From Nations to Worlds

Chris Marker's *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*

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Abstract

Si j'avais quatre dromadaires (If I had four dromedaries), Chris Marker's under-rated film of 1966, is a forty-nine-minute montage of seven hundred and fifty still photographs taken in twenty-five countries around the world. The film is a piv-ot-point in Marker's work, the moment at which he passes from an implicit but insistent imagination of the world in terms of nations toward the global scope for which his later work is so celebrated. Before 1966, Marker had made films in six different countries and had edited volumes on two dozen countries in the Petite Planète series of travel guides. *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* is the first of Marker's international films, the first to pass across a cut from Pyongyang to Havana, from the Dead Sea to the Arctic Circle. Closely examining the film's opening sequence and coda, the article proposes that Marker's transition from nations to worlds can be understood as heralding an issue that still looms large in cultural criticism, the simultaneous thinkability and unthinkability of the world-system. Thinkability: on some accounts, economic production has been organized globally since the emergence of capitalist banking in the Renaissance, so that all any of us have ever known is a globalized economy. Unthinkability: we struggle to say anything meaningful about the planetary flow of capital, goods, people, and information, and if we are film scholars, it is not obvious that such questions even belong in our discipline. Yet, if we throw up our hands, we will find that these questions are thought for us, without our input. The article follows Marker's passage from nations to worlds by following the prompts found in the formal strategies of the film, which may in turn enable us to connect the history of what Denning calls "the age of three worlds" to the philosophical understanding of "worlds" proposed by Badiou.

Keywords: marker, *si j'avais quatre dromadaires*, globalization, world-systems theory, badiou

Chris Marker is generally agreed to have been born Christian-François Bouche-Villeneuve in Neuilly-sur-Seine in 1921 and is said by many sources to have taken his nom-de-plume from the Magic Marker.[1] This is a marvelous story. It makes great imaginative sense for such a democratic filmmaker to get rid of that double-barreled bourgeois-sounding legal name and adopt something more artistic, more indexical, more telling. The Magic Marker was so-called because it could write on so many different kinds of surfaces, and as a novelist, educator, photographer, filmmaker, organizer of collective films, video artist, installation artist, author of CD-ROMs, web cartoonist, and online virtual gallerist, Marker has certainly made many different kinds of marks.

But when did Bouche-Villeneuve become Marker? At the latest by 1947 with the publication of *Un coeur net*, a novel about airmail pioneers in Indochina, reminiscent by turns of André Malraux and Howard Hawks.[2] And when was the Magic Marker developed and first marketed? 1952. So the Magic Marker story bears little scrutiny. Is there even any reliable evidence that Marker ever told anyone this story? Secondary sources are plentiful, but I have not been able to find anything that can be considered primary, unless we are willing to count the credits of *Toute la mémoire du monde* (All the memory of the world), Alain Resnais's 1956 documentary on the Bibliothèque Nationale where, as Raymond Bellour has noted,[3] Marker's credit reads "Chris and Magic Marker." This whole legend of the Magic Marker seems to begin with that credit, itself a kind of joke or pun among filmmaker friends. Note that Marker's contribution to *Toute la mémoire* was a simulation or fabrication, an imaginary tourist guide to the planet Mars that appears as the example book in a sequence showing how a book is delivered to the library, processed, catalogued, and shelved.

But if not from the felt-tip pen, where did Bouche-Villeneuve get the name Marker? Note that Marker is not really a word in French at all, even if some, no doubt assuming that the French know best how to pronounce the name of a Frenchman, insist on pronouncing it "mark-air." It cannot be by chance that Marker should disavow the name of the father by choosing an alternative not known in his mother tongue, though the man himself seems resistant to any such speculation: "I chose a pseudonym, Chris Marker, pronounceable in most languages because I intended to travel. You need look no further than that."[4] Fair enough, one might think. But this quotation is taken from an interview conducted by e-mail by Sergei Murasaki, the avatar of Chris Marker

1. David Thomson, "Chris Marker: Already Living in Cinema's Future,"
    New York Times, June 1, 2003.
2. Chris Marker, *Le coeur net* (Paris: Seuil, 1950). Translated by Robert Kee and Terence Kilmartin as *The Forthright Spirit* (London: Allan Wingate, 1951).
3. Raymond Bellour, "The Book, Back and Forth," in *Chris Marker: A Propos du CD-ROM Immemory, Qu'est-ce qu'une Madeleine?*, eds. Laurent Roth and Raymond Bellour (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997), 108.
4. "La Seconde Vie de Chris Marker," *Les inrockuptibles* 29, April 2008, https://www.lesinrocks.com/2008/04/29/cinema/actualite-cinema/la-seconde-vie-de-chris-marker.

on Second Life, a "3D virtual world." Now there is something contradictory, even self-deconstructing, in the avatar of a person with a nom de plume claiming that the meaning of a pseudonym is really straightforward. At the same time, it is significant for the argument that I will make that Bouche-Villeneuve wanted to rename himself in a way that would work internationally.

Among the connotations of *marker*, three seem particularly resonant. First, and as noted, Marker makes many different kinds of marks. Second, a marker is a memorial tablet, most fitting for a filmmaker who is as preoccupied with memory as Henri Bergson or Marcel Proust. And third, "marker!" is one variant of something shouted by the person with the clapperboard at the beginning of every take in an English-language film; other options are *mark* and *mark it*. In other words, *marker* may refer to sound as well as image, a point that seems to have escaped those who have happily repeated the Magic Marker story.

Marker's legal name has a social connotation about which there is no point in being squeamish. To anyone who knows French culture, the double barreling of both Christian-François and Bouche-Villeneuve indicates bourgeois social status, as does birth in Neuilly, long one of the wealthiest suburbs of Paris. Yet, after close to seventy years of left-wing political commitment, Marker can hardly be counted as indifferent to the fate of the people. On the contrary, he could be a case study in Alain Badiou's conception of subjectivity as fidelity to a political and artistic truth.[5] So my point is not to pass some spurious political judgement. Instead, I am suggesting that the name Chris Marker is the first work of Chris Marker; that one common account of its provenance is fictional, that this fiction is weighted with contradictions, and that such caveats should be kept in mind in any study of the work signed with this name.

In a productive decade between 1956 and 1966, Marker made films in China (*Dimanche à Pékin* [Sunday in Peking], 1956), the USSR (*Lettre de Sibérie* [Letter from Siberia], 1958), Israel (*Description d'un combat* [Description of a struggle], 1960), Cuba (*Cuba si!*, 1961), Japan (*Le mystère Koumiko* [The Koumiko mystery], 1965), and France (*La jetée* [The jetty], 1962, and *Le joli Mai* [In the merry month of May], 1963) and produced the texts for two "imaginary films," one about the United States (*L'Amérique reve* [America dreams], 1959) and the other about Mexico (*Soy Mexico* [I am Mexico], 1965). During the same period, he published a booklet of photographs taken in China (*Claire de Chine*, 1956), a book of photographs taken in Korea (*Coréennes* [Korean women], 1959), and served between 1954 and 1958 as editorial director of the Petite Planète series of travel guides, overseeing and sometimes contributing photographs and layouts to volumes on Austria, Sweden, Italy, Holland, Ireland, Greece, Germany,

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5. Alain Badiou, *L'etre et l'evénement* (Paris, Seuil, 1988). Translated by Oliver Feltham as *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2006). See especially part 5, "The Event: Intervention and Fidelity."

Tunisia, Switzerland, Spain, Turkey, China, Iran, Israel, Denmark, Portugal, Tahiti, Belgium, and India. Why am I spelling out all these names of countries? In order to stress the extent to which, for the ten years following his first film as a director, the unit of Marker's imaginative world was the nation-state.

Against the background of this implicit but insistent habit of thinking the world in terms of nations, Marker's much underrated film of 1966, *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (If I had four dromedaries), a forty-nine-minute montage made up of more than seven hundred and fifty still photos taken in more than twenty-five countries around the world, represents a pivot-point, the moment at which his work first turns toward the planetary or global scope for which later efforts like the epic New Left history *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (Red is in the air, 1977) and the widely acknowledged masterpiece *Sans soleil* (Sunless, 1983) would become celebrated.

Of course, Marker's work has a kind of international sensibility from the beginning. *Dimanche à Pékin* begins with a shot from a window with a view of the Eiffel Tower and a voice-over that tells us that the film is not really about Peking but instead about dreams and images of Peking remembered from childhood. Meanwhile, *Lettre de Sibérie* proposes that the autumn scenes with which it begins could just as well come from Ermenonville (northern France) or New England and later goes on an advertising-parody tour of the "housewives of the world." But, apart from this bare handful of shots, everything in *Dimanche à Pékin* and *Lettre de Sibérie* comes from Peking and Siberia, respectively, so that the comparison of the distant Asian location with somewhere European or North American, while significant as an inoculation against an easy exoticism, is an opposition involving just two places or two types of place. Not until 1966 and *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (henceforth *Si j'avais*) do we see cutting across the world from Paris to Pyonyang, North Korea, to Havana, Cuba, as a montage principle that structures an entire film.

Nor is thinking the world in terms of nations something that simply disappears from Marker's work after 1966; he made a second film about Cuba (*La bataille des dix millions* [The battle of the ten million], 1971), and in 1997, he republished his Korean pictures within the photography section of the CD-ROM *Immemory*. And *Si j'avais* explicitly retains something of the idea of nations. Just a few moments into the film, a voice that is casting around for a definition of art settles on a somewhat awkward analogy with nationality: "Art, my brothers, is neither inferior or superior, it is art. It doesn't always have to do with puffing oneself up, it is not a quality, it is . . . a nationality, if you like."[6] However, the idea that we are all citizens of the nation of art should not prevent us from recognizing the newly planetary scope of *Si j'avais*, whose cuts from the Arctic Circle to the Dead Sea; from Amsterdam, Holland, to Beijing, China; from Lisbon,

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6. Chris Marker, *Commentaires 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 88, my translation.

Portugal, to Shanghai, China open onto the transnational terrain of much of the later work of Marker.

Si j'avais does not identify all the places that it visits, but we can at different moments be confident that we are in North Korea, the Soviet Union, Japan, Norway, Ireland, Cuba, Spain, France, Iran, Hungary, China, Greece, Iceland, Sweden, Israel, Austria, and Italy. Note that this list of countries consists predominantly of what the period became accustomed to calling the first and second worlds—that is, the rich or developed countries and the countries of the Communist bloc; third-worlders are represented in *Si j'avais* primarily as immigrants, as in a sequence showing Algerians in the Paris suburb of Nanterre celebrating the independence of Algeria. Marker, who went on a 1958 visit to North Korea in the company of Claude Lanzmann and Armand Gatti,[7] and in the 1970s made documentaries on such celebrity members of the French Communist Party as François Maspero, Yves Montand, and Simone Signoret, clearly had good access to the socialist countries, which were de–Stalinizing at the beginning of the period the film covers. Keep in mind that the historical links between Zionism and socialism and the idealization of the kibbutzim meant that Israel, too, could in this period be perceived as a socialist country, a point that has been made previously by one of the most interesting of French critics of Marker, Arnaud Lambert,[8] who is also codirector of a documentary titled *Chris Marker, Never Complain, Never Explain* (2017).

A text of *Si j'avais* was published in 1967 in *Commentaires 2*, prefaced by a note that reads: "This film was made entirely on an animation stand, on the basis of still photos taken in twenty-six countries between 1955 and 1965."[9] The fact that *Si j'avais* is made of still photos means that it compares directly with the much more famous *La jetée*. Like that earlier film, it has just one moment that comes close to the conventional impression of motion in the cinema, and just as in *La jetée*, this is a sequence of intensely romantic overlapping dissolves of a woman's face. Where in *La jetée* the woman opens her eyes, in *Si j'avais*, she smiles. Any doubt that the latter sequence is intended to evoke the former vanishes when the animation of the smiling face is followed by a high-contrast image of a white bird against a dark hillside; this high-contrast X-shape in the middle of the frame is a distinct motif throughout *La jetée*.

However, *La jetée* was photographed to follow a storyboard; it is a fiction, with actors playing dramatic roles. *Si j'avais* is an album of actuality photographs, which were assembled as a film after the fact. The film does contain an occasional image that

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7. For an account of this trip, see Antoine Coppola, *Ciné-voyage en Corée du Nord: L'experience du film moranbong* (Paris: Atelier Cahiers, 2012).

8. Arnaud Lambert, *Also Known as Chris Marker* (Paris: Le Point du Jour, 2008), 171.

9. Marker, *Commentaires 2*, 89, my translation.

can't be understood as documentary, such as its ninth shot, which gives the Mona Lisa the face of an owl, a collage idea that Marker was still exploring in the "X-plugs" of *Immemory* thirty years later. But these are rare exceptions. Events in the film that can be specifically dated include the World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in July 1957; the American National Exhibition in Moscow in July 1959; a Paris protest against the Bay of Pigs invasion in spring 1961; crowds attending the funerals of the victims of the Charonne massacre in Paris in February 1962, and the independence of Algeria in March 1962. Other period indicators include the commentary's parodies of the 1959 Esso slogan "Put a tiger in your tank," the currency of the Cuban Revolution and the Sino-Soviet split, political signs critical of 1964 presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, and mention of the Beatles.

Si j'avais was originally produced for German television and was not seen in France until the mid-1970s. It remains unknown to the general public and was for a long time quite fugitive even for specialists; some published discussions seem to have less to do with the film than with the commentary. Yet there are substantial differences between that text and the film itself. The film contains more than seven hundred and fifty still photos, of which the text reproduces one hundred and thirty; the text contains another forty photos that do not appear in the film. The text is eighty-one pages long but some sixteen of these (just about one-fifth) contain words that are not heard in the film. Conversely, the film contains a few short speeches that are not found in the printed commentary.

The film's title is taken from a short poem of Apollinaire called "The Dromedary," included in *Le bestiare* (The bestiary, 1911) and recited at a rapid clip at the very beginning of the film. The singsong rhythms and nursery rhymes defy translation, but the first three lines tell us of one "Don Pedro Alfaroubeira" who, with his four camels, traveled the world and liked what he saw. The last two lines are in the first person: "Il fit ce que je voudrais faire/Si j'avais quatres dromadaires" (He did what I would like to do/If I had four dromedaries). However, only the first four lines are spoken by the voice-over, which means that the viewer effectively completes the rhyme by reading the main title as it flashes up in sudden silence.

The subject of the film is explained by a title card at the beginning: "A photographer and two of his friends comment on images taken here and there around the world." Thus, the voice-over is for three voices, which are given the names of the actors playing them (Pierre, Nicolas, and Catherine). Pierre is the photographer, and thus the avatar of Marker, and gets significantly more airtime than the others, including several long soliloquies, though both Nicolas and Catherine are at different points given their own interior monologues. The printed text of the film indicates a number of different and slightly comical tones for line readings, such as "between the teeth," "proverbial," and "promotional." It also indicates pauses, silences, and resumptions of the conversation.

So the film is a large album of actuality photographs, almost all of which can be understood as documentary, but with its imagined personae and actively directed voice performances, it also borders on fiction.

Si j'avais is in two parts: "the Castle" (shades of Kafka) and "the Garden" (shades of the Bible). The Castle is the world in which we live, with all its social oppressions: "The distance between those who have power and those who don't. . . . The line between the races. That's the Castle. The poor live in its shadow."[10] The Garden is the world in which we would like to live, the world of happiness and grace: "It's there, it's in us, just as much as cruelty and the will to live. Yes, there is a law of the Garden, which is expressed in . . . the simplest of gestures."[11] The Castle begins in good modernist fashion with a discourse on photography, moves on to a comparison of mornings around the world, visits Moscow and (following a train of association) the Russian Orthodox monastery on Mount Athos in Greece, sketches a Nanterre celebration of Algerian independence, and closes with some thoughts on social division as a refutation of the idea of "the family of man," which is also the name of the MoMA exhibition and Edward Steichen book of 1955 that period viewers would quite likely associate with Marker's film. The Garden begins with animals and children, tours North Korea and Scandinavia, offers some ideas on mortality and femininity, and concludes with the assertion that there is such a thing as grace; thus, there is some hope for happiness despite "the horror, the madness, the monsters" that surround us.

Along with Dziga Vertov and Bruce Conner, Marker is one of the great associational montage makers of the twentieth century, and I want to give a flavor of that in practice by looking at some formal specifics selected from the first six and the last two-and-a-half minutes of the film.[12] I will argue that we can follow Marker's transition from nations to worlds by the simple expedient of following the prompts suggested by the film, stressing in particular patterns of editing, where one will see the film moving back and forth across the world by graphic match and mismatch. Apart from a few nicely dialectical pages by Nora Alter,[13] a few thoughtful pages by Catherine Lupton,[14] and a few descriptive pages by Sarah Cooper,[15] previous discussion of *Si j'avais* is scant. There is no previous work that attends to the formal strategies of the film in any detail.

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10. Marker, 133, my translation.
11. Marker, 167, my translation.
12. Readers interested in seeing the film for themselves can find a good-quality copy with English subtitles on YouTube, or seek out the French DVD. This last is beautifully produced, has English subtitles, and is region free; that is, it will play in any DVD player. See note 17.
13. Nora Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 96–101.
14. Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 103–08.
15. Sarah Cooper, *Chris Marker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 60–65.

In the first six minutes, *Si j'avais* begins with a quick fade-up from black to a bright circle of sunlight ringed by a much larger circle of darkness. The elementary nature of the forms combined with the high level of contrast makes for an image verging on abstraction, yet still the denotation is plain; viewers are looking straight down the barrel of a cannon. There is the impression that this is a large cannon mounted on blocks for public display, but the head-on perspective and the closeness of the shot make it difficult to be sure. As a thematically appropriate voice-over begins ("Photography is hunting; it is the hunting instinct without the wish to kill. . . . You track, you aim, you shoot and click!, instead of a death, you have something eternal"[16]), the camera tracks in closer, emphasizing the rifling inside the gun's barrel. When the camera movement stops, the metal spirals closing around a central point of light are distinctly reminiscent of a diaphragm-type camera shutter. Of course, the idea that the photographic apparatus shares something with weapons systems is commonplace; many an introductory class on photography or cinematography makes the point that one talks about "shooting" in both cases. However, what matters here is not so much the originality of the concept as the effectiveness of its rendering (see figure 8.1).
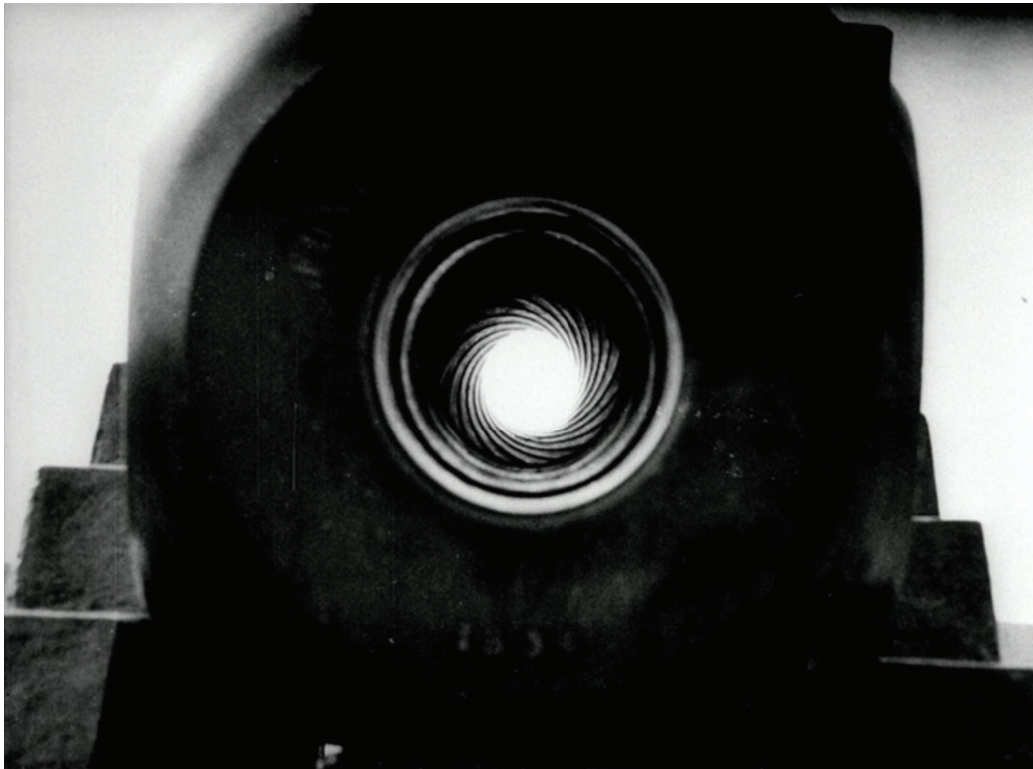

Figure 8.1: The first three shots of *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*. *Source*: fair use.

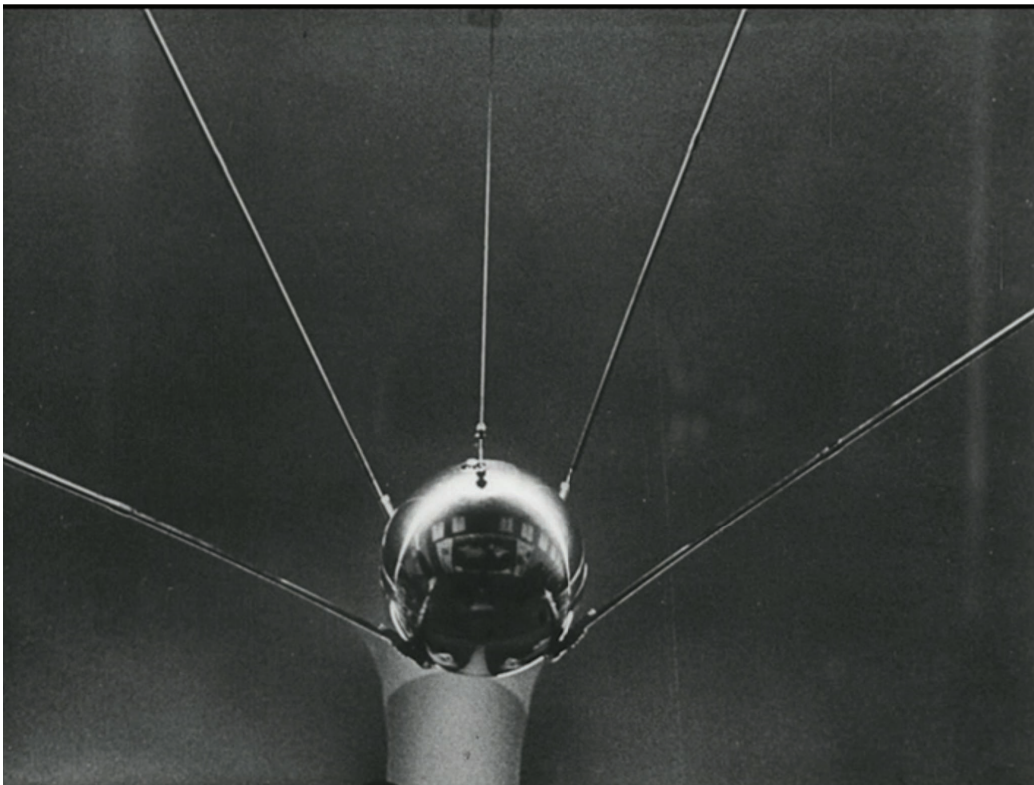16. Marker, *Commentaires 2*, 87, my translation.

Figure 8.1: (continued)

The camera cuts to a second shot strongly graphically matched with the first. Another bright circle of sunlight sits inside a darker circle, though this is a wider framing so that the darker circle is itself ringed by another brighter one. Somewhere in Asia, probably Korea, a worker in light-colored clothing sits in the shade of a giant pipe. As with the cannon, the viewer sees down the length of the pipe into the strong backlight provided by the sun. Such shots are something of a period signature for Marker; compare, for example, the opening sequences of *La jetée* with dark figures silhouetted against the low-hanging sun. The worker crouches, and his body is contained exactly within the ring of darkness that defines the pipe. Above his head, the circle of light at the other end of the pipe is crossed by two wooden planks or poles. These verticals are aligned one on each side of the worker's head, making a triangle of lines that converge but do not meet. This triangle is itself crossed by a horizontal sequence of dark rectangles, building materials placed by a curbside that curves in the background from the lower right to the center left. In other words, a small miracle of constructivism is found on a Korean building site, and the second shot replies to the first in that a technology of destruction is followed by an image of construction.

The third shot is another bowl of light in the darkness, more difficult to read but apparently a convex mirror seen from below, with brighter lines radiating outward like the ribs of an umbrella. The fourth shot is a fisheye perspective drawing of a bearded old man standing underneath a tree in the garden of a house by some water, and it replies to the third in that its anamorphic perspective is intended to be seen in a convex or cylindrical mirror. This shot moves away from the high levels of contrast found in the first three but holds to the motif of circular forms, as does the fifth, which shows a dense web of orbits around a nucleus, apparently a display, perhaps a scientific or educational model. The sixth shot returns dramatically to the contrast values of the first two—an ancient sculpture of a woman's face is shown as a bright oval floating in a dark field. This shot is lit from below without fill so that the woman's mouth, nose, cheekbones, eyelids, and forehead are all shadowed. The framing begins as a close-up and then tracks in for an extreme close-up in which the eyes fill the frame, slightly canted from left to right. Now, in words that do not appear in the published commentary, the voice-over speaks of a play of gazes, of time and eternity: "A sculptor has eternalized a certain face with a certain look. Now you, with the photo, you eternalize your own look at this look."[17] (See figure 8.2).

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17. Chris Marker, dir., *Si j'avais quatres dromadaires* (Paris: Les Mutins de Panoir and ISKRA, 2018), timecode 1:28, my translation.
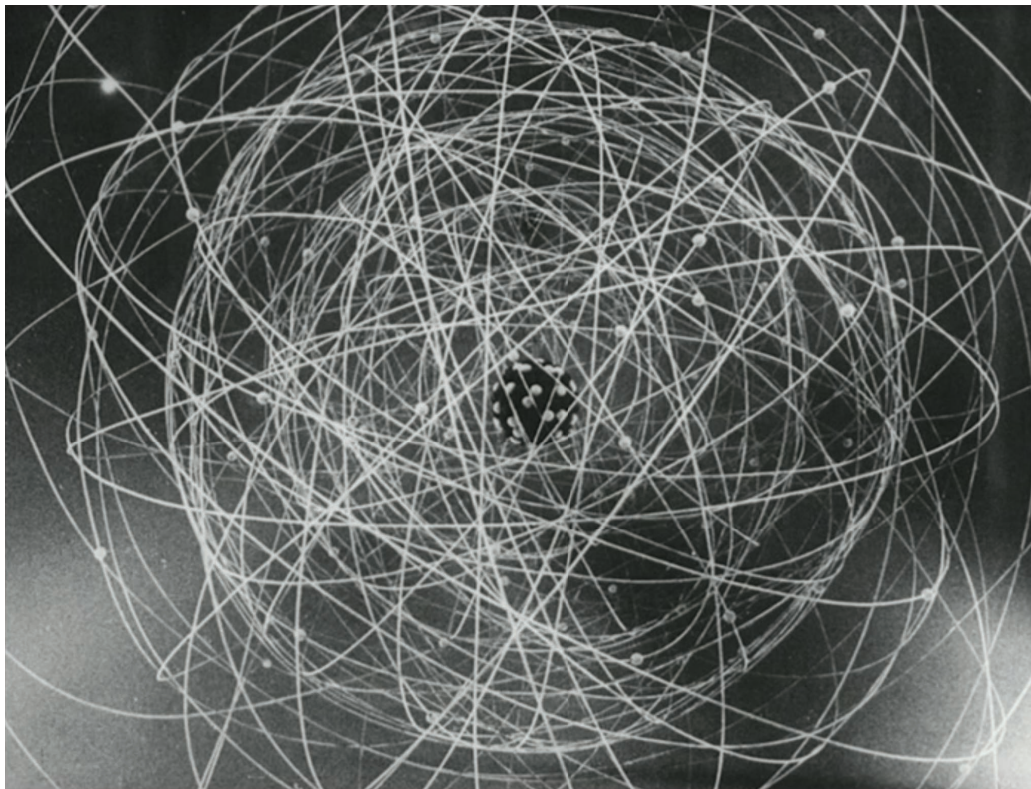
Figure 8.2: *Si j'avais quatres dromadaires*, shots 4–6. *Source*: fair use.

Figure 8.2: (continued)

The film's first shot lasts fourteen seconds, a long take for a film that shows us more than seven hundred still photographs in forty-nine minutes, for an average shot length of fractionally more than four seconds. The second and third shots last three seconds each, the fourth and fifth five seconds each, the sixth a full fifteen seconds. Editing is by straight cut for the first three shots, then by lap dissolve for the third through sixth. Apart from the voice-over, the only sound is a high-pitched flute, playing slowly and waveringly and gradually rising in volume. These first half-dozen shots establish editing rhythms and introduce the graphic match as a visual principle while the first words on the soundtrack establish photography as the film's first topic. Thus the voice of Pierre tells us not only that photography is hunting without the wish to kill, and that it eternalizes a moment, but that it belongs not to the world but to its double; that it belongs not to living humanity but to a life and death of images; that it is a game of hide and seek; that it is a bit like television, which does not inform us about the world so much as treat the world as a spectacle; and that like cinema and television, it causes a disorientation of the balance between the real and the imaginary. With simile piled upon metaphor and analogy dissolving into comparison, all of this is covered in less than two minutes as though the montage of ideas is at least as important as any one of them in itself. We might think here of the arguments of John Tagg over the last thirty years that the medium of photography is not "given and unified," that "it has to be constituted

and is multiply defined."[18] Such complications of the idea of photography as simply transparent or adequate to actuality are especially significant in a film many of whose images might on the face of it seem available to humanist and/or realist readings.

After the first half-dozen shots, the picture track, too, begins to address the question of photography. During the second and third minutes of the film, the viewer sees a shot taken inside a Korean portrait studio, a shot in which a man in battle dress displays an album of photos, a shot in which an easel with photographs for sale stands in front of an ancient ruin, and a Korean street scene in which the left half of the frame is dominated by a Rolleiflex on its tripod while on the right a man looks out through a window. Very likely the Rolleiflex is Marker's own; a picture of him holding such a camera appears on the back cover of *Commentaires 2*, which contains the text of *Si j'avais*. This sequence concludes with a title card with a quotation from a libretto by Jean Cocteau: "Since these mysteries in fact surpass us, let us pretend to be their organizer." Though the film doesn't tell us this, it is hardly a surprise to find that the Cocteau character in question is a photographer who takes pictures of newlyweds at the Eiffel Tower. This ends the film's direct discussion of photography, though of course any film with three voices commenting on more than seven hundred stills can be generally understood as a discussion of photography.

What follows is a pair of graphically matched shots from widely geographically separated locations. The first is a medium close-up of a sign that gives a distance of 9.5 km to the northern Finland town of Napapiiri and also reads "Arctic Circle" in English, French, and German; the zone "Travel" on the CD-ROM *Immemory* includes a much wider view of the same shot, indicating that another of Marker's decisions with any given photograph in *Si j'avais* was whether or not to crop. The second is a medium-long shot of a roadside in the Negev Desert, with a sign reading "Sea Level" in English, French, and Hebrew. Both signs are framed to the left, and both are multilingual; this matching of what the commentary calls "the two ends of the world" is further emphasized by the featurelessness of the respective terrains. The polar desert compares visually with the sand desert, a point that is taken up in a whole subsequent series of lap-dissolving long shots of beaches, rocky landscapes, bare hillsides, and wide waterways. These all have one or two focal points in an otherwise empty vista—a large rock in the foreground, a person at the waterline in the background, a man and horse on a distant horizon, a dark boat on bright water. The sense that these road signs and landscapes are the beginning of a new topic is underlined by the introduction on the soundtrack of the Barney Wilen Trio playing a free-jazz dirge, a bit reminiscent of the 1960s music of Ornette Coleman.

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18. John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxviii.

The snow and sand deserts modulate into waterscapes of glassy stillness. What follows is the most-celebrated passage in the film (quoted, for example, as the epigraph to *Staring Back*, the Wexner Center's 2007 book of Marker's photographs), when Pierre's voice-over begins to speak of a global morning: "I can't resist the sort of film which takes you from one dawn to another saying things like: it is six a.m. all over the world, six a.m. on the Canal Saint-Martin, six a.m. on the Gotha Canal in Sweden, six a.m. in Havana, six a.m. in the Forbidden City of Peking."[19] The voice here adopts a tone somewhere between portentous and pious, which the text archly captions as "like the commentary of a film." As we hear about more and more places where it is six a.m. (Brussels, Prague, Teheran, Berlin), multitracked voices begin to overlap and chime together.

This passage appeals to followers of Marker because it is so characteristic of his work both to pose questions about time and to move across a cut around the world, from Paris to Amsterdam to Nice to the Great Wall of China. However, what tends to be forgotten when the lines in question are quoted is that it is introduced as a kind of weakness ("I can't resist") and presented, if not outright ironically, certainly wryly or citationally ("like the commentary of a film"). Note too that the first four shots in the sequence are immediately followed by three different views of a jet airliner, which is Marker's deadpan acknowledgment of the material conditions enabling his lyric dissolves from Paris to Sweden to Havana to Peking. It is also worth noting that "six a.m. all over the world" is strictly impossible, in fact suggests we are not clear on the concept of six a.m., though of course this is very much the romantic appeal of the sequence. Underlying this is a philosophical conundrum about the nature of time and whether or not there is a difference between symbolic systems of measuring time and the real of duration.

What begins with the "six a.m. all over the world" incantation is the first of the truly global tours in Marker's work. In less than three minutes of running time (from 3:30 to 6:22, to be exact), we visit Sweden, Yugoslavia, Korea, Paris, Havana, Peking, Brussels (Belgium), Prague (Czech Republic), Teheran (Iran), Berlin (Germany), Amsterdam, Nice, Rome (Italy), La Ciotat (France), Jerusalem (Israel), Tokyo (Japan), Lausanne (Switzerland), Santiago de Cuba, Tel Aviv (Israel), Moscow (Russia), Oslo (Norway), and Lisbon (Portugal). As suggested by the predominance in this list of names of cities, what we see is very much the urban world of the built environment, the world of streets and billboards, subways and stores, construction sites and hospitals, graveyards and pachinko parlors. Even a Yugoslavian pig, which appears toward the end of the sequence and most likely lives on a farm, is "urbanized" by being shown in a tight close-up with just its face showing through the walls of its pen.

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19. Marker, *Commentaires 2*, 98, my translation.

Also noteworthy is that all of these places are directly identified by the voice-over. The opening sequence shows both Asians and Europeans but does not specifically identify any locations—we know that the construction worker in the second shot is most likely Korean because we know that Marker worked in Korea, not because the film says so. And, as might by now begin to be clear, *Si j'avais* travels by contrast and comparison, by graphic match and mismatch. Thus a train leaving the Lumière brothers' station of La Ciotat is matched first with a train leaving Jerusalem ("Leaving Jerusalem By Railway" was also a Lumière actuality of 1897) and then with a train arriving in Tokyo; a high angle looking down on a crowded Promenade des Anglais in Nice is paired with a high angle looking down on an almost deserted Great Wall of China; the sidewalk stalls of Moscow are compared with the sidewalk stalls of Tel Aviv; the lottery in Cuba is matched with the lottery in Lisbon and the pachinko parlors of Japan; billboards in the Paris metro are linked with billboards in Switzerland; and the Yugoslavian pig is comically contrasted with the young women of Paris. The sequence includes a brief excursus on the dozing passengers of the Japanese commuter railways, an idea that is taken up once again in one of the most memorable sequences in *Sans soleil* almost twenty years later. And the protagonist of *La jetée*, subjected in his hammock to the mind-shattering experiments of the doctors in a postnuclear shelter, is recalled by pictures of an open heart operation in Santiago de Cuba, which shows the staring eye of an anesthetized patient surrounded by nurses.

At the end of this bravura sequence, Marker's camera picks out two classes apart, the priests and the police, so that the tone shifts from romantic or utopian toward a consciousness of social division. This new subtopic retains something of the globalizing tendency, since the first religious person we see is a Buddhist monk, shown in two different framings. Next, however, we jump to a uniformed French policeman on duty in a crowded city street, followed by a pair of European priests in cassocks, and then by a group of French policemen on the viewing platform of the Eiffel Tower. Parisian policemen were the subject of *Cinétract 004*, from May 1968 (anonymous but clearly by Marker) and were still interesting to him more than forty years later; on Mayday 2009, he posted on the web a photo of a grim-faced quartet of *police nationale* arrayed around a phone-box flyer for a performance of *Ave Maria*, an image very precisely recalling his 1966 combination of priests and police.

In the last two-and-a-half minutes, *Si j'avais* ends with a coda containing forty-eight shots in 154 seconds, for an average shot length of 3.2 seconds, which is to say about 25 percent faster than the film's overall average. This faster tempo is particularly marked in the first twenty-five shots of the coda, which go by in a total of fifty seconds, including one rapid flurry of six shots in seven seconds. The coda is separated from the rest of the film by four seconds of black leader and begins reflexively with a low-angle shot of a street sign reading "Sortie" (way out), beneath which are the numerals for the hours

and minutes set at zero. The next shot is a high angle looking down on a flight of stairs descending to a wet dockside or flight apron. This suggestion of a traveler's return is followed by another low-angle shot, a diagrammatic map of France showing roads radiating out in all directions from Paris, which is a sign for a store or restaurant with the unlikely name "Du soir au lendemain et vice versa" (From the evening to the next day and vice versa). The film makes a minor motif out of such odd signs.

The sound accompanying these first shots in the coda is muffled and much harder to follow than the generally distinct speech of the film as a whole. It becomes clear that this is intended as a kind of abstraction when the voices slow and slur, producing the wowing characteristic of recorded sound played back at below-standard speed. The words "du soir au lendemain" are read out on the soundtrack by Pierre, but these are the only lines in this segment that are easily intelligible. After this, the human voices slow and stop and are replaced by the screeches of monkeys. The first half of the coda goes on to include another dozen shots of various kinds of street signs, mostly billboards, which advertise movies, political candidates, holidays, and back remedies. Before that, however, we see an elderly woman standing at a game machine of the kind in which a claw is used to catch soft toys. A quick track down within this shot emphasizes the skeletal qualities of the arms and hands inside the machine, which is linked with shots of horror masks and cutaway anatomical faces in store windows, pictures that belong in the tradition of the surrealist enthusiasm for the early twentieth-century photographer of Paris Eugène Atget.

So the chain of associations is France, Paris, the street, signs, stores. The urbanism on which this all rests is spelled out in another pair of graphically matched shots; a woman seated on a bench in the right of the frame with a misty cityscape visible above and behind her (a shot identified in *Immemory* as having been taken in Prague) is paired with a shot in many ways similar, except that in the second picture the woman on the bench is placed to the left and has become a statue about twice the size of life. These matched shots are followed by another kind of representation of woman, a billboard advertising Triumph bras. This image has been torn in such a way that the woman's face and waistline remain visible while the bra itself has completely disappeared.

There follow a dozen shots of torn and pasted-over billboards that develop a similar emphasis on the found surrealism of accidental juxtaposition. Viewers are shown a swastika spray-painted onto a grinning publicity face, an ancient carving on a street in Rome beneath which a modern graffitist has scrawled "Il Duce," a giant pop guitarist supplemented with an election slogan reading "De Gaulle c'est la paix" (De Gaulle means peace), a poster of De Gaulle himself hanging in tatters, and a quick track up from a figure crouching on the sidewalk to a huge poster of Sean Connery as James Bond, this last another iteration of the film's ongoing study of giant signs dwarfing the humans. Note that a whole school of Parisian artists (Jacques Villeglé, Raymond Hains,

François Dufresne) was working contemporaneously in this vein of *décollage*, though these artists typically acquired and tore their own advertising materials rather than relying on what could be found in actuality.

The sequence of publicity posters reaches a climax in a series of shots in which women's faces are reduced by tearing and/or by framing to pairs of eyes combined with various shreds of lettering. In one case, the lettering actually reads "la lettre" (the letter); in another, viewers are exhorted to "act together against American aggression," a reminder that these pictures were taken in the era of the Bay of Pigs and the escalation in Vietnam; in yet another, apparently an advertisement for package holidays, the words "voir et connaître" (see and know) are placed beneath a giant female face. An axial reframing takes viewers in for a closer view, realizing that the woman in question will have a hard time seeing and knowing anything since her paper eyes have been gouged out, presumably by vandals. Meanwhile, a kind of editorializing is heard on the soundtrack; the quicker and faster the torn faces of the politicians and holidaymakers are seen, the louder and shriller becomes the shrieking of a monkey.

The intense, almost bird-like cries of the monkey abruptly cease. There follow a few seconds of silence, and then a resumption of the conversation among the three voices along with a shot of holes scraped into a wall that is held for four seconds. Rapid-fire straight cutting gives way to dissolves, a repunctuation that establishes a new, somewhat slower tempo and a new subtopic, graffiti, described by Pierre as "une autre espèce de musée" (another kind of museum). I am calling graffiti a subtopic since it remains continuous with the previous thematic of signs in the street. After the holes in the wall, a graffito so heavily written over with so many scribbled letters that nothing can be understood is seen. Then come three different shots that all have in common a kind of dejection: "Ont ne nous aime encore" (they still don't love us [or, they don't love us yet]), "la vie est moche" (life is awful), and "j'aime personne" (I love no one).

When Marker cuts from a long shot of a woman seated beside a large white dog to a long shot of a white horse being nuzzled by a dark horse, and then to a medium close-up of the neck and mane of a blonde horse, he reintroduces the motif of animals and introduces a motif of pairs or couples. Of the last eighteen shots in the film, seven show animals. The other eleven show couples; these are variously romantic, or friendly, or familial, and each one includes a linked arm or an arm around the shoulder. At the very end of the film, Marker is cutting back and forth between pairs of humans (a young Scandinavian couple walking in a park, a Cuban elder and adolescent, a man and a woman in motorcycle helmets, a young couple silhouetted against the sunlight) and pairs of animals (two groundhogs embracing, a monkey with its hand on the head of its mate).

To think of Marker as moving from a strong emphasis on nations to an emergent globalism is to say that he can be understood as one herald of an issue that continues

to loom large in cultural criticism, the simultaneous thinkability and unthinkability of the world-system. Thinkability: according to *longue durée* historians such as Fernand Braudel and world-systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, and Janet Abu-Lughod, economic production has been organized globally at least since the emergence of capitalist banking in the Italian Renaissance. From this perspective, all that any of us has ever known is a globalized economy, and the world-systems school has a long shelf of books that write its history and prehistory.[20] I mention this account not because it is inarguable (in fact, it is much argued), but because it is a valuable counter to the buzzword version of globalization that became so prevalent in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union only to be abruptly declared dead after the 2008 financial crisis. That crisis was itself a global experience (failures in the US real-estate market crashed banks around the world), so the idea that globalization had been finished off by the crisis suggested that the term had been used in some wishful or uncritical ways.[21]

Unthinkability: we struggle to say anything meaningful about a topic as gigantic and complex as the planetary flow of people, goods, capital, and information. If we are film scholars, it is not obvious that such questions even belong in our discipline. Yet, if we throw up our hands and declare the problem beyond our intellectual abilities or disciplinary boundaries, we will find that these issues are in fact thought for us and without our input. Saying this does not, of course, magically solve the problem of knowing how to say anything worthwhile about such sweeping issues. In this essay, I am suggesting that we can trace Marker's passage from nations to worlds by the simple expedient of following the prompts suggested by the film. This may in turn enable us to connect the history of what Michael Denning has called "the age of three worlds" to the philosophical understanding of "worlds" proposed by Alain Badiou in *Logics of Worlds*.[22]

Denning's age of three worlds (first, second, and third) runs from 1945 to 1989, and he remarks that the idea was durable enough to withstand attempts from a variety of quarters to reduce it to a binary, either East versus West (that is, communism versus

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20. For the history of the world-system, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 4 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994); and Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

21. For a variety of thoughtful perspectives on globalization, see the trilogy of anthologies that appeared in the final years of the last century: Anthony King, ed., *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); David Lloyd and Lisa Lowe, eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). More recent years have seen a flood of globalization readers intended as textbooks for college classes.

22. Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 1994). Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2008).

capitalism) or North versus South (that is, development versus underdevelopment).[23] For Badiou, whose philosophical celebrity coincides more or less exactly with the end of the age of three worlds, *world* is a term of art for "networks, trajectories, and paths, which together give topological coherence to a universe of appearing," a useful definition I have borrowed from Bruno Bosteels.[24] For Badiou, things that exist are always and only elements of a world, yet any world is at the same time conditioned by its "inexistent," its "zero-signifier." In one sense, the inexistent is incalculable, radically unpredictable; in another, it is the sudden salience of an element that did not count in the previous world system. I would suggest that during the period in which Marker was making *Si j'avais*, this was very much the status of the decolonizing third world.

Finally, *Si j'avais* can be understood as an essayistic attempt to map multiplicity by mosaic, selectively constructing the three worlds as (1) the social democracies of western Europe, (2) the "people's democracies" of North Korea and the USSR, and (3) the global poor in the shape of African and Algerian migrants to Paris. As noted, Marker renders all three worlds as urban, presaging the moment in the early twenty-first century at which urban populations would outnumber rural for the first time in history.[25] Crossed by the contradictions of an early project of "thinking globally" on the part of an independent filmmaker, the result is a complex of residual and emergent worlds that anticipates a globalization to come while remaining marked by the previous historical and political situation.

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23. Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, 26.
24. Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 169.
25. On this point, see Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 1–20.