Non-Linear Narrative As a Form of Political Action: Viewing Chris Marker’s Film Sans Soleil

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by Dr. Kia Lindroos

Dept. of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
Current address:
41 Milford Gardens. Edgware, Middlesex HA8 6EY. UK
Email: kialind@globalnet.co.uk
In this essay, I shall discuss the cinematic narrative and its politics through three approaches. The first part characterises chosen historical aspects of the ‘politics of cinema’ in outlining a background for discussion on politics and film. In the beginning, I also present aspects of cinematic narrative through its connections to and differences from the textual narration. In the contemporary cultural analysis, it is often stressed, how the vision is an important part in forming knowledge of our immediate surroundings and history. Here, the knowledge can be basically understood as being formed in narrative ways, although the forms of how narrative is used for instance in cinema, literature, history, political theory or journalism, may differ by their representation and content. The way in which narrativity is used in cinema, is interpreted here as including a potential element of political action.

The second approach introduces an example of Chris Marker’s cinema and as such is it a movement towards a ‘non-linear’ (and experimental) narrative. Marker is a French new wave film director who mainly makes political documentary. I shall discuss here his film Sans Soleil (1983) that is a known example in film theory, but less known in commercial cinema. Generally, Marker’s films could be described simultaneously as philosophy, as they deal with the events of time, memory and history and the appearance and disappearance of these issues in everyday world. In addition, Marker experiments with ‘storytelling’ in forms of films essays or self-portraits. I shall elaborate parts of Marker’s film by discussing the ways in which he actualises the ‘politics’ of narrative both through historical documentation and through continuity and disruption of his ‘documents’.

Thirdly, the philosophical, political or aesthetic discussion since roughly the 1980’s has repeated the issue of the crisis of narratives. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard refers to the incredulity toward the metanarratives of various issues starting from politics and philosophy. This critique is focused on the rupture of an eschatological or teleological form of storytelling; however, it is not the first rupture noticed, as I refer to Benjamin’s cultural diagnostic in the beginning of this essay. Moreover, as I shall claim, the claims concerning crisis of narratives open a discussion of the temporality of narratives. For instance, Chris Marker does not only thematize the issues of political and collective memory, but he also deals with the elements of forgetting, and he illustrates these components as ruptures in narrative proceeding. This creates an alternative form of political discourse, as it includes the elements of accidental and interruption within the narrativity itself. As such, it makes apparent how we can illustrate the differences within a single narration, without posing the limits of inside/outside (Self or the Other) as contrasting one (‘meta’) narrative. This might lead to rethinking of narrative-historical form, as the development of the 20th century cinema is an example of transformed perception of a single narrative towards heterogeneity of visual and textual expression.
1. The first films: Destruction of Experience?

Have we lost the art of storytelling by the emergence of new narrative mediums during this century, such as media and multi-media? Or have we rather gained new possibilities of narration? In discussing the cultural history of the 19th century, Walter Benjamin diagnostized the emergence of the modern novel as a sign of the poverty of experience (Erfahrungsarmut). For him, the writing and reading practices of a novel appeared as a contrast to traditional (oral) storytelling, mainly, because the aesthetic experience by authors and readers of the novels was now happening in their ‘private chambers’. The traditional form of storytelling was a narrative event, in which audience and storyteller shared for instance a room or gathered around the bonfire. In this physical as much as mental gathering, the experiences of former generations were shared and passed further. Especially in the article on the Russian author Nikolai Lesskow, Benjamin claimed that during the course of modernity, the art of narration (Kunst des Erzäh lens) was in the process of coming to its end. This was connected to the argument that the experience itself is in the process of destruction.

The scattering of the traditional form of storytelling was soon accompanied by the birth of cinema. As one consequence of the birth of modern novel was an individualisation of experience, the collective gathering of people to share various fictional or nonfictional ‘stories’ was now happening in the cinema. However, the stories were presented on the screen, which distracted the physical closeness between storyteller and his or her audience. The closeness was replaced by the technical reproduction, which added a psychological and also potentially manipulative impact on the viewers. Since the film technique implies the possibility of arranging and rearranging the ‘original’ events, it can also manipulate our ideas of for instance history and present, and shape the image of the future times. In Benjamin’s work, the issues of history and destruction of experience were also theoretically connected, as he claimed that the historiography of the previous century was coming to its crisis during aesthetic and political modernity.

Especially the possibility to technically destroy and reconstruct a temporal narration was, for Benjamin, an important reason why cinema introduced such a revolutionary change in perception and artistic production. More accurately, it implied a new form of temporal and spatial mode of experience. This art of experience was possibly to replace the traditional form of aesthetic experience that was already scattering during the early modernity. However, the cinematic experience was in danger to remain only powerful in creating shock-effects which would have lead into producing mainly modern disconnected forms of experience (Erlebnis). The meaning of the coherent sharing of

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1 See Benjamin, 1933c: 214; 1936b: 439, 440. The similar idea concerning destruction of experiences is also discussed in Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire (1939).

2 In the Theses on the Concept of History (Benjamin 1940), Benjamin criticized mainly German Historismus and its identifying aspect of causal and linear presentation of history.

3 In Erlebnis, the unity of the experience and, in the Proustian sense, its temporal durability and compositional integrity are destroyed. This idea also goes back to the difference between remembrance (Erinnerung) and memory (Gedächtnis), in which Benjamin follows the German psychologist Theodor Reik. The differences between the concepts lie in that the
experiences comes back to the importance of the tradition of oral narration, which brings the durability of experiences forth in the physical and present figure of the narrator. This shows, however, how Benjamin’s idea of the poverty of experience is dualistic. On the one hand, it searches for the possibility of creating a new perspective on temporal and historical form of aesthetic or political experience, and on the other hand, Benjamin describes with a certain nostalgic attitude, how the narrativity in oral tradition has transformed into pure exchange of information, which implies the degeneration of experiences.

Following the ways in which German and Soviet interwar cinema presented political “stories”, Benjamin suggested that cinema has as an exemplary political power in regaining a collective experience. Yet, the danger of cinema was embedded in the fact how its manipulative aspects were partly disguised in its entertaining form. Especially the revolutionary and pro proletarian ideas of the Soviet Cinema were successfully spread out in Soviet Union and partly also, in Germany. Benjamin comes so far to claim that without cinematic presentation, the socialist ideology would not have had that important role in the societies as it had. In the context of the Soviets, Benjamin’s notion on the politics of cinema, which could be described through how we ‘see’ our everyday surroundings in a different way than in the natural perception is accurate. Benjamin calls this shift as a ‘prismatic perception’, as our perspective to surroundings change after they are reflected via camera. The political meaning of this relates to the way in which cinematic images are considered to emancipate us from the immediate perception and also reveal aspects that earlier have escaped our perception in this historical context, the transformation form the immediate perception and the alienating aspect to the natural perception is essentially manifested, for instance, in experimental and avant-garde art of the 1920’s and the 1930’s. During that time, Dadaists, Surrealist or Futurist painting, photography and cinema turned the view towards new possibilities of artistic production in the technique of montage. Many of the artists, such as Alexander Rodtchenko, El Lissitzky or John Heartfield, connected the visual art also to the historical-political situation and its critique. The contrast to the earlier century became especially after the phenomenon of l’art pour l’art, in which (roughly around the middle of the 19th century), the bourgeois writers and artists had withdrawn themselves from political and social engagements. In the avant-garde, the idea of moral conviction and aesthetic authority of the ‘bourgeois’ conception of art clearly broke down.

The important example of the political film is, as mentioned, the Soviet Cinema. The Russian constructivist films of the 1920’s documented a “new vision”, or a montage and dialectics of seeing in an attempt to describe the proletarian vision. One of its main purposes was the changed (and

_Gedächtnis_ is considered to be protecting the memories, and the _Erinnerung_ is aimed at destroying them (Benjamin 1939: 612).

4 _Zur politische Bedeutung des Films. Nie wäre der Sozialismus in die Welt getreten, hätte man die Arbeiterschaft nur einfach bessere Ordnung der Dinge begeistern wollen...Zu keinem, wenn auch noch so utopische Zeitpunkte, wird man die Massen für eine höhere Kunst sondern immer nur für eine gewinnen, die ihnen näher ist. Und die Schwierigkeit, die besteht gerade darin, die so zu gestalten, daß man mit dem besten Gewissen behaupten könne, die sei eine höhere. Dies wird nun für fast nichts von dem gelingen, was die Avantgarde des Bürgertums propagiert_ (Benjamin 1983: 499-500).

5 Benjamin 1927: 752.
‘revolutionary’) perspective, although the tools of creating this vision, such as the ideas of dialectics, montage and constructivism, varied among the Soviet directors (e.g. Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, Schub or Vertov). Here, the provocation of the aesthetic subject was not only to identify with the moving image, but also to see the everyday surrounding differently than before. This was a distinguishing factor between Russian and Hollywood-films, since the Hollywood cinema concentrated in offering fiction and illusions.

The third types of the early political films are the German films of the 1930s. In Germany, the topic of the absolute authority was implied in the ideological content of the films. This was apparent especially in the “national movies”, in which the sense of architecture, the rhythm of cutting and movement towards a ‘unified nation’ found a use in the skilful films of Leni Riefenstahl, for instance in *Triumph des Willens* (1935) or *Olympia* (1938). In thinking of the ideas of landscape and their symbolism especially in fascist aesthetics, the unique and ‘auratic’ charisma of nature signifies an unattainable, although omnipresent idea of a unified nation. The nation creates a monumental cult or ritual, which is strengthened by and manifested in military forces, historical days of celebration, and the cult of heroes and the memorial dates of the victims of wars. This created an effective contradiction to German Realism and Expressionist cinema, in which, for instance, the films of G.W. Pabst, W.J.T Murnau and Ernö Metzner, were characterised by feelings of chaos, destruction and obsession.

The interwar European cinema also developed first examples of gender films. Especially in the German expressionism, as contrary to the Hollywood cinema, the women, such as Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich, were presented as able to take a masculine role. These films also included underlying lesbian issues that probably escaped the censorship because of the inability of the censors to code the visual symbolic. These images of women have transformed to more or less conscious feminist films in the contemporary, in which the essential part of an analysis in not only that of linear narrativity but also the way how the female images are represented in the cinematic narration.

Benjamin, with his rather optimistic idea of the political and revolutionary potentiality of the cinema, stood in opposition to Adorno and Horkheimer, who, after the II WW, published a critique of mass culture and ‘cultural industry’ in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. The leaders of the Frankfurt School were especially sceptical about the reproduction of art, which they thought would lead to the commodification of art. The ‘cultural industry’, which roughly included films, radio and magazines, “would make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part”. For them, this unified system was in a Nietzschean sense, stylised barbary. This claim of commodification is roughly the fifth way to describe the politicisation of film; however, here it refers mainly to the Hollywood cinema. In the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, the technology was understood as conspiring against the coherency of

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6 More on the history of fascism in its filmic representation e.g. in Anton Kaes 1989. The interesting director preceeding Riefenstahl was Fritz Lang, whose aesthetic and ‘architectural’ expression was trasferred into ideological purposes by Riefenstahl.

7 Especially the director Josef von Sternberger created a new gender figure from Marlene Dietrich in *Blue Angel* or *Morocco*.

8 The underlaying lesbian or gay issues developed further in the *film noir* 1940 and 1950, on the study e.g. Dyer 1993.
a narrative history, and technology was considered to lead towards a society, which would become alienated from itself. The illusionary nature of the technology in mass culture (popular music and cinema) lead to the strengthening of capitalist ideology, and technological rationale was presented as becoming the rationale of the domination itself. This would mean that also the narrative of the cinema, as being tied to the capitalist production would reproduce the capitalist narrative, although in sublime ways. Through this view, the critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, although it was expressed in quite radical manner, had an important message to ask, how does the cinema legitimate and support any state-narrative. More currently raised issue that is connected to this critique is, how the film-policy functions in selection and censorship inside of the film-industry.

Nowadays, the politics of film or a ‘political film’ is not easily definable. It includes for instance the issues dealt with the third world documentaries, ‘third cinema’, films discussing the situation of the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe, commercial films dealing with political-historical issues, such as Schindler’s list, The Deer Hunter, or Apocalypse Now and explicitly ideological, such as Marxist cinema. Currently, the racial issues that reached the commercial level were dealt in Spike Lee’s films, such as Jungle Fever or Do the Right Thing and the feminist issues have spread around independent cinemas. For instance Margarethe von Trotta directed feminist films that gathered a large audience (Rosa Luxemburg, Three Sisters). The politics means also the way in which the cinema implies critique and alternative view to the reality presented in other means.

The social, historical and political reality, which political or historical films intend to ‘show’, is in constant transformation process. As the Hollywood pioneer, D.W. Griffith in his Birth of Nations, aimed at showing the cinema-audience ‘what actually happened’ in the American Civil War, this attempted to open the viewers a ‘window of reality’. It is obvious, however, that the window presented a racist narration of the Civil War. Now, the modern cinema is, as for instance Deleuze shows in his Cinema-books, a world in itself. In this sense, the politics of the films cannot be ‘defined’ as anything constant or through the ways in which the film relates to the reality, but it can rather be an aspect of film-making and film-perception itself. Most films do not even attempt to show ‘real images’ of ‘real life’, since even documentary films create their own image of ‘the world’, selected by the filmmakers. The additional possibility to imply politics in film is in its technique. In this sense it relates to the narration of the history, as it shows that besides one view, there are the views of marginal, forgotten, non-documented or ignored aspects.

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10 I do not go into the issue of cultural or film policy in this presentation. More on the subject, see esp. Moran 1996.
2. The Cinematic Narrative

Before introducing my example, I shall shortly discuss the issue of a film narrative. Yet firstly, we could question, what can be understood with a narrative? Regarding to its temporal form, we might take the suggestion that narrative involves “the linear organisation of events, selected and arranged in a particular order"\(^{12}\). This approach is supported also by several other definitions of narrative, such as “narrative is opposed to atemporal laws that depict what is, whether past or future“ or “the distinguishing feature of narrative is its linear organisation of events into a story"\(^{13}\). Also, the cinematic narrative comes close to these approaches, although it resists, as for instance Seymour Chatman notices, the language-centred notions of the narrator\(^{14}\). Edward Branigan’s idea is that a filmic narrative is “a perceptual activity that organises data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience”\(^{15}\). Narrative is a way of organising spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle and end.

Temporality and its course are essential features in the film narrative, since they hold the outer and inner ‘levels’ of narrative together. According to the classical theory of Arnheim, in film every object that is reproduced appears simultaneously in two different frames of reference, namely in the 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional, and one identical object fulfils two different functions in the two contexts\(^{16}\). Also in Branigan’s theory, the narrative in film rests in the ability to create a 3-

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13 These examples are picked up from the handout distributed for this conference. (Martin 1986: 187; Cohan and Shires Telling stories. A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction 1988: 52).
15 Branigan 1992: 3.
dimensional world out of a two-dimensional wash of dark and light. Graphics on the screen-size, colour, angle, line, shape etc., must be transferred into an array of solid objects, and a texture of noise must be transferred into speech, music and sounds\textsuperscript{17}.

Regarding the spatial and temporal differences inside the film ‘story’, the film theory distinguishes between diegetic and non-diegetic worlds. The diegetic world is the one that surrounds a character, it presents events that occur in particular manner, in a certain sequence and time span. This world has a certain set of laws, which appears clearly to the viewer, however, it also contains non-visible elements of this world, like other persons assumed to be there but not explicitly presented as film figures. The diegetic world also extends beyond what is seen in a specific shot and beyond even what is seen in the entire film: it is an implied spatial, temporal and causal system of a character. The nondiegetic elements are for instance those addressed to the spectator. Like the film music, they are elements about the diegetic world of a character and these are intended to aid the spectator in organising the events and the specific film world\textsuperscript{18}. On the other hand, this nondiegetic world can also be considered as not only supporting the story, but simultaneously adding another layer in the film. This is the case for instance in David Lynch’s films, in which the music does not only create a specific mood, but it includes references to other films and also to the music history. Generally, the spectator’s organisation of information into diegetic and nondiegetic story worlds is a critical step in his or her comprehension of a film narrative and in understanding the possible relationship between the story events and our everyday world.

As in literature, the film includes one or several authors. The narrative is also constructed during the viewing process. According to Roland Barthes, :”the one who speaks (in narrative) is not the one who writes (in real life) and the one who writes is not the one who is”\textsuperscript{19}. As we have learned in the narrative theory, there usually is a difference between the explicit and implicit narration. In cinema, the difference is obvious, since the finalised film is a co-operation of various individuals, who add their own layers and especially ‘authorships’ to the product. The film also creates an ‘implied author’. For instance Christian Metz described the ‘implied author’ in the following way:

\begin{quote}
“The impression that someone is speaking (in narrative) is bound not to the empirical presence of a definite, known or knowable speaker but to a listener’s spontaneous perception of the linguistic nature of the object...the spectator (of a narrative film) perceives images which have obviously been selected (they could have been other images) and arranged (they could have been different). In a sense he is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages but some ‘master of ceremonies’...who (...) is first and foremost the film itself as a linguistic object...(Metz 1974: 20-21).
\end{quote}

With the ‘implied author’, Metz isolates the aspect of our narrative comprehension, which is not reducible to what a biographical author says or intends to accomplish with a film. As it seems, with the discussion of authorship in cinema, the issue also comes close to the narratology in other genres,

\textsuperscript{17} Branigan 1992: 33.
\textsuperscript{19} Barthes 1975: 261.
such as drama and literature. Yet, the elementary difference between these, that for my concern is not possible to be solved, is the gap between the visual and verbal representation.

Especially semiotic attempts have been made to bridge the gap between visual and verbal. For instance the raise of linguistic and semiotic approaches encouraged film theorists, such as Christian Metz, to apply linguistic principles to the study of a film. Yet, the semiotics of film is not to be deciphered only as another ‘language’, since the cinematic ‘language’ is a compilation of mediums, of which textual and verbal activity are only one part. For instance Bordwell has criticised Metz’s semiotic approach, and he argues that film has no agency corresponding to narrator and that film narrative is best considered as a kind of work performed by the spectator. Bordwell’s merit here is, for my concern, that he strongly emphasises the spectator’s activity in ‘constructing’ – and actually actively finalising – the film’s narration in the event of perception\textsuperscript{20}. Bordwell actually rejects the whole idea of a narrator being inherent in film, and he claims for film narration, in which the spectator’s role is as important as the filmmakers is. Also Chatman comes closer to Bordwell, although he is not as extreme, in arguing, that the viewer actually reconstructs the narration in the viewing event. He distinguishes, in the case of films as for novels, between the presenter of the story, the narrator and the inventor of the story and the discourse. In this, he gives only minor importance to the figure of the ‘implied author’\textsuperscript{21}.

The temporality, although it is expressed in different ways is an another common issue to the narrative of cinema or textual narratives. Cinema combines singular events in their spatial and temporal surroundings, and at the same time it shows the historical events and their variation. Following the film, the spectator encounters at least two major frames of reference. These are firstly the space-time of a screen and secondly, the space-time of a ‘story’ world. The causality on a screen involves patterns of a purely visual, and the events on screen might not apparently connect to each other. Light and sound create two fundamental systems of space, time and causal interaction and one of the tasks of the narrative is to reconcile between these systems\textsuperscript{22}. This ‘reconciliation’ of events usually happens in so called classical cinema (and ‘classical form of narration), such as in Gone with the Wind, Casablanca, or Ben Hur which are also examples of epic or historical films. In classic cinema, the long follow of events is brought to a closure. Here, film narrative is a way of comprehending space, time and causality in the film, and narrative film is a principle by which for instance historical information is converted from the frame of the screen into a diegesis.

The temporal aspect is embedded for instance in the technical, semiotic, narrative or diegetic levels of a film. Following the discourse of the film or the way in which the story is narrated, the film also has an ability to transfer or rearrange any temporal and spatial context of the events or the ‘story’ itself, as it implies the possibility of arranging and rearranging ‘original’ (or chronological) elements of which a film-story is made. It means, that as much as the film can present the events in their causal-logical

\textsuperscript{20}Bordwell 1988, cf. Chatman 124ff. Bordwell draws from the Russian formalists, and their distinction between \textit{fabula} (chronological cause-effect – chain of events), \textit{syuzhet} (arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film, its ‘discourse’) and style – approaching the narratologists distinction between story, discourse and actualization. See further Bordwell 1988: e.g.21-25; 49-51.

\textsuperscript{21}Chatman 1990: 133.

\textsuperscript{22}Cf. Branigan 1992: 34.
connections, the film discourse can confuse this causality. As such, it can also manipulate our ideas of for instance history, present and future times and events. The science fiction films (as well as the literature) have shaped our images and expectations of the future words as much as historical films have re-narrated the past. The ways in which the images are connected to each other or how they proceed, can be understood as supporting or distracting the temporal understanding of the viewer.

As we know, the screen time is able to grasp or rather, present our images of years or even hundreds of years towards our future or past. In the viewing of a film, we put together these temporal leaps and link them to the narrative. The screen time can extend the ‘real instant of time’ for instance in slow motion. The famous example of this is the Odessa step massacre sequence from Eisenstein’s *Panzership Potemkin*. The scene of the massacre creates an impression as if it would last ‘an eternity’, has been repeated and transformed in other films in the course of the film history. On the other hand, we can view a recurrence of the same time like in Wim Wenders’s *Night on Earth*, which describes the recurrence of one hour in various spaces on earth. Altogether, the technological apparatus of the film makes it a medium par excellence for any ‘politics of time’, in which the linearity of narration, whether it concerns fiction, history or social conditions, is possible to edit, interrupt and manipulate. This is often used in the modern narrative technique; such as in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Two or three thing I know about her* (1966). The cuts, overlapping sound and the fragmentary nature of the film are documented in a story, a narrative about “her”, which is obviously only one of the many possible narratives. This means, that besides the presented version, there exist other, countless stories of the same events.

However, what happens, when we confront experimental or so-called ‘(post) modern’ films like Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, in which the linear sequence of events is not organised, or it appears as disorganised without a certain beginning, middle and end? This disruption of events causes confusion, surprise, and involving our own thinking activity in relating the events to each other. In film, such as in Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil*, the events are selected and arranged in an order, which does not seem to follow any external or causal-linear logic. The story is neither a teleological nor a continuous one, which means that the temporality of narration creates a puzzle. There exists a textual narration the film, which is presented by a woman’s voice-over that presents fragments from letters, written by an unseen traveller. In a way, the single images create their own narrative events, as if they would be part of larger diegesis, that of a human life. Here, the story still has a beginning, middle and an end, although these parts do not follow each other chrono-logically.

II

1. Chris Marker

Chris Marker is a French, ‘independent’ filmmaker. One could characterise him as a film director and screenwriter, a novelist, poet, and journalist, which means that he acts in multiple way also as an ‘author’ of the films. Marker formed the SLON film co-operative (*Société pour le lancement des oeuvres nouvelles*, 1967) which is one of the leading political film co-operatives still operating in France. At the 1961 Berlin Festival, he was the recipient of the Golden Bear for his film *Description d’un combat*, and he also received the International Critics Prize for *Le Joli Mai* in 1963. After the war, Marker joined the staff of *Esprit* journal, where he wrote political commentaries, poems, articles
and film reviews. He formed the so called Left Bank Group of New Wave French directors together
with director Alain Resnais, novelist Jean Cayrol and co-editor Henri Colpi, all of whom often
contributed to each others films.

Marker’s films are a form of personal essays, combined with the genre of documentaries. His cinema
has been characterised as an ‘essay film’, which makes it a cinematic genre that also has a strong
connection to the literature. As Marker began his carrier by writing poems, essays and translations
these elements can still be found in his films. His films contain verbal and visual imaginary with
philosophical speculation and erudition, and commentaries that he creates to accompany the narration
of the film-images come close to streams of consciousness. The poetry of the text combines with
rather subjective seeing and hearing experiences. According to the critic David Thompson, Marker’s
work makes no attempt to be cinematic or literary; it is based, instead, on the assumption that “a
cultivated man should express himself in words or in film”. In this sense, his films are in the
crossroads of literature and cinema, however, creating an interesting example in both of these genres.

Marker’s philosophical background is apparent in many of his films, and it especially draws from the
philosophy of memory and time, which are central issues in works by Henri Bergson or Marcel Proust,
and in the **nouveau roman**. The issues of memory also combine Marker’s work to other films dealing
with specific view on temporality, especially to Hitchcock’s **Vertigo** or Resnais’ **Je t’aime je t’aime**.
The **cinema vérité** has also inspired Marker’s film, due to its ‘documentary’ approach. However, his
inspirations draw from the political film in Russia, as much as he draws from the French new wave. In
the late 1970’s Marker travelled to Japan, a trip that resulted in the photo-films **Les depays** and **Sans
Soleil**.

By Marker, the montage of seeing is already included in his film-narrative. As Dziga Vertov presented
the filmic material that consciously presented the ‘reality’ as transformed through the ‘montage of
seeing’ or ‘concentrated seeing’, he opened the avant-garde field of documentary filmmaking. In this
sense, the idea of montage is an example of gathering and perceiving the moments of the ‘present
time’ of the filming, communicating with every present time of viewing. The montage enters into the
filming, in the intervals occupying with the camera-eye, and it comes after the filming, in the editing-
room and in the audience, who compare life and film. However, this implies, that the presentation,
as immediate as it intends to be, remains restricted by the choice of the technique. Instead of finalising
the montage-technique for instance in **Sans Soleil**, Marker leaves spaces between different scenes

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23 For instance, Marker scripted *Les statues meurent aussi* with Resnais. This film was made in 1953, but it was banned
for a decade. Recently, Marker has made portraits and documents on, for instance Akira Kurasawa, Christo, Tarkowsky
and Simone Signoret. His latest film is *Le Tombeux d’Alexandre (The Last Bolshevik*, 1993), that was prompted by
Alexander Medvedkin’s death.

24 *Qu’est-ce qu’une Madelaine?* 1997:110.


partly open as dark/black spaces. All parts of the film are not technically finalised, which means that it can begin always anew, and it remains open for possible restructuring.

Sans Soleil reached a broader audience than any of Marker’s previous films and it received the British Film Institute award in 1983. Although it plays with the juxtaposing image and commentary, the images do not always illustrate the text, nor does the text comment support the images; one has to take them in ‘disorder’. This confuses the logic of linearity. Sans Soleil includes also other intercuts, such as stills from Hitchcock’s Vertigo and more or less explicit quotations from other films, also from Marker’s own work. Especially the scenes from Vertigo are those, that are interesting for studying the dislinearity, memory and the narrativity of the film, since for Marker, the Vertigo is the only film that is capable of portraying impossible memory, insane memory. Here, the Vertigo represents the issue of vague remembering, as it also portrays the sphere of the forgotten that remains in the background of the active memory.

2. Sans Soleil (Sunless)27

Marker’s stories illustrate the simultaneity and difference of African, European and Asian times28. Actually, we might ‘remember’ Hiroshima, Iceland or Guinea-Bissau without having experienced them, as we newer saw them presented as we see the spaces and the events represented here. Some might want to argue, that the proceeding of Marker’s stories does not happen in a narrative manner but rather, as a description. Without going to the depths of this discussion, I regard Marker’s film as an example of a dislinear narrative. Despite the puzzling temporality of the film, the images and narrator’s message do form a ‘story of events’ from its beginning to the end.

28 About the differences between description and narrative, see e.g. Chatman 1990: 2nd Ch.
Sans Soleil is a collection of memories that are narrated by a Woman (Alexandra Stewart). The geographic places described in the film vary for instance from Africa to Ile de France, Iceland, Guinea-Bissau or Japan. With some exceptions, Marker shows a non-European space commented by and to a European viewer. At the same time however, the films ‘happens’ in none of these places, since it only shows places of memories, described by Marker’s camera and script. We could assume that the traveller is Marker himself, whose experiences are documented in the forms of the letters and images. Yet, there are no personal notions that could help to trace the identity of the letter writer, nor is there any closure of the story that would explain why we come to view these images. The viewer is set in a triangle between the images, the invisible letter-writer and the woman’s voice-over.

The beginning 10 minutes of Sans Soleil is a montage that combines the epigraph from T.S. Eliot’s Ash Wednesday a shot of three children on a road in Iceland in 1965, a sequence of a train in Hikkaido, shots of women on the Bissagos Islands of West Africa, a prayer for the soul of a lost can in an animal cemetery near Tokyo, a dog in a deserted beach and a bar in Tokyo. This beginning montage creates a kind of a mystery, which is the starting sequence that is referred to and returned to in the course of the film. There is not only one ‘diegetic zero’, which means the commonly used stopping of film time into a ‘freeze-frame’ before the actual story time begins. Instead, there are many beginnings of stories that are almost simultaneously documented, as if each of them would characterise the following course of the film. This implies that actually there are many narratives included in the film, and the combining subject of these stories is the camera. The camera wanders among the crowds as well as through the silent and deserted places, documenting the vision like a sole traveller who wants to share his or her experiences with a larger audience.

There is no clear protagonist of the film, since it deals with thoughts, experiences, memories and vision of invented “Sandor Krasna”. As mentioned, Sans Soleil seems to be a part of Marker’s visual

29 See also Rafferty’s article in Imagining reality 1997: 242.
and textual autobiography, yet, the images are not only subjective (memories), they also are commented as documentaries and some of them are interpreted in their social and political contexts. Altogether, the film images form a constellation of travelogue, hand held shots, television images from horror to porno films, historical and critical documentary shots, including intercuts of crashing aeroplanes, and synchronised images of something that might be a revolution. In side sentences marker brings forth the issues of colonialism, political protests or consequences of industrial capitalism.

The logic of diegesis is difficult to decipher, at least, when the film is viewed for the first time. The places described show us plurality and diversity of events without an obvious order between them. There is not hierarchy between the memories and the ‘real’ events, between associations and real consequence of happenings. The multiplicity of the temporal fragments becomes soon overwhelming for the viewer; Marker’s images do tell a story, but if one wishes to grasp the content only into one narrative, he or she confronts problems. The technique of narration (or narrations) is rather horizontal and interlapping than proceeding vertically. Each sequence of images seem to contain an access to another, independent story that accidentally comes together with other stories of the film, confronted by a sole traveller.

I would claim that this kind of presentation of images might actually expand the idea of storytelling. This creates a challenge also to a broader discussion on narrativity and on the way in which different ideas and temporality of narration are dependent on the medium which presents the narrations. Here, dealing with the time span of around twenty years, Sans Soleil also opens the space of collective memory after the 1950’s. The cameraman presents mainly his memories but also references to the ideas of the ‘future’, as for instance the investigator from the year 4001 comes to view the images of desolation and poverty. The viewer’s task is to resolve the messages.

Since the images need an active reflection by the spectator, Marker’s film is one art of communication. This communication is the for which makes the film to connect and also differ from the more typical political argumentation, as it discovers a sphere, in which the collectively experienced images of history can lead to their individual interpretation. The people documented inhabit certain sovereignty of being, the relation to the life, ‘bare life’ (zoe) that is, according to Giorgio Agamben’s book, excluded in the Western political being. The film shows the difference between bare life and the politics that is a field of power that, in wars, guerrilla attacks or rebellions have left its traces to this life. People are not, as we could follow Homi Bhabha’s notion, neither the beginning nor the end of national narratives. Rather, they represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population.

Another layer of remembering, that we experience here is ‘written’ on the faces of people. It is included in the gazes, as the seeing and being seen is an important and recurrent issue of the film. In most of the cases, a black woman is here an object of seeing, however, the object is not described

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32 Bhabha 1990b:297.
explicitly through a male gaze but through an interest of looking and returning the gaze. The people are described through a curiosity and interest that does not value but questions, how is their existence in relation to ‘ours’. The ‘life itself’ is, even though it is put on screen, not explicitly politicised spectacle, but the rituals and habits of people construct a cultural spectacle meaningful in itself.

The work in the film comes close to the work of historian as it reorganises the documented moments, and transfers them into the filmic format. Here, the documentation testifies something, if only that, that the events happened in front of the cameraman in certain times and places. However; it narrates about the history and about a contrast between the industrial nations and their former colonies. The question of how to represent historical time is here solved by the mere documentation, as the moments are documented as historical texts, images or memories themselves. The other layer of this history is created by the subjective commentary of the images. It illustrates what for instance Stephen Heath says: that every film is an effect of historical and social conditions of its activity of representing, and the terms of representing are proposed the historical present of any film.

According to Rafferty, Sans Soleil is a diary of a return. We return to the politics of history, but since the returning is done every time the films are viewed, it also includes the now at the viewing moment, the beginning of any history at a displaced and represented event. Recognising these moments as constellations of fragments, simultaneously produces an idea that the film might start a history of its own; the other history that is legitimated when it is documented. The retrospection does not follow, nor respect the presentation of the official ‘world history’. Nor it seeks the ‘causality’. The official history is shown from the point of view which is regarded as marginal and fragmentary. The politics of vision includes also interruptions and black spots as a part of the film discourse. These empty spaces can be those of forgetting, like a silence or a searching for a suitable image. They might also be spots of sunlessness as the film title advises. They also are interruptions in a narrative that make obvious the difference between visual and textual narration.

Consequently, Sans Soleil deals with the politics of remembering without excluding the spaces of forgetting. The remembrance touches areas that are not necessary experienced by the viewer him or herself, but form partly known, partly unknown connections, as the subjects are presented, at least for the Western viewer, in strange contexts. One example is the Kennedy puppet in the Tokyo storehouse, whose words “do not ask what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” turn to a small song, and the gazes of Asian people make the scene simultaneously so paradox, ironic and in a way, serious. Marker also shows the celebrations of the national days and he describes the remembrance of the II WW, as the experience of the nation who experienced the Hiroshima is somehow constantly present in the film. He shows pieces of the historical memory included in the calendar, yet this is a different calendar than the Western one: what does the prayer for the lost cat really mean? There is also a scene describing the Dondo-yaki, a Shinto blessing of objects that have previously been a part of a celebration. The blessing gives the objects a right of immortality, and then

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36 Cf. Branigan 1992: 211
they are consumed by fire. Is this the way we deal with our memories and the events of history? Bless them before forgetting.

Western spectators do not necessarily identify with these images; they are alienating any “true image” of the past and they bring forth a question about the factual history and its reappearance (and disappearance) in the third world. Regarding the temporal frame of the film, we might follow Paul Virilio’s distinction to two temporalities and two speeds of geopolitical time: of which one is absolute, the other relative. According to Virilio, the gap between developed and undeveloped countries being reinforced throughout five continents and leading to a radical divide between those who will live under the ‘real time’ empire essential to their economic activities at the heart of the virtual community of the world city (e.g. Marker’s ‘Tokyo’) and those, who will survive in the real space of the local towns (Marker’s Africa), the planetary wasteland that will bring together the only too real community of those who no longer have a job37. The metropolitan involves not so much concentration of population than the traditional metropolis, as the hyperconcentration of the ‘world-city’, the city to end all cities. In Marker’s Tokyo, this idea of a ‘world-city’ is already, although then years before Virilio’s analysis, apparent in the telenetwork and in the accumulation of temporalities, old and new, traditional and contemporary. The electric trains are like the veins of Tokyo; the metro is a ‘collective dream’ of this virtual city. The ‘have nots’, as arrogantly defined by the Western ‘haves’ are excluded from the virtual cities, and they are located in the ‘real space of local cities’, even more abandoned than those living today in the suburban wastelands38. However, do the gazes of the African women look unhappy as they present the zoe against the bios, bare life against the political existence?

Marker’s “displacement of politics” as it may be called here, is basically referring to decontextualising the events. This makes apparent the existence of ‘something else’, a story hidden behind the images. The attack to the Pearl Harbour, African guerrillas and the Kennedy puppet melt into a montage, which shows the political events in a discontinuous narrative that it at the same time irreel and real, implicitly present and only partly shown. The memory of it is embedded in the imaginary narrative. Since the shots do not last long, the story that they tell is constantly interrupted. It is as Marker would argue for the events, argue in a speeding rhythm,

III Politics of Narrative

Nowadays, the effect that cinema had in the beginning of this century, shortly described in the first chapter, is almost forgotten. The presentation of the ‘real’ events does not need cinematic narration at least in the sense practised by the Russian Agit-trains; the ubiquitous media takes care of the representation of immediate reality. Yet, also cinematic and visually produced knowledge is an essential part of enlarging our world-image. Although we hardly discuss any more, as Benjamin did, about the destruction of experience (or the destruction seems to be an essential condition of

38 Virilio 1997: 74.
postmodern theories), questions concerning the change of our perception are further raised in the post-war era of 3-D films, CinemaScope and digital image.

Paul Virilio uses the example of Michel Klier, and his film Der Riese (the Giant) in materialising the change of the function of the cameraman in the film. The film is a montage of images that are recorded by automatic surveillance camera in German cities, and their major public places. Through this example, we come to reclaim the “end of art”, this time by Klier himself, who claims this video to be “the end and the recapitulation” of his art. This is according to Virilio, because the visual subject has transferred to a technical effect, which forms a sort pancinema, which turns our most ordinary acts into movie action, into new visual material. This means a culmination of the progress of representational technologies, of their military, scientific and investigative instrumentalisation over the centuries. A similar idea is also included in Wim Wenders’ film The End of Violence that describes the control and destructing power of the camera above the city of LA. Here the city forms a pancinema, in which the ‘real’ people are actors and objects of control at the same time. The cinematic illusion is being merged and partly transplaced by the reality, which now seems to be more fascinating than the fictional images the studios have been producing throughout this century.

Consequently, the idea of the political power of cinema might still lay in its narrative ability to show ‘reality’ in a way that makes possible a space of critique. It means continuing the project of Vertov and Eisenstein, what also Benjamin named as the political power of the cinema: to see and to show the everyday differently – or perhaps more accurately - than in immediate perception. In this sense, the narration might be analysed following the similar principles as “reading” the narration as one form of political thinking. However, in this essay, I use the idea of the political in a narrative not in a form of ‘constructing’ or supporting political thought, but as expressing the accidental, confusing or provocative effect of the narrated story.

Already in the early commentaries of the effect of films, comes forth the question about the disruptions of the narrative event. For instance James Lastra notices, how the early films promoted “secondary” visual fields as fragmented accidental images. The challenge is here to arrange these potentially disturbing and subversive views, when compared to more acceptable “easy” narratives. According to Lastra, fragmenting an object, a person, or an action stresses the impression that the depicted scene had been snatched from the very flow of reality, the random act of “framing” implying a disrupted continuity with something “beyond” the representation. From my point of view, these fragments include the possibility not only to ‘explain’ reality or ‘theory’ as in the textual narration, but also to include space of critique into the explanation itself. As such, it attacks the homogeneous

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39 However, the first 3-D movies were presented in 1915 by Edwin Porter and William Waddel. This film described New York and New Jersey in non-narrative ways. Also Abel Gance shot a 3-D roll for “Napoléon” already in 1927, but did not use it. The first 3-D feature film was Fairall’s Power of Love, 1922.

40 Virilio 1995: 47. Klier won the Grand Prix 1984 at the second international Video Festival in Montbéliard.

41 Virilio 1995: 47.

42 Following the guidelines of Maureen Whitebrook, e.g. her reading elements of Liberalism in selected novels: Whitebrook 1995b.

time of social narratives. This is an aspect of argumentation within one narrative, which implies a possible provocation to question the legitimated forms of political narrations. A political film, approached from the point of disruption of the narrative, brings every moment in past time not only reproduced in front of our eyes, but also to the immediate visual confrontation with the present. This present re-narrates the events told as the historical and temporal situation constantly changes. The fragment in narrative reminds us, more effectively than a linear narration, that besides, beyond or parallel to this narrative, there exists another view, another story, told by other people and cultures. The provocation of the aesthetic subject is connected to the social critique, the remembrance of this possibility, the other realities and histories that exist simultaneously to the narrated one, is the moment that is crucial in political sense.

During the contemporary time, we hardly escape the notions of the discontinuity in various connections. The end of modernity was followed and also inspired, for instance, by Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition, through the discussion on the death of philosophical metanarratives. What was common to these narratives was that their temporal legitimisation was following the linearity of the historical ideas of Marxism, Communism or Liberalism. The goal was displaced into the future, following the idea of scientific or historical progress established especially during the 19th century. The future and its course began to be questioned, as the political problems connected to the narratives of historical progress, technical development and economic growth become visible for instance in pollution, ozone-depletion or new military and communicative technologies, as is outlined already in Beck’s Risk Society.

The crisis of metanarratives is a well-known idea and repeated in various forms since mid 1980’s. After The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard himself often returned to the question that all critique of metanarratives couldn’t be simply identified as ‘postmodern’. In Lyotard’s book The Inhuman, he characterises politics as a resistance to organism, military power, or the uncritical use of new technologies. This politics should be done in form of writing, thinking, literature and arts. Approaching this, we also need different conceptions of politics, and here the discussions of the narrativity in its different forms could inspire us to approach the difference. For instance, Lyotard supports the trust to human thought in itself, since “human though can distinguish the important from unimportant without doing exhaustive inventories of data and without testing the importance of data with respect to the goal pursued”. Since the concept of postmodern has became a repeated slogan, used also as referring to interpreting Marker’s Sans Soleil’s narrative technique, it has lost its original ‘power’. Here, I would like to turn not to the question of in form of postmodern politics, but in form of re-interpreting the politics not only with the means of human thought, but also with the vision?

The ‘reading’ - also the political interpretation – of a cinematic narrative implies that the viewer finds an active position in interconnecting the temporal and historical reflections and contexts of the image. In this sense, the ‘reading’ also means production of the meanings through the translation of the similarities and experiences into the text. Virilio claims that if the classic interval is giving way to the interface, politics in turn is shifting within exclusively present time. Here, the question is then no

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longer one of the global versus the local, or of the transnational versus the national. It is, first and foremost, a question of the sudden temporal switch in which not only inside and outside disappear, that causes an expansion of political territory, but also the before and after of its duration, of its history escapes the logic of inclusion/exclusion; all that remains is a real instant over which, in the end, no one has any control\textsuperscript{46}. The gap emerging between continuity of historical narrative and its disruption is, as in Virilio’s reflections of the real instant, in the present moment in which \textit{the re-interpretation of the phenomena is made possible}.

From my viewpoint, \textit{Sans Soleil} is one possibility to document and present the change in the linear structure of the narrative. The politics of disorder, which might happen in narrative as well as the filmic presentation, reaches every present-time viewing situation, which conserves the moments in their authenticity. This also means to rethink some examples of history or our imagining of the future. In \textit{Sans Soleil}, the images are real, and as they appear in a flashing speed and rhythm, they are almost as the images we confront in our everyday perception. Here, the history is not only a theoretical construction, but it is explicitly a political one.

The view towards historical time is here also a movement towards unknown space and time. It is a view towards a sphere that exists on the border of what we can see or what we can know about the nature of time and events in it. The instant is connected to a fragment, which exists like a still image that is detached from a linear temporal flow of a narrative. This points out countless alternatives to conceptualise temporal events. For example, the narrative course of time and events related to each other can be conceptualised rhythmically, impulsively, or as sections or structures of time. The temporal leaps, intervals or standstills between the two extremes of totalities and singularities, are also the seeds from which we could begin to construct possibilities of negotiations, conversations with the linear time of history. However, the destruction of temporal homogeneity creates a gate towards the individual present and the ‘liveliness’ of a contemporary action, which is necessarily a starting point for any political interpretation\textsuperscript{47}.

Following Deleuze, especially the modern film image constitutes an autonomous world, which is made up of breaks and disproportion, deprived from all its centres, and addressing itself as such to a viewer who is no longer centre of perception. Deleuze recognises that the viewer is no longer the centre of his own perceptions, and the classic \textit{percipiens} and the \textit{pericipi} have lost their influence\textsuperscript{48}. In other words, the centre is lost, because there is no longer any single definable centre. Instead, there is a displacement of time and space. This idea has also political consequences, as the way in which we think about political space is not any more homogeneous and clearly definable with centre and periphery. The organisation of space loses its privileged directions and the privilege of the vertical with the position of the screen still displays, in favour of omni-directional space, which varies its angles\textsuperscript{49}.

\textsuperscript{46} Virilio 1997:18.  
\textsuperscript{48} Deleuze 1992: 37.  
\textsuperscript{49} Deleuze 1992: 265.
The idea is also implied in the sharp analysis of Homi Bhabha, as he argues that nations, like narratives, lose their origins (and unity) throughout the time\(^50\). If the unity of the nation as a symbolic form is destructed, how is unity and difference implied in the heterogeneity of ‘people’ and cultures to be politically discussed? From my viewpoint, Marker shows the elements of difference: the simultaneity of existence in selected nations and spaces on the globe. In a way, Marker also shows the displacement of historicism that has according to Bhabha, dominated discussions of the nation as a cultural force\(^51\). This is done by simultaneously representing and destroying the Western historical narration. The people and nations narrated are those normally characterising a ‘cultural difference’, but in Marker’s film they are characterised as the cinematographic centre.

Being a narrative event, the whole cinematic material presented in discontinuous ways finds a variety of perspectives during the experience of viewing. It becomes acknowledged as full of different levels and contents, interruptions and re-readings, which add further layers to the logistic-linear idea of reading, and it might liberate the viewer/interpreter of the film from the pre-restricted theoretical frames of following a film narration. Following Scott McGuire, the modern cinema poses a cine-spectator to change a unified perspective of a story into a plurality of ‘points of views’. Cine-realism amounts to a reformulation of realism’s conceptual space, as narrative continuity becomes the effect of radical discontinuity at the level of the signifier\(^52\). The spectator adds an additional layer on the interpretation, since a spectator of a cinema is ‘used’ to construct some art of connection between the cinema and ‘reality’, these disturbances (intercut in the story), movements, displacement of time and place might take us as surprise and also as a resistance. Finally, this all turns out to characterise the politics of film, which is made possible by its narrative structure. Here we might find a space to escape the controllability of a unified narrativity, as the politics can be made and notified in the fragmented instant. I argue that this basic temporal reference turns the view towards a beginning and creativity of our contemporary thinking.

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50 Bhabha 1990a.
51 Bhabha 199b: 292.
52 McQuire 1998: 70.
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Homi Bhabha


Gilles Deleuze


Jean-François Lyotard


Paul Virilio

Maureen Whitebrook


*Sans Soleil* (Sunless)

**Director** Chris Marker  **Production Company** Argos Films  **Conception** Chris Marker  **Assistant Director** Pierre Camus  **Editor** Chris  **Script** Chris Marker  **Narration** Alexandra Stewart (English version) Florence Delay (French version)  **Music** M. Moussorgski. Sibelius (treated by Isao Tomita).  **Running time** 110 minutes.

**Image Source:** *Sans Soleil* image library in the Chris Marker HomePage compiled by Adrian Miles: amiles@rmit.edu.au.