

# *Sans Soleil:* A Lesson in *Témoignage*

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**Abstract** | The act of bearing witness implies immediacy and chance, but also intimacy and responsibility. The witness observes but also participates in what he sees, in part by reporting back to those who are not present. In Chris Marker’s 1983 *Sans Soleil* his fictional stand-in, Sandor Krasna, reports back on the events and people he witnesses, both by letter to an unnamed female correspondent and by word and image to the film’s audience. Marker implies that the audience too may bear witness to the people and places visited by Krasna, no matter how foreign they initially seem. In particular, Marker encourages the audience to identify with whichever images – among the multitude presented in the film – resonate with their own experiences, moments of recognition which, as he quotes from a 11<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, “make the heart leap.” In spurring a more emotional connection, in the style of Proust’s involuntary memory, these moments of recognition allow for a deeper understanding of the other, and, in a postcolonial France, remind us that even the unknown may have associations with the self.

**Keywords** | *Sans Soleil*, Chris Marker, involuntary memory, *témoignage*, postcolonial France

Near the end of Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* the protagonist, an itinerant cameraman, writes: “I wonder how people remember if they do not film, do not take

photographs.”<sup>1</sup> In this 1983 film Marker travels across national borders collecting images and, by extension, offering up memories of a culture even for those who have never visited. Marker’s camera, an outsider to the places it witnesses, nonetheless evokes a sense of home and belonging. His remarkable use of montage draws awareness to the relationships among the images and the malleability of their juxtaposition. He constructs an idea of a culture – of Japan, for example, or the Cape Verde islands – by curating these images, as if they were objects in a museum dedicated to culture and history. However, Marker also succeeds where museums often fail by constantly questioning his own practice, recognizing that at no point can a culture be completely communicated nor understood. He, or rather his fictional stand-in Sandor Krasna, classifies his location, especially Japan, in highly specific ways, in particular by establishing the elements that feel like home. The culture is identified through him: through his eyes, his choice of frame, his selection of images and the words that accompany them. But Krasna’s experience is only one of many possible stories gleaned from among the multitude of images; while Marker’s choice of images and sequences is by nature definitive, it is not intended to be restrictive. Rather, Marker encourages viewers to identify, like Krasna, with those images that speak directly to their own hearts,<sup>2</sup> thereby opening up points of contact with other cultures that can be accessed merely through the act of careful looking. Although the nations and cultures remain at a remove, they become less foreign as the audience begins to detect elements of themselves amidst the unknown, experiencing moments of recognition that spur an emotional connection akin to a faint, yet poignant, memory.

If *témoignage* implies a measure of intimacy, a first-hand account that affirms the object being observed, it is also subject to memory’s vicissitudes. Like Proust’s *mémoire volontaire*, the reflection may be imperfect, even dulled by time; such a memory is characterized by the fact that “the information which it gives about the past retains no trace of it” (Benjamin, 1968: 158). Yet if Marker suggests that culture and its definition are difficult to grasp, he nonetheless emphatically asserts the beauty of the unknown, and perhaps too the beauty of the unknowable. Encapsulating the culture is not the point; rather, the goal is – must be, Marker implicitly argues – to create and appreciate a fleeting moment of communication and understanding. Just a glimpse of

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from the French of the film mine unless otherwise noted. The film also comes with an English-language soundtrack, with ‘Sandor Krasna’s letters’ read by Alexandra Stewart rather than Florence Delay.

<sup>2</sup> Marker quotes the 11th century figure Sei Shonagon, who speaks of “les choses qui font battre le coeur”.

three blond children on a lonely road, or the silhouette of dogs playing along the shore, may be enough to solidify the reality of a nation that might otherwise remain entirely in the dark. For in representing the past through these intimate moments the *témoin* may also call upon the *mémoire involontaire*, the resurgence of that which has passed evoked through unexpected moments of recognition – of scent, often, but also of image and sound. Marker’s collection of images acts as a call for attentiveness<sup>3</sup> on the part of the audience; the film splits the difference between the poignancy of a *mémoire involontaire* and the accessibility of a *mémoire volontaire* in order to conjure up points of convergence, through which an audience may briefly come in contact with the foreign.<sup>4</sup> In *Sans Soleil*, Marker’s camera becomes the tool of observation through which he – or the unseen Krasna – views the other. Because Krasna himself is absent, however, the burden of *témoignage* shifts to the film’s audience. *Sans Soleil* encourages recollection; like Krasna, the audience accepts and collects images which make the heart leap, forging a memory of places that might otherwise be called home.

There is something uncanny about the act of bearing witness to another. The act invokes a sense of transgression, as if viewing something uninvited, as if watching from a distance or, like Poe’s narrator in “The Man of the Crowd,” through a smoky pane of glass. If the subject is unaware of being observed there can be no question of consent; the image has been appropriated by the filmmaker. In her essay “In Plato’s Cave,” Susan Sontag puts it bluntly: “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (Sontag, 1977: 14). Possession of the image implies possession of the person, turning subject into object and using these objects to build a *memento mori* with perhaps only a tangential relationship to reality.<sup>5</sup> Yet Marker’s images, unlike the static frames of photographs, are more than artifacts; his subjects retain their agency through their movement. Further, Marker’s subjects are often (although not always) aware of the presence of the camera, acknowledging and implicitly accepting its presence as observer. Though

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin also notes the importance of the camera in this effort to find correspondances between *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire*: “The techniques based on the use of the camera and of subsequent analogous mechanical devices extend the range of the *mémoire volontaire*; by means of these devices they make it possible for an event at any time to be permanently recorded in terms of sound and sight” (Benjamin, 1968: 186).

<sup>4</sup> In 1962 Franz Fanon had already implored the (white) French nation: “Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? . . . At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness” (Fanon, 1967: 231-232).

<sup>5</sup> Sontag: “All photographs are memento mori” (1977: 15).

Sontag argues, with a sense of regret, that “taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events” (Sontag, 1977: 11), leading to a detachment, non-intervention, a too-neutral flattening of the world, Marker finds joy in the fact that the private celebration of a family cat may hold the same (visual) importance as a country-wide rite of passage; each has equal possibility of speaking directly to – and through – the heart of the observer. The event being viewed may be both strange and strangely familiar, a point of identification beneath the trappings of other cultures, places, and times.

The tendency of Marker’s camera to travel across and through various cultures is paralleled by his ability as a filmmaker to transcend the boundaries of genre. Although pieced together primarily from footage shot on location, *Sans Soleil* cannot be classified merely as a conventional documentary film, nor as pure narrative. Nora Alter points out that Marker tends to work in the sub-genre of audiovisual essay, with an emphasis on pushing the boundaries of genre and “innovative formal techniques” (Alter, 2006: 15-16). In fact, Marker took an early interest in film formats as one of the “groupe des trente” aiming to invigorate the short, 30-minute film in the 1950s. His work has been praised by André Bazin for being “unlike any other documentary” and “a truly innovative form of filmed intelligence” (quoted in Alter 2006: 15). His films, like many of his New Wave contemporaries, also adhere to Alexandre Astruc’s definition of the *caméra-stylo*, although often without the devotion to narrative found in the majority of that era’s productions. Rather, Roy Armes posits that Marker chooses to “replace narrative with documentary discovery” (Armes, 1976: 57), often as a means “to report on [his] travels” (ibid.: 109). Hamid Naficy, who considers Marker in his study of exilic, border-crossing filmmakers, prefers the term “letter-film” and the genre “epistolary filmmaking” (Naficy, 2001: 104) to describe Marker’s productions, which he terms more “performances of the documentary form, not documentaries themselves” (ibid.: 278). The most effective descriptor for Marker’s works, however, is the film-essay, as adopted by Alter and many other writers on Marker. Indeed Hans Richter had already invoked the idea of a film-essay in a 1940 text in terms that presage Marker’s oeuvre and intent, identifying it as a film that “produces complex thoughts that are not necessarily grounded in *reality*” (Alter, 2006:17, italics original). Following Timothy Corrigan (2011), David Oscar Harvey instead reverses the term, writing that “the politically engaged, aesthetically bold documentary voiced with strong personal expression is how the essay film has come to be theorized” (Harvey, 2012: 6), most prominently among the Left Bank New Wave group that included Marker as well as his contemporaries and friends Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda. Harvey proposes that the

essay film is most often considered “vococentric,” as in “[Michel] Chion’s term for the cinematic sound track’s prioritization of the human voice over sound effects and music” (Harvey, 2012: 7), although Harvey includes not just the voiceover but the rhetoric of the film itself in his definition, and argues that in fact Marker has become so commonly associated with the essay film form that his work has become altogether too synonymous with the genre. Finally, several of Marker’s works also call to mind ethnographic film, particularly of the tradition established by Jean Rouch during his years of production in Africa. Rouch, who conducted fieldwork primarily in Niger, “blend[ed] observation and participation, science and art, constructing a provocative ethnographic oeuvre that challenge[d]” viewers’ assumptions (Stoller, 1992: 23); likewise, Marker’s work, while not intentionally ethnographic in the anthropological sense, nonetheless asks viewers to reconsider previous notions of the foreign. For the sake of simplicity I will continue to use the term “film” in this essay, while acknowledging that Marker’s work draws much of its influence from his ability to reach beyond purely narrative or documentary film; like the borders of the nation, the boundaries of genre are ones that Marker traverses with ease.

Marker’s project depends on the ability of the camera to rove almost indiscriminately among cultures, collecting images that will later be edited into the film-essay form. In *Sans Soleil*, rather than create a straightforward visual diary of his own experience, Marker instead invents a character, Krasna, who becomes a witness to various foreign cultures, most notably those of Japan, the Cape Verde islands, and Guinea-Bissau. In terms of screen time Japan remains the primary focus, but each community takes on a distinctive shape as Krasna crosses back and forth across borders, enumerating the contrasts among the cultures both explicitly and implicitly through letters and images. A parade in Guinea-Bissau is paired with a similar celebration in Tokyo, for example, and later with the odd rituals of the Japanese youth dance group, the Takenoko. An interrogation of the meaning of death moves from the mourning of a Japanese panda to the traditions of the Bijago islands, via the seemingly unconnected death of a wild giraffe, while political protests in Narita mirror those in Guinea-Bissau, both seen in the present as well as in the past. Marker most often chooses to recreate Japan through evocations of its rituals and people, and Tokyo in particular through its visual language, noting that “the whole city is a comic book.” Celebrations and habits, perhaps because of their grounding in national or cultural tradition, appear frequently, thus forming a vision of the nation similar to that offered up by Roland Barthes in his 1957 *Mythologies*, a nation constructed through its rituals in addition to its myths.

Marker's effect depends not just on the images but also on the juxtaposition of various sequences and the meanings that blossom from these imbrications. In the first volume of his work on cinema, Gilles Deleuze (1986) argues that a whole must be presupposed in order for montage to be effective. He traces the historical conceptions of montage, including the parallel or organic montage of Griffith, the dialectical montage of Eisenstein, the quantitative montage of Gance, and the expressionist or spiritual montage of the German school. In *Sans Soleil*, however, Marker uses montage to a different purpose, allowing an improbable variety of shots to build not just a cohesive whole but also an inherent questioning of this whole. Rather than using montage to construct a definitive reality, Marker presents his audience with multiple perspectives, understanding that individual readings may vary. Of course, his choices privilege a certain sense of wholeness, but unlike more conventional fiction films the audience may interpret according to their own experience the meaning of, for example, the dance routines of the Japanese women, whose steps and costume are never definitively explained. In this, Marker returns to Deleuze's own questioning of the whole and how best to comprehend it:

Montage is the determination of the whole . . . by means of continuities, cutting and false continuities. . . . But why *should* the whole be the object of montage? Between the beginning and the end of a film something changes, something has changed. But this whole which changes, this time or duration, only seems to be capable of being apprehended indirectly, in relation to the movement-images which express it (Deleuze, 1986: 29).

In addition, Marker considers the passage of time by including images from both past and present, so that "montage emerges as a means of historical rescue, of sorting through far-flung, ready-made material and marshalling it into an acute, affective examination of the past" (Warner, 2009: 17). Moving through both space and time, Marker thus presents the viewer with his own interpretation of culture, but simultaneously asserts that whatever whole emerges from the film remains fluid and changeable. In fact, Marker collects moments and images in the same way that Benjamin used his Arcades Project as a means of collecting and understanding Paris.<sup>6</sup> The kaleidoscopic whole that emerges from Marker's accumulations allows him to question the meaning of what is seen, and to offer the viewer a chance to search out his or her own understanding from among the visual fragments.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Marker's relationship to Benjamin and his concept of the 'dialectical image' see Fairfax (2012: 1).

<sup>7</sup> Marker would later bring this concept of a multi-layered "truth/experience" to his CD-ROM *Immemory* (Lupton, 2005: 179).

Knowledge can be conveyed through images and film, to be sure, but also through writing, namely Krasna's letters, another collection highlighted as the narrator repeats the phrase "he wrote to me." In fact the letters may be key to Krasna/Marker's ability to communicate; in his text on exilic and diasporic filmmaking Hamid Naficy posits that "epistolary media are generally communitarian; they link people across time, space, and cultural difference" (Naficy, 2001: 105). In this case Marker's images work through the letters, mirroring, expanding, and even occasionally contradicting them, so that the film remains incomprehensible without both elements. The effect of the film relies on the pairing of word and image, and on the ability of the recipient to identify with the letter sent from elsewhere. As Krasna sends letters back to the narrator, who in turn reads them aloud to the viewer, the film creates several layers of narrative experience and interpretation to accompany the variety of images on the screen. Marker often includes shots of hands or feet, close-ups of individual faces, and countless anonymous people in semi-private moments of sleep, prayer, mourning, and dance, focusing in on these highly personal attributes while the voiceover comments, more vastly: "he liked the fragility of these suspended moments, these memories that had no purpose but to leave a memory." The letters also reflect Krasna's concern with the inexpressible, later addressed visually through the Zone, as he notes in several instances the untranslatable, whether it be a certain social class of Japanese whose existence is denied ("a category of Japanese who did not exist . . . their name – the *eta* – is a forbidden word, unpronounceable") or the impossibility of expressing a certain melancholy that results from the inherent differences between the males and females of any species. By including the supposedly untranslatable in the verbal narrative, Marker further questions the relationships between cultures, recreating in one what cannot be said in another.

As befits his own peripatetic experience, Marker also demonstrates a keen interest in methods of movement and travel, bringing the camera onto trains, a ferry, subways, a bus, and even infiltrating the slow undulations of the parades in Tokyo and Guinea-Bissau. In fact, Marker's interest in travel extends even to the idea of other planets and times, as Krasna in at least one letter imagines a visitor from elsewhere, "someone who comes from elsewhere, from far away . . . not from our planet, but from our future."<sup>8</sup> Throughout the film, travel appears not just as a way of moving from place to place but also as a comment on the idea of boundaries, cultural and national. For Marker, cultural and national boundaries are not necessarily fixed, nor are the

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<sup>8</sup> This interest will be familiar to those who have seen Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), which (alongside Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo*) is itself cited within *Sans Soleil*.

strangers who enter into an unknown culture at a disadvantage. In fact the stranger may be in the perfect position to bear witness, as suggested by Johanne Villeneuve: “How then can we render the act of vision if not in conferring to a single gaze the task of bearing witness? This is exactly what Marker does in assuming that there cannot be an absolute witness, that the only possible witness is one who regards from afar and not from within the experience” (Villeneuve, 2003: 48). Although the foreigner may not fully understand Tokyo, his or her perspective is no less relevant than that of the native, whose own vision of the city relies on a set of limitations and selective framing as well. In walking the streets of Tokyo, the visitor corresponds with the city, a new-world *flâneur* armed with a camera instead of a pen.<sup>9</sup>

Of course the point is not just to pin down the meaning of ‘Tokyo’ or ‘Guinea-Bissau’ but rather to open up our understanding of what any culture means and how in fact its meaning is constantly subject to interpretation. Therefore Marker, born just outside of Paris (at least according to most reliable biographies), brings our awareness back to France by inserting occasional reminders of his homeland, including the emus who live (surprisingly, Krasna seems to say) in Ile-de-France. Marker’s expression of self-awareness culminates in his creation of the Zone, a computer-generated, video-game-like recreation of reality. Images, fed through the computer, reappear as barely comprehensible masses of color on the screen, forcing us to question what happens when images (read: understanding) break down, when this ‘reality’ becomes pixilated or blurry. Over and over again Marker takes key scenes from the film and replays them through the Zone, leaving them recognizable and yet entirely altered, forcing a reexamination of any assumptions previously made about what the images mean. Key moments in the film – notably the single frame in which an African woman looks directly into the camera<sup>10</sup> – resurface in new form, mimicking the play between sameness and difference that Marker has drawn out in his extended comparisons between and among cultures.<sup>11</sup>

The Zone also allows Marker to acknowledge what might not otherwise be said and to present what might not otherwise be shown. For example, a long sequence of

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<sup>9</sup> In this Marker echoes Benjamin, who writes “How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books!” (1968: 63) – though Marker is interested more in collecting film segments than books.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, this visual bluntness also refers back to the indescribable moment in *La Jetée* in which, in the midst of 30 minutes of still photographs, a woman slowly blinks her eyes at the camera

<sup>11</sup> Sontag: “In the normal rhetoric of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject's essence” (1977: 38-39).



pixelated images portrays the last hours of Japanese kamikaze pilots in World War II, whose final ceremonial moments appear only through the Zone. In muted oranges and blues rows of pilots salute their leader and silhouettes of planes fly straight into the sea, with the resultant explosions all too clear despite the visual static. For France, a nation in which discussions of difficult moments – perhaps most notably the Algerian War of Independence – have often been subdued, Marker points out that the camouflaging of death only draws attention further to its prominence, and to the constructed nature of the discourses surrounding it; obscuring the violence does not succeed in hiding it. The non-reality created by the Zone, which Krasna terms “non-images,” again echoes Barthes, who writes: “As paradoxical as it may seem, *myth conceals nothing*: its function is to deform, not to make disappear” (Barthes, 1957: 194, italics original). Barthes argues that the myth exists in parallel with the object, with both representing equal but different realities, much like the depictions that emerge from Marker’s Zone correspond to the images previously shown. Further, the ostensible creator of the Zone, Hayao Yamaneko, represents another alter ego of Marker, one who sees things that Krasna cannot. Thus Marker effectively splits himself in three, demonstrating (visually) exactly how differently individual perspectives may appear. For in the end each set of images of Japan represents the nation equally well: Krasna conveys the parades and rituals, Hayao the unspeakable, Marker the spaces in-between.

As Krasna’s images dissolve into pixels the film also marks an awareness of time and change and the capriciousness of memory as well as of history. The film constantly questions reality through an intentional blurriness of location created through quick cuts and a lack of identifying shots, as well as the ambiguity of who exactly speaks from among the voices of Marker, Krasna, and the narrator at any given moment. The confusion of reality becomes essential to the greater stakes of the film, especially with regard to the passing of time and our natural reaction to it. Marker’s awareness of time and change eventually becomes another organizing principle of the film, as seen through the doubling of the image of the three Icelandic children, who are first seen in a shot that has been admittedly cut short. Later the rest of the clip is restored, the shaky frame reconsidered as a marker of reality rather than an imperfection. The clip still occurs in juxtaposition, but where it previously stood alone, surrounded by blackness, the section of black leader so carefully stressed in the opening sequence now becomes a new film clip showing the same Icelandic town buried under black ash, a testament to the effects of time, history, and chance.

*Sans Soleil* presents a markedly different approach to assessing national boundaries than an earlier work that Marker co-created with Alain Resnais, *Les Statues*

*Meurent Aussi* (1953), which offers a more literal approach to collecting objects and images of a culture. The political import of *Les Statues* lies primarily in the commentary, as Marker and Resnais posit that the static objects (and images) of African culture collected in a French museum can never truly convey the culture in question and in fact represent just another form of colonization, as the French attempt to define the ‘other’ in potentially condescending terms. In the museum shown in *Les Statues*, unlike the self-reflective *Sans Soleil*, no one acknowledges that time has been frozen, that the collection represents only one of many possible snapshots. Instead, *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* shows the negative effects of collection, the fossilization of a culture when all intimacy has been removed. Catherine Lupton emphasizes the lack of emotion in these artifacts, writing that “*Les Statues* argues that colonialism murders African art by severing its roots in traditional ways of life, consigning it to the graveyard of Western museums and degrading its forms into mass-produced tourist kitsch that no longer expresses a cultural purpose – a prayer, as the commentary puts it – for the people who make it” (Lupton, 2005: 38). By fixing the viewer’s perspective in place, the museum in *Les Statues* denies any opportunity for the culture to come alive and thus for any true act of communication to take place. Contrast this with *Sans Soleil*, which, as Elizabeth Cowie posits, “can be read as an essay-film on the cultural fetishes – including ethnographic film – by which we sustain ourselves in the face of the undecidable, while it also problematizes the easy assumption of distance from such fetishism that documentary usually affords us” (Cowie, 2007: 102). Marker’s *Zone* in particular asserts the need to reflect deeply on our own process as viewers, to pay attention to why certain elements of a foreign culture – often the celebrations and rituals that also furnish the artifacts found in museum collections – seem to carry the weight of the originating culture and whether or not the viewer can content himself with a single interpretation or rather should go back for another, alternate look.

An additional approach to collecting culture appears in another film that pairs France and Japan, Resnais’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), which opens on a museum dedicated to the bombing of Hiroshima. Here the museum can present only reconstructions of the past, “faute d’autre chose,” and the narrator of the film, a Frenchwoman, struggles to identify the truth contained in the artifacts, as well as her own reaction to them. The parallels between the two films provoke an additional question: what kind of understanding may be gained by a viewer who collects images of France, and of Japan, not just from one film but from multiple? Can the lessons of *Sans Soleil* be extended across the boundaries of individual works in order to glean a more fluid awareness of the relationship between, in this case, France and Japan? In

*Hiroshima*, the Frenchwoman classifies Japan in a long sequence of slow-moving shots accompanied by a poetic narrative; both elements are highly stylized and quite unlike the images found in *Sans Soleil*. Yet the narrative in its most basic sense remains the same – a French native who discovers Japan – and occasional doubles appear: the female Japanese dancers in *Hiroshima*, for example, clearly prefigure those in *Sans Soleil*. The communication between the cultures appears quite differently in *Hiroshima*, to the point that each character is permitted to (momentarily) encapsulate the entirety of the other’s culture within his or her person, literally naming one another as ‘Hiroshima’ and ‘Nevers.’ Nonetheless, by pairing Marker’s controlled visual chaos with Resnais’ stylized sequences, a careful viewer might gain yet another perspective on France, Japan, and where exactly the boundaries between them might lie. Thus Marker’s film conveys lessons that expand beyond the film itself, becoming useful in a global sense by instructing the audience not just to view but also to bear witness.

In Marker’s obituary in the New York Times Dennis Lim appropriately identifies *Sans Soleil* as “one of [Marker’s] least classifiable, a free-associative mix of ethnography, philosophy and poetry” (Lim, 20012: 1). Lim’s observation triggers another question: does the film generate a stronger effect because it is neither purely documentary nor purely fiction? The effect of poetry (both visual and aural) on an audience certainly creates a different sort of transmission of knowledge, motivated as much by affect as by fact. Traces of such appear in the beauty of certain shots of *Sans Soleil*: the silhouettes of German shepherds cavorting in the waves against a brightly lit sky, or the extended sequence of trains and tracks crossing the screen at every imaginable angle. There is beauty too in the wrenching footage of a giraffe shot and crumpling to the earth, and the barely-visible faces of the doomed kamikaze pilots. Or consider Krasna’s favorite Icelandic children, his personal “image of happiness.” Indeed another organizing principle of the film, cited multiple times, comes from the 11<sup>th</sup> century figure Sei Shonagon, who expresses the importance of “those things that make the heart leap.” Marker does not insist upon the philosophies of his text, but he does insist that emotion form some portion of the viewer’s experience: “If we don’t see happiness in the image, at least we will see the blackness.”<sup>12</sup>

Contemplating this abundance of evocative images, Carol Mavor writes:

Both *Sans Soleil* and the Musée d’Histoire naturelle [in Paris] are over-generous places, haunted by death. Like a photograph, they are excessively full as they

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<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire argues that Stendhal “overshoots the mark” when he writes that “Beauty is nothing else but a promise of happiness” – but acknowledges that this may be quite close to the truth (Baudelaire, 2003: 4).

hearken not only the loss of the moment, but also the darkroom of development. Photographs are like taxidermied animals: they preserve not only with sawdust and emotion, but also regret (Mavor, 2007: 741).

Yet *Sans Soleil* is not just about regret, or loss; by capturing these images Marker communicates joy as well as sadness, an awareness of the enduring beauty of that which has passed. In this he reprises Baudelaire, who rejoices that in the too-rare declaration “that however much we may love *general* beauty, as it is expressed by classical poets and artist, we are no less wrong to neglect *particular* beauty, the beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners” (Baudelaire, 2003: 2). The final words of *Sans Soleil* form a question, as posed by the narrator: “Will there be, one day, a final letter?” The question, like the ending, surprises with its abruptness, but nonetheless proves oddly satisfying; we have watched the film come full circle, down to the moment of its conception as Krasna imagines making a film entitled “Sans Soleil,” and as the letters, too, suddenly occur in the present: “he writes to me” instead of “he wrote to me.” It is hardly surprising that the film has no definitive narrative ending. It cannot end, any more than the culture of Japan ends with these sequences, nor the character of Krasna with his disappearance from the screen. The fictional Krasna may no longer speak, but it is easy to imagine him, or rather the *témoin* he models, en route to a new location, camera in hand, sending back letters and images, witness to the intimate moments of the individuals whose lives represent the nation and its culture more completely than any political border ever could.<sup>13</sup>

In this Krasna – and by extension Marker - is not unlike the *flâneur*, Baudelaire’s man of the crowd, observing and reflecting upon those among whom he feels profoundly at home and yet severely out of place. He is the “eternal[ly] convalescent” Constantin Guys, looking for joy “amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite” (Baudelaire, 2003: 9). The mobility of the camera and its wielder is essential to the film; a viewer must first release any restrictive sense of (national) self in order to recognize and welcome the culture of the other. Further, bearing witness to another, particularly in difficult moments, suggests a sense of responsibility. Can *Sans Soleil* itself become a tool of change, melding the power of

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<sup>13</sup> Sontag dismisses the humanist aspects of photography as tautological, an acknowledgement rather than an explanation: “What is this humanity? It is a quality things have in common when they are viewed as photographs” (1977: 111). Yet, as she also notes, “the force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the normal flow of time immediately replaces” – an “insolent, poignant stasis” (1977: 111) that often leads to beauty, which, I believe, is essential to Marker’s project.

documentary with the intrigue of fiction in order to influence a generation? Sontag writes that “for photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock” (Sontag, 2003: 81), but Marker’s film-essay is in fact a gentler attempt to alter the conduct of those who might otherwise dismiss the other (and particularly that of the French people, whose colonial history is not explicitly referred to here and yet inevitably forms a backdrop to all of Marker’s work). Marker’s ultimate project, across his oeuvre, is to remind his audience of the outside world and any atrocities that may be occurring in it - note the almost imperceptible shot of a warplane descending at the very beginning of *Sans Soleil*, uncommented upon and yet markedly out of place against the images of the Icelandic children. Similarly, in 2004’s *Chats Perchés*, Marker allows only a single, superimposed shot of the World Trade Center towers burning to indicate the importance of that act of terrorism on the film’s more prominent subject, the rallying of the (again anonymous) people of Paris around calls for peace.

*Sans Soleil* is thus a film through which the audience (and in particular, France, via Marker/Krasna) may not just view but also remember the other. The film presents a kaleidoscope<sup>14</sup> of images assembled from across several nations from which viewers may, like Marker himself, glean their own moments of identification, the moments that make the heart leap. For in responding to the image, we also become responsible to it, and to what the image represents. Sontag insists that “no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (Sontag, 2003: 7); yet as Harvey argues, in *Sans Soleil* “Krasna/Marker makes a valiant attempt to become other, illustrating in the process the vertiginous orientation of selfhood for a globalized subject” (Harvey, 2012: 12). The film suggests the creation of a shared memory that calls upon the power of the *mémoire involontaire*, but in such a way that it may be accessed over and over again. It opens up the often restrictive boundaries of unknown cultures by moving freely through each culture’s rituals and myths, sending back messages akin to those sent by Krasna to his correspondent. Benjamin writes, in his essay on Proust, that “an experienced event is finite - at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it” (Benjamin, 1968: 202). In creating this memory, half-imagined, half-real, the film speaks to the need for mobility not just among images, but among cultures, the need to detach from and release any restrictive notions of home and instead to recognize and welcome the homes – and the people - that lie elsewhere.

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<sup>14</sup> Baudelaire describes his observer in “The Painter of Modern Life” as “a mirror as vast as the crowd itself. . . a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness” (Baudelaire, 2003: 10).

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