

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme**, *Le Joli Mai*, New York: Icarus Films, 2013/1963.

145 minutes; black and white

In 1962 Chris Marker made two films that distilled post-war subterranean anxieties about the future. The better known of these, the elegiac 29-minute speculative fiction film, *La Jetée*, would captivate cinephiles and general audiences alike with its black and white tale of time travel, memory, lost love and apocalypse, assembling a series of still photographs to reinvent the very meaning of moving images while delicately reconstructing as fiction the latent terrors registered in the wake of cataclysmic world events. As fictional abstraction and a ground-breaking experiment with form and aesthetics, *La Jetée* would thoroughly eclipse the non-fiction film whose making constituted a real-world bedrock for *La Jetée*'s thematic preoccupations, Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme's foray into *cinéma-vérité* (or what Marker preferred to call "*ciné, ma vérité*" ["cinema, my truth"])<sup>1</sup>, *Le Joli Mai*.

Filmed during "the lovely month" of May 1962, *Le Joli Mai* marked a departure for the elusive French filmmaker Chris Marker, who had become known within the post-war Parisian cultural scene for his personal and idiosyncratic travelogue films, including *Letter from Siberia* (1958) and *Cuba Si!* (1961). Pared-down from 55 hours of raw footage, *Le Joli Mai* is assembled mainly out of in-the-street interviews with a cross-section of "ordinary" Parisians, who are asked a variety of general questions about their lives, their relationships to work and the city, and their outlooks on the future. Their personal experiences are firmly situated in global geopolitics. The scene from which the

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<sup>1</sup> Most often translated as "direct cinema", *cinéma vérité* is a style of documentary characterized by an intimate, observational filming technique to create a feeling of discovering or unveiling a "true" reality.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

filmmakers inquire is that of France's turn toward capitalist modernization; the signing of the Évian Accords, which marked the formal end of France's brutal eight-year war with Algeria and more than 100 years of Algerian resistance to French colonization; the trial of French ex-General Raoul Salan, leader of the right-wing paramilitary group *Organisation de l'armée secrète* (OAS) on charges of torturing Algerians; and the most radical restructuring of urban space experienced by Paris since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the razing of whole neighborhoods and forcible relocation of their inhabitants. As a portrait of Paris, then, *Le Joli Mai* is also a cinematic study in social relations, political consciousness, and the perennial challenges of sympathy and solidarity.

Marker disdained the term “documentary” because of what he once called the “trail of sanctimonious boredom” associated with the form (quoted in Lupton 2005: 49). Yet the vast majority of his non-fiction films, including his more well-known essay films *Sans Soleil* (1983) and *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977), offer tender and tireless investigation into the world around him. His films are animated politically by a compassionate and wildly erudite attention to the social fabric of history as it is lived in the present, an attention that encompasses pet cemeteries as well as revolutionary upheavals.

When Marker died on 29 July 2012, the day of his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday, the film world lost a seminal interpreter of our strange ways of being in the world, and the Left lost a luminous comrade and interlocutor. “Comrade” may seem a strong word given Marker's stated aversion to politics as such (“politics, the art of compromise (which is as it should be—if there is no compromise there is only brute force, of which we're seeing an example right now) bores me deeply. What interests me is history...” [Marker 2003: np]), but his tremendous body of work spanning the genres of poetry, multi-media, criticism, fiction

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

and film, no less than his committed artistic experiments in collectivism, belie such aversion; indeed, his films may be more important politically for it. His was an unflinchingly radical life that included participation in the French Resistance; a decade of working, often anonymously, with the left-wing militant film collectives SLON and ISKRA to produce newsreels and films on political struggles worldwide; and a lifelong commitment to democratizing the tools of cinema as well as its authorship. When *Le Joli Mai* was released, Marker insisted on sharing a director's credit with his cinematographer, Pierre Lhomme, given his central role in creating the film's thoughtful visual images. Marker was notoriously elusive and disinterested in public attention; among the fables that follow him are that of taking his pseudonym ("Chris Marker") from the Magic Marker pen, and responding to press requests for photographs with a picture of a cat. Of this, one of his most beloved of creatures, he once said: "A cat is never on the side of power" (quoted in Brunton 2012: np).

In one of the rare interviews recorded with Marker, he describes his overarching project in disarmingly modest terms: "I keep asking: How do people manage to live in such a world? And that's where my mania comes from, to see 'how things are going' in this place or that" (Marker 2003: np). The question of how people manage to live in such a world is an apt descriptor of *Le Joli Mai*'s most central inquiry, otherwise posed by the interviewer in the questions "Are you happy?" and "When are you free?". The simple answer expressed throughout is variously articulated: "I try not to think about it", "I don't think at all" or "There's nothing we can do". Probed repeatedly about what *else* has marked the month of May, one Parisian cannot think of anything more significant than the price of potatoes going up 220 francs. Meanwhile, during May, in the "first springtime of peace" in seven years, some 10-50 Algerian citizens were being killed

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

every day by pro-French paramilitaries. The film cuts to the funeral of eight protesters crushed to death during a protest against the right-wing terrorist group OAS in order to make a larger point.

A collective myopia would thus seem to suffuse even the immediate present. But Marker is too sophisticated a traveler to allow a simple reading of false consciousness and willed blindness to explain mass acquiescence to the numerous injustices piling up over the film's montage. One encounters in these ordinary Parisians something more complex, something akin to what Lauren Berlant describes as "the production as desire of a collective will to imagine oneself as a solitary agent who can and must live the good life promised by capitalist culture" (2007: 278). Certainly that would seem to be the preoccupation of the suit salesman in his singular focus on "filling the till" before heading home to dinner and television. This *production as desire* is a deeply uneven one. If the two young interns at the stock exchange are at a loss of words to describe the "fun" they think their aspired-to wealth will buy, the black African student we later meet is not. His answer to the question about his first encounter with white people in France comes quickly: "I thought: 'They're the ones that beat us'...".

But even in that moment the story is more complicated, and both the gaze of the camera and the lilt of the script betray an interest in an uneasier and more contradictory truth. Anxiety is everywhere in the film; it suffuses the very prosperity that marks this turning point in French capitalism. In May 1962, emerging evidence of France's use of torture, and the government's tacit sanctioning of that torture, in Algeria threw the country into a crisis of conscience; and conscience, as feminist theory in particular has well taught us, is an embodied platform with multiple registers. A nervous and fragile-seeming costume designer with a proclivity for making lavish outfits for her cats is not

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

played for the fool, though it would be easy to do so. Instead, her retreat from public life is considered sympathetically: the patience of the cat is a cue. *Le Joli Mai* thus evokes what Avery Gordon calls “complex personhood”, which means, among other things, “that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in what symptomizes their troubles, and also transform themselves” (2004: 100).

For the Parisians experiencing rapid and uneven capitalist modernization in 1962, the close of the Algerian War and France’s retreat from empire overlapped with the introduction of new consumer durables into French life. As Kristin Ross argues, “[t]he movement inward—... ‘privatization’—is a movement echoed on the level of everyday life by the withdrawal of the new middle classes to their newly comfortable domestic interiors, to the electric kitchens, to the enclosure of private automobiles, to the interior of a new vision of conjugality and an ideology of happiness built around the new unit of middle-class consumption, the couple” (1995: 11). But the colonization of everyday life, *Le Joli Mai* reminds us, is no less dependent on the strictures and structures of force than the colonization of foreign territory; the complacency of consent embodied by the nightclub dancers perfecting their twist requires a vast infrastructure of oppression. *Le Joli Mai* might be considered a study in what Gramsci called “hegemony protected by the armor of coercion” (1971: 263). Indeed, structures of coercion reappear throughout: the police beating of a young Algerian; the systematic relegation of immigrants to the lowest echelons of the poverty-wage structure; the vicissitudes of the stock market; the hunger games of company bosses against their striking workers; and, finally, the prison. The film closes upon this fact and image: in the month of May in 1962, 5,056 people were incarcerated in the prisons of Paris. A wide shot of one of them, La Petite Roquette, cuts to an interior panopticon layout populated by nuns. The film then closes with a finely

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

drawn point: “As long as poverty exists, you are not rich. As long as misery exists, you are not happy. As long as prisons exist, you are not free.”

We would be mistaken, however, if we were to interpret this closing sequence as suggesting nothing more than the idea that the prison is a metaphor, a way of dramatizing the self-repression of the Parisian masses and their complicities in their own unfreedoms. While it may be those things, the prison is also very much a real tactic and geographic site; it is part of the iron fist which packs the punch of the velvet glove, and an institution of control that would, we now know, expand dramatically in France, as in much of the Western world. It haunts the “happy many” to whom the film is dedicated, like the colonization of Algeria haunts the lovely month of May, and all the many months since.

*Le Joli Mai* has been issued a new life in the restored version recently re-released by Icarus Films. Like so many of Marker’s subjects who seem to address us from the future, the cross-section of Parisians interviewed in *Le Joli Mai* come across as startlingly prescient in their ordinary here-and-now-ness. It almost feels as if it were planned as such. In preparatory notes for the film, Marker writes: “[t]his film, *Le Joli Mai*, would like to offer itself as a fish tank for the future fishermen casting their nets into the past. It’s for them to sort out what has left a real impression from what will turn out to have been only froth” (quoted in Lupton 2005: 87). The future lingers in the past, just as history is what is happening now.<sup>2</sup>

## References

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<sup>2</sup> As they said at the 2013 Robert Flaherty Film Seminar. See <http://flahertyseminar.org/the-flaherty-seminar/past-seminars/2013-flaherty-seminar/>

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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August 2014