

Chris Marker

Beaconsfield London May 12 to June 13

The ground floor of Beaconsfield was transformed into a cinema foyer: posters knocked up on computer advertising films that never were. Louise Brooks in *OWL PEOPLE*; '1926 - the great premakes: *RAMBO MINUS ONE*, when Maciste saved the world from the Kaiser, Lenin and Dr Fu-Manchu. Onstage, Rudy Vallee sings the popular song *HOW GREEN WAS MY BERET*. Sometimes you laugh because the posters are known to be jokes, rather than because you get the references. In the adjacent booth, there was a kind of bush cinema: free admission if you managed to get to Vauxhall through the May storms. A Chris Marker retrospective complete with rosey sound system and passing trains that almost drowned out the eloquence of Salvador Allende. Was Allende allowed to speak on last year's Fox/BBC2 Cold War series? Did Ted Turner, United Nations benefactor, edit him out or was there something wrong with the idea of fitting half the American continent's calamities into a 50-minute programme? Allende is there in *A Grain Without a Cat*, 1977/1981, which is not just a reckoning with the generation of 68 but also a three-hour bequest to subsequent ones.

The other great discovery of the screenings was *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*, 1967, a film made from the director/traveller's still photographs and one of his finest in its use of music and tempo. And to bring us up to date, *Prime Time in the Camps*, a roughly made video short about a Bosnian refugee TV station set up in Slovenia in 1993. Sky, CNN etc is shown being re-edited and narrated for co-refugees by people who have never touched cameras or sound gear before, and who in doing so discover a purpose. (Marker presumably shot *Son Tango*, a single take of an elephant's beautiful movements, set to Stravinsky, on the same trip: Ljubljana Zoo, 1993, the credits inform us. But that needs no explanation; it was one of our wars, wasn't it?)

Marker (b 1921) is distinctly great, but also modest. At his best his works make viewers feel they (you) could do it too. Aesthetics and politics meet in his works (films since 1952, TV series, books, a CD-Rom) or if they fail to meet, they take turns at doing what each does best in the knowledge that the absence of the missing half will be registered, not forgotten.

Silent Movie must be one of the few works made by a film-maker for a gallery that seems other than decorative, or part of a trade show. It was made to a 'century-of-cinema' brief for the Wexner Center, Ohio State University, and arrived in London courtesy of the Pier Trust; a replica of it should be bought by the Tate, or by the BFI for the foyer of their South Bank IMAX cinema, as it happily tolerates a distracted gaze. It combines the charms of a player piano (a soundtrack of Chopin and Gershwin) and a flickering beacon of digitised celluloid. It could be said to resemble letters being burned; then given another chance when the computer programme which governs the order in which the images appear decides. Five monitors are stacked on metal shelving - a reference to 'hardcore constructivism' - clips from films, mostly from the silent era, are organised in themes: The Journey, The Face, Gesture, The Waltz. The central screen interrupts the flow of images with 94 intertitles from silent films - apparently authentic finds, although, as they're redesigned, one keeps guessing that Marker might have made a few up to help the automatic poetry. The choice of black and white, Marker explains, 'is nothing less than a haughty denial of our biological heritage, a way to assert man's inner resources against nature's consoling paraphernalia'. He does like his little jokes. He also refers to black and white as 'that other kind of mutism'.

And so to Catherine Belkhdja, the actress with the Russian name, a Circassian beauty who smokes (one of the whole points of photography), rouges her lips, plays with a toy car, walks along an imaginary tightrope: 'She



Chris Marker
Silent Movie 1994-95

bore that distracted look women bear, who have been loved by kings' flashes past on the screen. He has filmed her in homage to the faces so vast in size, that we never met. The contemporary film is slipped in amongst the historical; Marker is in love with Belkhdja or performing that love for our benefit, which might come to the same thing; or, as we say, the camera is in love with her. He's also in love with machines, of which there are all manner, including sex machines: Duchamp's roto-reliefs, gramophones, wheels, signalbox switching mechanisms; Dziga Vertov's camera, sewing machines, projectors, a readout of a heartbeat; the cupid's bow lips that are all we see of the rocking woman in Léger's film, *Ballet Mécanique*.

A critical report should mention the way *Silent Movie* seems to stop, freeze then start again. But it's completely obvious: set it up to run, and it will run, in an imitation of memory's rapidity and flight. The contents of memory are finally indifferent; it is the articulation and the movement and the stimulation to the memory that matters. Perhaps, finally, Marker isn't a Proustian: memory doesn't depend only on a chance conjunction. Neither can it easily be taught, but it can be cajoled. And if nobody is watching, the machine simply continues on our behalf. The plenitude is real, in that the conjunctions and montage never will recur twice, but it isn't finally a worrying plenitude, which holds you transfixed or seeks to substitute for life. 'There are unnamed birds outside' one of the intertitles reminds us. In *Sans Soleil* (*Sunless*) the fictional cameraman Sandor Krasna, whom we never see, develops the crazy idea that machines will come to the aid of mankind. *Silent Movie* is one of these machines: gloved hands crack open a safe but you don't see the contents; words and names are written and read but as in dreams they promptly vanish. Marker writes that in Mexico, when radio itself was a rarity, radios would be left blaring on all day when their owners went to the fields. 'It was there simply to be, not to be listened to, like a fire whose sole purpose is to burn, not to light or to warm.' ■

Chris Marker's CD-Rom, *Immemory*, is available from Art Data.

Ian Hunt's essay on Chris Marker appeared in *Coil 5* (1997).