

Though it's very hard to see any of his works and almost impossible to discover anything about him (let alone find a photograph), he may be the most important film-maker in the world. By Kevin Jackson

Who is Chris Marker?



A scene from Chris Marker's 'Silent Movie'. He's one of the few experimental film-makers willing to admit that experiments often fail

The goofy red cat with the white staring eyes gestures invitingly over its shoulder with its left paw and asks "En Savoir Plus?" (Roughly: "Check it out?" or "Wanna know more?") This cute little chap is the latest feline emblem adopted by Chris Marker, who, according to the press handout for his new exhibition, *Silent Movie*, may well be "France's most important film maker". I'm not too crazy about the word "important", but I think I know what they mean and I don't think they're being extravagant. In fact, a small number of otherwise sane and sober people consider that Chris Marker might be the most important film-maker not just in France but in the world. *En savoir plus?* I'll do my best; here are 13 things I know about Chris Marker.

1 Over the last 40-odd years, Chris Marker - poet, photographer, explorer, scholar and thinker, as well as film director - has shown, or hinted at, some of the ways in which film might be shuffled neatly aside from its old storytelling role and be used, instead, to produce essays, travel diaries, political tracts, reveries, scrapbooks, letters, criticism, cultural history, anguished confession, novelties, memoirs and jokes. Not all of these works have been masterpieces or anything like, and I suspect Marker wouldn't want them to be seen that way. He's diffident about his work (see below, item six), and dismisses some of it as juvenilia, mere reportage or misfire. (At a guess, he's one of the few experimental film-makers who'd be willing to admit that experiments often fail.) But some of them - *La Jetée* (1962), *Sans Soleil* (1962), *The Last Bolshevik* (1993) - are, among other handy adjectives, mournful, haunting, fierce, brilliant, wordy, worldly, other-worldly... and, yes, "important".

2 He's a notoriously elusive man, who never, as far as I know, gives formal interviews and has seldom been photographed. (Though those of my friends who have bumped into him report that he is one of the most charming gentlemen you could hope to meet.) Most of his films are similarly hard to track down, and one of the few praise-words you couldn't reasonably apply to them is "accessible". Apart from the two or three which are available on video, you'll mostly catch them on late-night television in foreign countries, in the few surviving cinemas with hard seats and no popcorn, or in art galleries. If you want to see *Silent Movie*, you'll have to make your way to a backstreet in Vauxhall, south London, across the river and west a bit from the Houses of Parliament.

3 *Silent Movie*, which has been brought to the UK by Ingrid Swenson of the arts organisation Pier Trust ("The Pier", coincidentally, is the standard English translation of *La Jetée*), consists mainly of a tall Dexion Speedframe tower which five video screens showing simultaneous extracts from American and French silent movies intercut with footage specially shot by Marker.

4 However, Marker is being a bit cheeky with his definition of "silent movie". Among the clips I spotted on the tower were extracts from James Whale's *Frankenstein*, which was a sound movie, and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, which was not only sound and colour but also, on its first run, in 3-D.

5 Downstairs from the main exhibit, you can have a good giggle at the comic posters he's drawn for imaginary films of the silent era (I won't spoil the joke by quoting them), or bring yourself up to speed with a few of the things he's been doing with moving images since 1962. The programme boasts a baker's dozen of film and video projects, including *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (1967), *L'Ambascia* (1973), *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977-88), *Junkopia* (1981) and *Three Video Haikus* (1994).

6 Why nothing earlier than 1962, the year of *La Jetée*? After all, Marker, who was born in the suitably distant territory of Ulan Bator, Mongolia, in 1921, made his first feature in 1952, and his first widely acclaimed film in 1958: *Lettre de Sibirie*. Ingrid Swenson hasn't spoken to Marker on the phone, let alone met him, but she has been involved in a lively exchange of faxes and e-mails with the great man, and shows me one of the latter, which reads: "Forget about *Lettre from Siberia*. I was doing my first steps (steppes?) in film-making, and while I keep a pleasant souvenir from the whole thing, it'd be unbearable today. Nothing political (in some respects, I was rather prophetic) but it's really too clumsy. Tell the poor souls who saw it then to stick to their memories."

7 Two perhaps unduly solemn comments on this punning modesty of Marker.

(a) Memories and the nature of memory, as anyone who has seen *La Jetée* or *Sans Soleil* will confirm, are among his abiding preoccupations. In this, he has elective affinities with the Hitchcock of *Vertigo* (a movie Marker has dissected both in print and on screen) and with Proust.

His most recent multi-media project is a CD-Rom entitled *Immemory*; the book which accompanies it is entitled *Qu'est-ce qu'une Madeleine?*. On its back cover is a shattered portrait of Proust; on the front, a similarly treated shot of Hitchcock. And, of course, there is a fat red cat asking "En savoir plus?"

(b) He is nothing if not political. If my own memory serves me well, the first thing that I ever saw by Marker was his contribution to the multi-authored *Loi du Vietnam* (1967). At the Beaconsfield, you can also see *La sixième face du Pentagone* (1968), a documentary account of the vast protest march on Washington.

Also showing is *Prime Time in The Camps* (1993), which shows how a group of young Bosnian refugees in the Roska camp in Ljubljana, produced their own nightly news broadcasts by filming and re-editing material from satellite TV.

8 His real name is Christian François Bouche-Villeneuve.

9 The reason I have already referred four times to *La Jetée* is that it is the one Marker film which just about everyone with an interest in the cinema is likely to have seen. Briefly, *La Jetée* is a science fiction story about a hapless chrononaut, sent backwards and forwards across time from the underground warrens inhabited by the survivors of World War Three. (1962 was the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis.) He is a suitable case for time travel because he is haunted by images from his childhood: a woman's face, a man's death. At the end, he realises that the death he witnessed was his own. If this plotline sounds familiar, it may be because *La Jetée* was the admitted inspiration for the screenwriters of Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys*.

10 I forgot to add one "important" point. *La Jetée* is made up entirely of stills. Except, that is, for one brief shot, in which there is faint and languorous movement. It is quite in order to wax rapturous about this shot as one of the most blissful and astonishing moments in cinema, although...

11 Kingsley Amis thought that *La Jetée* was a load of pretentious froggy hogwash. *Chacun a son mauvais goût*.

12 (a) What is it about Marker and cats? I don't know, but they're everywhere. Apart from the plump red one, there are the dozens of Japanese porcelain money-cats in *Sans Soleil*, the moggie carried around by a young Parisienne in *From Chris to Christo* (1985), and I just noticed that *La Jetée*'s love scenes include some stuffed cats in (what looks like) Paris's Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle. *Chat écoutant la musique* (1985) consists of nothing more than shots of Marker's beloved puss, Guillaume-Egypte, lying across a piano keyboard and listening to "Pajaro triste" by Frederic Mompou, it is one of the very few films by Marker likely to draw the response "That's nice, dear", from your Auntie Mavis.

(b) He also has a thing about owls, but that's another story.

13 One implication of Marker's work - and one reason why he is "important" - is its profoundly democratic suggestion: you could do this yourself. (It would help, of course, to have a mind as capacious, inquisitive, witty and engaged as Marker's.) In recent years, countless people - from those Bosnian refugees and their reworked images from CNN to the BBC's legions of video diarists - have unwittingly been following Marker's lead. Nor does he show any sign of slackening his pace.

"It's amazing," says Ingrid Swenson, "he's 78 years old now and he's busy experimenting with what you can do on CD-Rom..." The critic David Thomson once described Marker as "a man of the 22nd and of the 18th centuries". In 101 years' time, maybe we'll start to catch up with him. Check it out.

Silent Movie: till 13 June at Beaconsfield, Newport Street, London SE11: 0171-582 6465/439 1121