and time, floating in the arena of memory.

Throughout the 1980s, Marker's digital images were woven into his films, including *Sans Soleil*, and then more prominently the following decade, in his television and gallery installation works. These technological interruptions removed the historicity from our conventional understanding of historical events and inserted surreal visions into somber realities. His persistent divergence culminated at the end of the century into a new form altogether: the CD-ROM. This imperfect medium, which was nearly obsolete at the peak of its use for data storage and dissemination, provided Marker with the means to create an erratic labyrinth from a bricolage of memories. This magnum opus would function as a souvenir from travels through its maker's memories, allowing viewers of the CD-ROM to recall their own memories of a time immemorial.

Marker would refer to the project as "Memory, Land of Contrasts," but gave it the exhibiting title of *Immemory One* in its first iteration as a multimedia installation at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1997. This title incited the possibility of additional lands filled with more memories accruing in the present; but *Immemory One* would stand alone, its contents transferred onto a CD-ROM for viewers to bring home and insert into their personal computers. When removed from an institution, *Immemory* becomes a direct address, personally delivered from one mind to another. It is a gift.

In its final form as a CD-ROM, *Immemory* is a packed conglomeration of material—chaotically ordered but generous in breadth—of a subject whose life and work consisted of a diligent recording of his movements throughout the world. In the liner notes of the English edition of the program, Marker writes that it is not his profession as an image-producer that makes his memories more intriguing than any other man or woman's. Rather, the myriad traces this living leaves behind allowed him to assemble the traces of this an autobiographical work as an offering for others to feast.

The presentation of the content varies throughout the work, but each screen is an opportunity for the reader-visitor (as described by Marker) to interact with his memories. This interaction is intimate, where one feels as if she is the first person to lay eyes on the representation of these moments, the sole witness of something

secret. *Immemory* compiles photographs, posters, postcards, travelogues, and other material traces that followed Marker from Cuba to North Korea, and from poetry to technology, into the educational software HyperStudio, which was initially created to provide an interactive learning experience in the classroom—a more dynamic PowerPoint, not unlike a video game. The program had limitations to its storage capabilities, so Marker manipulated these restraints to create the illusion of a physical infinity. While some screens include brief clips of films and animations, endless layers of images and words drive *Immemory*. Marker’s aim is not to be entirely mischievous or obscure; there is no finite goal. He concludes his introduction with encouragement for the curious:

But my fondest wish is that there might be enough familiar codes here (the travel picture, the family album, the totem animal) that the reader-visitor could imperceptibly come to replace my images with his, my memories with his, and that my *Immemory* should serve as a springboard for his own pilgrimage in *Time Regained*.⁶

The clicks, hovers, meditations, and disruptions guide his reader-visitors through the codes of *Immemory* in a journey that can both quicken the heart and slip into the banal. But this coded web, through a handing over of time and a willingness to fall prey to entanglement, prompts a pilgrimage through memory. And, as Marker so aptly states, “if you’re going to work on memory, you might as well use the one you’ve always got on you.”⁷

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Marker was clear in his intention from the start: *Immemory* would not be organized by history or time, but in terms of geography. A pattern emerges when memories are historicized. They become privileged and assign significance to the most exhilarating highlights, shunning the presumably banal moments as if they take away from an individual’s relevance in her own life. Marker’s solution was to examine all moments of a life by arranging them in a system of spaces:

6. Chris Marker, *Immemory* (1997).

7. *Ibid.*

A more modest and perhaps more fruitful approach might be to consider the fragments of memory in terms of geography. In every life we would find continents, islands, deserts, swamps, overpopulated territories and terrae incognitae. We could draw the map of such a memory and extract images from it with greater ease (and truthfulness) than from tales and legends.⁸

The result of this approach would be a more spacious and pragmatic introduction into Marker's images, distracting the mind's impulse to place them into preordained contexts. He chose eight themes of departure, which were broad enough for any reader-visitor to assign their own equivalences: Cinema, Travel, Museum, Memory, Poetry, War, Photography, and the elusive X-plugs. In *Immemory's* Main Menu, these entry points are organized in a loop around the CD-ROM's title, each treated with an equal interest and signified by distinct icons. The names of these spaces are only revealed when the cursor touches each image and become animated when clicked, anxious to be interacted with. They are not doorways; in fact, they are hardly beginnings. Instead, Marker refers to them with specific locution, a seemingly ordinary term that stokes meaning for some, and curiosity for others: they are Zones.

A "zone" is generally understood as a space with a particular meaning and defined by inherent characteristics, often restrictions. This definition works for *Immemory* in the sense that the reader-visitor's movements are guided through screens that are often specific to their Zones; in the Poetry Zone, one will find stanzas, just as a collection of photographs can be browsed in the Photography Zone. But a Zone has an illusive quality, too.

In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, three men embark on a journey to the Zone—a forbidden place of color and quiet, where everything is constantly changing.⁹ This venture into this beguiling space takes hours, causing viewers to question if the Zone exists at all; Tarkovsky does not afford his viewers this affirmation. Instead he offers a brief explanation for his creation, stating succinctly:

8. Ibid.

9. In addition to being contemporaries, the two filmmakers were also friends. Many images and themes are shared between them, including their interest in the space of memory. Marker made a film based on Tarkovsky's oeuvre, *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* (2000), featuring the filmmaker on his deathbed as he attempted to finish his final film.

The Zone doesn't symbolise[sic] anything, any more than anything else does in my films: the zone is a zone, it's life, and as he makes his way across it a man may break down or he may come through. Whether he comes through or not depends on his own self-respect, and his capacity to distinguish between what matters and what is merely passing.¹⁰

However, in creating a filmic world in which the Zone can be sought after, Tarkovsky develops a space in which the peculiar task of navigating through life's uncertainties affords no guarantee that one's desires will be fulfilled. This is as much a mental quandary as it is spatial, where a progressive movement through unfamiliar territory brings one closer to the unknown—even if that territory is never quite defined.

In *Immemory*, the Zones are inarguably extant, but their more devious qualities are not unlike *Stalker's* Zone. The movement of images within each Zone is dependent on one's interaction with the screen, just as every new location within Tarkovsky's Zone must be treated with a specific ritual. If a wrong step is taken, the journey may be for naught. Marker's play is less devastating than Tarkovsky's, where hasty movements can cause missed opportunities to experience a bifurcation into another Zone and, at worst, idle play may prompt the disk to stop spinning, bringing the reader-visitor back to the Menu again.

Reference to the Zone appears first in *Sans Soleil*, when Marker as Krasna enlists his friend "the maniac" to help synthesize his images of the past. The filmmaker asserts that Hayao calls his machine's world the 'zone,' as an homage to Tarkovsky, where he affects Marker's images with "the moss of time." The machine saturates the images, producing an illustration not unlike that of a thermal sensor's representation of the various densities of heat. Instead of temperature, Hayao's images can be thought to compress layers of time, like the rings of a sequoia tree, into pixilated outlines and fields of color that narrowly represent the reality once hinted by Marker's film:

10. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Tarkovsky The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 199.

I envy Hayao in his 'zone,' he plays with the signs of his memory. He pins them down and decorates them like insects that would have flown beyond time, and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time: the only eternity we have left. I look at his machines. I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend.¹¹

This thought propels him toward the future, toward *Immemory*, where legends zig-zag through time, which is both Marker's and our own. He borrows these images from a life spent concerned with seeing time and place as mysteries to be invented, reinvented, and relived. I believe his intention was to give pause to his viewers, so they might slouch toward the sentimental, experiencing the memorial as a site to learn from political urgency of the past and its many interpretations. The poet Susan Howe writes of Marker's enigmatic effect, where "an image introduced once as a hint or possible symbol may in another context contradict its intended leitmotif. The moment of looking is an arrest."¹²

Marker offers contradictions through both text and image and then erases their traces in order to immemorialize them, inventing a way to summon their appearance once again. He understood that forgetting is an aid to memory rather than its opposition. From the beginning writing has been an apparatus that, with the help of images, grants us the ineffable sensation of recollection. By creating a CD-ROM that acts as a labyrinth preserving these triggers, he fashioned a new memory apparatus. Once again, it is a gift.

11. Marker, *Sans Soleil*.

12. Susan Howe, *Sorting Facts, or Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker* (New York: New Directions, 2013), 58.