

Recollecting Fragments of 1968 in Chris Marker's *A Grin without a Cat*

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Chris Marker¹, who once went by the name of Christian Francois Bouche-Villeheuve,² treats images as a stream. The damming of one end forms a reservoir. Marker reserves and presents many reservoirs in order to make sense of events in which he participated; and, sometimes, the events in which he did not. In *A Grin without a Cat*, 1977,³ Marker mostly uses found footage and footage he filmed of the events surrounding the Marxist revolutions of 1968. Indeed, images from news reels appear along with footage shot directly by Marker or his associates⁴ in *A Grin without a Cat*. Different speakers do voiceovers from a text Marker has written that follows recollected fragments of footage from Marxist⁵ revolutions surrounding 1968. Film and voiceover give an uncertain chronology to the events for the purpose of collapsing the time between the 1968 Marxist revolutions and the present in *A Grin without a Cat*.

Why memory instead of teleology in Marker's *A Grin without a Cat*?

Marker recollects fragments of footage from the events surrounding May 1968 in *A Grin without a Cat* for the purpose of proposing a memory and not teleology. His account of 1968 appears topsy-turvy like the grin of the Cheshire Cat, (fig. 1) a character in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. If Marker had produced a *Grin without a Cat* according to a teleological representation of the events surrounding 1968, then such a film would imply a closure of the struggles therein. Exactly what happened remains open to question as a man with an English accent says in the film, "you can never tell what you might be filming."

Figure 1

¹ Born in 1921

² MdDonough, Tom, "Chris Marker: Gazes and Relationships," pp. 49

³ Released in 2001 in English

⁴ Possibly members of the SLON group

⁵ Marxism and feminism do not exclude one another as critical theories.



Still from *Alice in Wonderland*, 1951
Walt Disney Studios

Marker recollects fragments of the events surrounding 1968 via found footage, footage he took and voiceovers. The use of found footage allows Marker to produce an image of the struggles and conflicts surrounding May 1968 via metonym, using footage from locations such as Minamata, Japan; Santiago, Chile and the Pentagon. Film of a speech given by Fidel Castro (fig. 2) may follow an interview of Che Guevara followed by mass protests (fig. 3), all of which appear contiguous. Distances collapse when the only starts and stoppages happen between one frame and another.

Figure 2



Chris Marker
Still from *A Grin without a Cat*, 1977

Figure 3



Chris Marker
Still from *A Grin without a Cat*, 1977

The collection of footage arranged in order to evoke a 'memory of the future,' does not present an encyclopedia of May 1968 in *A Grin without a Cat*. In her article, "HAPPINESS WITH A LONG PIECE OF BLACK LEADER: CHRIS MARKER'S SANS SOLEIL," Carol Mavor, professor of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester, writes:

In 2002, Marker made a video about the photographer Denis Bellon (focusing on her work between 1935 and 1955), with the telling, Proustian title of *Le Souvenir d'un avenir* (*Remembrance of things to come*). Catherine Lupton has titled her history of the filmmaker's work *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*. This 'future remembering' is the tense in which Proust writes and in which Marker makes films.⁶

It might then be assumed that Marker's fragmenting of the present through recollecting images of the past opens the imagination to the future.

The title *A Grin without a Cat* connotes fragmentation as it refers to the guerilla struggles in Latin America at the time of its production as well as the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland* who isn't 'all there' himself. Similarly, another phrase spoken in one of the monologues, one that describes Che Guevara as "a spearhead without a spear," evokes fragmentation. It should not be surprising that parts *One: Fragile Hands* and *Two: Severed Hands of A Grin without a Cat* imply a fragmenting of the body as well.

It would be a mistake to think Marker's *A Grin without a Cat* as an example of synecdoche since any reference to a whole would be in doubt. Those artists and writers who use the concept of synecdoche should take note. The revolutions of 1968 cannot be summarized in a single conflict. Instead, Marker chooses to focus on localized conflicts. In particular, Marker uses footage taken from a local shareholders meeting of the Chisso Company in Minamata, Japan. The Chisso Company had been poisoning the surrounding populations for decades despite signs of mercury contamination. Local populations bought company shares to gather at the meeting to protest. A woman screams at the owner who smirks at the crowd to 'stop smiling... you have a son too... can you imagine how I feel... I have lost everything.'

A Grin without a Cat shows reels of film in which the revolutions cannot and did not end in utopia. For instance, President Allende commits suicide during a coupe against him staged by the Chilean Military on 11 September 1973.

A Grin without a Cat does not fantasize its conclusion in an imagining of a posterior event with the intention of presenting it in its entirety. Instead, *A Grin without a Cat* attempts to make sense of the events through *mimesis*, a re-writing of history to correlate with the leftover images. Yet, one forgets where one is watching *A Grin without a Cat*. Perhaps this is why Carol Mavor compares Marker's *Sans Soleil*, 1982, to "Proust's memory-laden memory cake"⁷ which, metaphorically, involves a returning to always the same place at any place

⁶ Mavor, Carol, "HAPPINESS WITH A LONG PIECE OF BLACK LEADER: CHRIS MARKER'S SANS SOLEIL," pp. 745

⁷ Mavor, Carol, "HAPPINESS WITH A LONG PIECE OF BLACK LEADER: CHRIS MARKER'S SANS SOLEIL," pp. 742

whatsoever. Watching *A Grin without a Cat* remains always an activity of recollecting traces of places.

Several speakers read from a text written by Marker in a voiceover in *A Grin without a Cat*. Which speaker is Chris Marker? None or all? Male and female speakers of different ages read as if to make Marker silent. Such a practice would correlate to the theory of the death of the *Auteur* by Roland Barthes, French philosopher, literary critic, and semiotician. Marker had studied under Jean Paul Sartre and would have been influenced by Roland Barthes's *La Chambre Claire*.⁸ Plausibly, Marker would then represent both sexes via voiceover so as not to claim an essential identity to an *Auteur*, which does not exist. The voiceover dislocates Marker and locates the voices of others; all the while, the writing unmistakably refers to Marker's thought.

Marker locates authorship only in fragments by using found footage and voices of others in a voiceover. Speech itself becomes a readymade. Such practices have a history. Marker previously produced a film using found footage and invented text in *Lettre de Sibéria (Letter From Siberia)*, 1957, after seeing Alexander Ivanovich Medvedkin's⁹ *Schastye (Happiness)*, 1932.¹⁰ Marker later met Medvedkin in 1967 at a Leipzig Festival.¹¹

Whose fragments?

Marker makes the Marxist revolutions of May 1968 his object while negating a teleological representation of the events surrounding it. May 1968 had been a year when two-thirds of the French workforce went on strike with students, causing a near collapse of the De Gaulle regime. The revolutions tested the Left and signaled a shift away from strategies for gaining and holding power to strategies for making power more democratic as a result of May 1968. Marker's *A Grin without a Cat* provides seemingly testimonial footage of events critical to this struggle.

A Grin without a Cat shows distant events within a sometimes arbitrary and *liminal* frame of reference. Liminal comes from the Latin word *limen*, meaning "a threshold,"¹² and can be defined as state in-between states, causing openness and indeterminacy. The chronology of Marker's *A Grin without a Cat* appears scattered, out of order, as if to suggest one happens upon it by chance. It seems that the narrative has no determinate end in mind. The apparently random chronology of *A Grin without a Cat* gives the spectator the sense that the film may begin or end at any point.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 729

⁹ 1900-1989

¹⁰ Wert, William F. van, "Chris Marker: The SLON Films," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, spring 1979, pp. 39

¹¹ Marker, Chris, "The Last Bolshevik: Reminiscences of Alexander Ivanovich," *Cineaste*, 33, no4, fall, 2008, pp. 12

¹² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality>

Most of the footage appears dominated by male figures of authority despite the abundance of feminists resisting such domination at the time of the filming of *A Grain without a Cat*. While it seems that Marker does not approve much of the figures representing a patriarchy in one way or another, there is something to be said about the limited role Marker depicts women having in the revolutions surrounding 1968. That said, that Marker seems as much interested in the absence of an image as well as an image's presence would make it seem that he would approve of such criticism. Nevertheless, absent in Marker's film is the fact that women faced daunting challenges to their reproductive rights and sexual discrimination within both the unions and corporations during the production of *A Grain without a Cat*. These challenges have not been met today in what appear in even more disturbing ways by way of global capitalism.

Marker's use of filters

Much of the footage appears monochrome in shades of red, yellow, blue and green. These monochromes dispel a phenomenological viewing of the film. Instead of attempting to represent an entire spectrum according to a phenomenological or "true" luminosity, Marker plays with color. Carol Mavor writes that Marker uses a "politics of being red."¹³ Color appears as fragments of a spectrum. The interest lies not in showing a claim for a complete spectrum, but, rather, deconstructing the spectrum as it is known. The yellow tint of footage taken from a speech by Mao Zedong (fig. 4) shows the fracturing the spectrum in film.

Figure 4

¹³ Mavor, Carol, "HAPPINESS WITH A LONG PIECE OF BLACK LEADER: CHRIS MARKER'S *SANS SOLEIL*," pp. 740



Chris Marker
Still from *A Grain without a Cat*, 1977

Marker's Chronology

A Grain without a Cat weaves together footage to recollect fragments of Marxist struggles surrounding 1968 despite its seemingly random appearance. Marker does this with uncertainty. A voiceover near the start of the film reads “you can never tell what you might be filming.” With that in mind, Marker’s collection of footage in *A Grain without a Cat* offers the possibility for a re-collection of memories of the events surrounding 1968 through a relatively uncertain chronology.

Marker relinquishes any *one* narration of a chronology of fragmentary footage—some found, some taken directly by him. The absence of a coherent chronology with the severing of “hands” between the first and second parts of the film implies a fracturing of the body. The dominance of footage of labor leaders, union gatherings, student protests, revolutionary intellectuals and politicians suggest that the severing of hands happens to the Left. To mistake this preference for sentimentality would mistake partisanship for prejudice.

Although Marker presents footage of struggles for emancipation from bourgeois dictatorship, the sequencing of events gives doubt to any coherent chronology. Marker thus locates the fragments of footage in a collapsed notion of time. In other words, the consequence of his sequencing of images could be nothing, or everything. This handling of images in which the consequence could be nothing or everything gives the sense that it could happen anywhere.

The lightness with which Marker gives continuity between images and speakers makes any structuring of a chronology a weak one. Indeed, Marker insists "...if they [the spectators] don't see the happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black."¹⁴ While making a reference to his use of black leader in *Sans Soleil*, 1983, Marker implies that black may substitute for any picture. And since black is the absence of a picture, Marker seems just as interested in the appearance of images as in their disappearance.

Which images does Marker make disappear in *A Cat without A Grin*? Marker collapses the time between the viewing of *A Cat without a Grin* and the recollection of the May 1968 Marxist revolutions, at which point, it becomes apparent that their strength came from their fracturing.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 749

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