

Chris Marker. *Early Film Writings*, edited by Steven Ungar. Translated by Sally Shafto, U of Minnesota P, 2024. lxix + 199 pp.

French filmmaker Chris Marker is perhaps best known for genre-bending films like *La Jetée* and collaborations with Alain Resnais including *Toute la mémoire du monde*. He is also, suggests editor Steven Ungar in the introduction to this new collection of Marker's earlier writings on the craft, reception, and politics of cinema, worth consideration as a film critic and theorist. Collected for the first time in English translation by Sally Shafto, these twenty essays spanning Marker's early career (1948 to 1955) bring his criticism and theory to a broader audience. The essays reveal Marker's often overlooked insight into the radical transformation of French and international cinema.

Steven Ungar's lengthy introduction is as valuable a text as Marker's own writing. The editor considers Marker's biography and presents a richly researched sketch of the director's filmography. Ungar is especially thoughtful in his deep reading of the essays, establishing a foundation for the essays that reveal their contexts and discover throughlines that connect the otherwise stand-alone pieces. Of note is Ungar's attention to Marker's shift from writing about medium specificity, history, and style, to writing about film as a sociopolitical exercise. Ungar emphasizes throughout this introduction an intentional and practiced link between the filmmaker's politics and his film criticism. Marker's time writing for communist-affiliated publications *Peuple et culture* ('People and Culture') and *Travail et culture* ('Work and Culture') are described by Ungar as joyous, an experience like living May '68 every day. The filmmaker was interested in the Mexican liberationist movements and in German cinema's transition through the politics and trauma of the World Wars. Ungar gives the readers the key posts that support Marker's relevance in the discussion of historical and contemporary film criticism and theory; his attention to who makes and watches cinema is as crucial as his insights into how it is made and viewed.

As the reader moves from Ungar's introduction to Marker's essays, the filmmaker's appreciation for the mass' reception, reading, and celebration of these films is notable. In "Corneille at the Movies," for example, Marker lauds the insight of a group of young women, students at Lycée de Sèvres, who, as a class project, worked with the filmmaker adapt *Horace*. Ungar's introduction comes back into play, reminding us of Marker's involvement with workers' movements and publications; the reader recognizes here, perhaps, Marker's populist politics,

valuing the opinion of these young women equally to, if not more than, that of established, elite critics—in fact, evidence exists throughout these essays of a certain disgust towards the latter. He later dedicates an entire essay to Marie-Thérèse Poncet's groundbreaking dissertation written at the Sorbonne. Marker's acknowledgment and embrace of these female scholars is significant considering the dominance of male filmmakers, scholars, and theorists in cinema throughout the 20th century. The reader is reminded throughout that Marker's criticism, like his filmmaking, was hands-on and populated by people outside of the elite spheres of cinema and film criticism.

In the introduction, there is something encyclopedic about Ungar's approach to film that can become dizzying. He considers webs of films with an urgency that suggests a need to have in one's hands every morsel of the bibliography from which Marker draws before sitting down to his writings. As the reader explores Marker's essays themselves, however, Unger's completionist approach comes to make some kind of sense: It's borrowed, consciously or not, from Marker himself. At the opening of "One Hundred Masterpieces of Film"—the title itself a warning of the coming litany of references—Marker imagines a reader who reads haphazardly, consuming Gide without Montaigne or Sartre without Stendhal. Marker warns of the dangers faced by the autodidact who attempts to digest literature without the proper knowledge of history and its genealogy. This reader is found, he warns us, throughout contemporary movie theaters. Thus, one of the defining themes of these essays is the necessity for connection—between films, between filmmakers, and between the social and political nodes that frame them. This tendency becomes almost funny in Marker's essays on animation, where instead of Paul Verhoeven, Laurence Olivier, and John Houston, these lists include Betty Boop, Popeye, and Tom and Jerry. He chastises himself for having written about animation but having failed to cite *Gerald McBoing*. He even falls into this habit when focusing wholly on one film; his short essay on *The Passion of Joan of Arc* references six other movies (and a play) in one paragraph.

Though both the introduction and Marker's essays are strongest when they deal in themes rather than in list and numbers, their encyclopedic nature is not simply pedantry. Whether this is successful depends largely on the reader. Those who come to this collection with their own comprehensive catalog of film history are rewarded with an almost-exhaustive well of examples, counterexamples, and corollaries. Approaching the essays without that background, one might effectively

drown in the referentiality or else may come out the other side with a robust syllabus to add to a “To Watch” list.

This book represents not only an archival achievement in Marker’s film criticism and theory, and Ungar’s efforts to bring the essays together for the first time, but significantly, a remarkable work of translation. Shafto offers the readers a confident rendering of Marker’s writing. Her introduction highlights the uniqueness of Marker’s voice—his long paragraphs and sentences, his use of English words, and his asides, ellipses, and references, for example. From the first pages, Marker’s wit and clarity are propulsive, thanks entirely to Shafto’s careful and reverent work with the translation. By offering these essays in English and in collection, Ungar and Shafto undertake the important project of ushering Marker into the conversation among film theorists like Bazin and Eisenstein. This book encourages scholars to not only think about Marker’s films but also to think with Marker himself.

Jason C Grant
independent scholar