
Remembrance of Things to Come¹

Ben Ferris

Abstract

This article considers the limitations of a strictly linear form of classification of student works and contends that there is a merit in approaching the preservation of student films as “fragments of memory” (in the context of Chris Marker’s non-linear and essentially egalitarian vision of the past / future).

Dans nos moments de rêverie mégalomane, nous avons tendance
à voir notre mémoire comme une espèce de livre d’Histoire :
nous avons gagné et perdu des batailles, trouvé et perdu des empires.
A tout le moins nous sommes les personnages d’un roman classique (‘Quel roman que ma vie!’).
Une approche plus modeste et peut-être plus fructueuse serait de considérer *les fragments
d’une mémoire en termes de géographie*. Dans toute vie nous trouverions des continents,
des îles, des déserts, des marais, des territoires surpeuplés et des terrae incognitae.
De cette mémoire nous pourrions dessiner la carte, extraire des images
avec plus de facilité (et de vérité) que des contes et légendes.
Que le sujet de cette mémoire se trouve être un photographe et un cinéaste
ne veut pas dire que sa mémoire est en soi plus intéressante que celle du monsieur
qui passe (et encore moins de la dame), mais simplement qu’il a laissé, lui, des traces
sur lesquelles on peut travailler, et des contours pour dresser ses cartes.

(Chris Marker, *Immemory*, 1998)

Student films produced at film schools around the world provide a distinctly valuable insight into the world’s “geography” through their sheer diversity, but also authenticity. Just as geographic phenomena assist a cartographer’s reconstruction of the world, so too can student films illuminate the “continents, islands, deserts” of our collective memory.

“Gone and never to return
and being for myself alone
a remembrance of things to come
who fancied being a human”

Claude Roy²

The Sydney Film School current archival practices ensure that student films are readily accessible, catalogued logically by year and semester. Film titles can be easily identified on the website, either by the name of the graduate filmmaker, listed alphabetically, or by the title of the film, also listed alphabetically. While making the retrieval of the film a straightforward task, this current practice reveals an overtly vertical linearity of classification and unwittingly discourages non-linear and associative (horizontal) connections and discoveries to be made between the works themselves. It is this oversight that has prompted my interest in the theories of filmmaker Chris Marker.

In the works of Chris Marker we are perpetually reminded of the sheer improbability of reconstructing history³. It is a fool's game. Any account inevitably becomes a subjective task, for there must always be a collector/curator who, working within their unavoidably limited, defined parameters of knowledge (or bias), determines what information should be included, as much as what should be excluded. There is necessarily a mode of assemblage, a means by which the historical data is catalogued and made accessible, and such a mode contains within it inherent arbitrary assumptions, determined by the whims of the collector/curator.

One cannot then escape subjectivity when dealing with history. That is a futile task. So, instead of pursuing the Sisyphean goal of a so-called "objective" history, let us aspire towards a Markerian version of history that is polyvalent, ambivalent, and egalitarian⁴.

Considering Marker's aspirations for the creation of interactive archives of cultural memory, and referring to his geographic conception of memory⁵, it strikes me that film schools, positioned as they are in geographically diverse locations around the world and increasingly facilitating student cultural exchange between geographies, are perfectly placed to contribute to the polyvalent reconstruction of our cultural memory. By offering up their extensive archives⁶ of diverse subjective narratives (visions of the world at particular historical periods) they can establish the foundations for a collective, worldwide cross-referential vision of history.

Student films contain within them personal, social, political, psychological, and universal "cartographies"⁷: a student's experience of living in a foreign culture; a yearning for home; unraveling perceptions of the home country through the eyes of a foreigner; major international events as they are perceived in different ways at the same time around the world; or interiorized visions of an individual's psyche, both personalized and universalized-symbolized. These primary source texts moreover represent authentic voices, free from commercial and propagandistic imperatives⁸.

Reconstructing a polyvalent picture of the world is inevitably one of dissonance, rather than harmony; but dissonance, unlike harmony, creates the opportunity for dialogue and growth. How we might witness "the truth" of the "cultural event" of tensions between Japan and Australia over the Japanese hunting and killing of whales has, for example, a multitude of perspectives at any one time. When a French student studying in Australia perceives these tensions, she makes a film⁹ that celebrates the beauty and majesty of the whale and becomes critical of Japanese practices. Concurrently, her Japanese colleague, studying in Australia at the same time, presents us with a very different view¹⁰ of the same phenomenon; one that endeavors to provide a historical context for the practice of eating whale meat in Japan, and for whom the criticism of such practice amounts to an arrogant assertion of one set of cultural values over another. In addition, a New Zealand filmmaker, arriving to study in Australia, offers us a criticism of Australia's export to Indonesia of live cattle, pointing to clear examples of animal cruelty where both Australia and Indonesia are complicit, which she satirizes in her stop-frame animation film¹¹ (by substituting human victims for the animals and animals for the human captors). An Indonesian filmmaker, on the other hand, perceives a deeper issue at the heart of Australian culture, driven, as she perceives it, by the incessant pursuit of wealth¹². "The truth" is multi-layered. The more we look at it, the more fault-lines we find in its edifice.

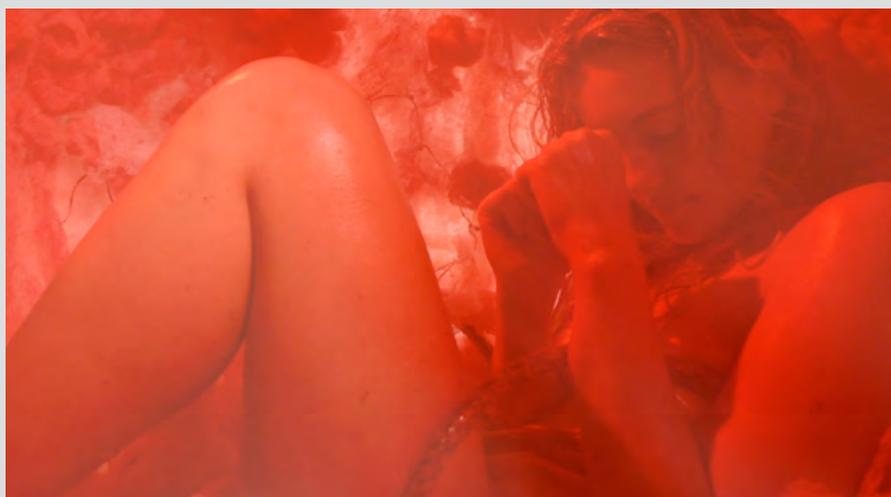
Indigenous views of a host country, such as an aboriginal Australian's personal struggle¹³ between her traditional upbringing in the Tiwi Islands (Northern Australia) and the cosmopolitan lifestyle of Sydney, play with and against "outsider" depictions of displacement of the indigenous population, facing homelessness¹⁴ or drug addiction and prostitution¹⁵. A white Australian filmmaker can try to understand the same issue from his perspective¹⁶, by looking at a young aboriginal Australian boy who is ostracized from an early age by the strict disciplines of the white Australian schooling system, while another offers us an aetiological myth¹⁷ taking its inspiration from the death of the Brazilian man mistakenly shot dead

by London police in the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings, exploring what could happen to an Australia which becomes too fearful of its minority cultures, in this case members of a Chinese-Australian community. A Chinese filmmaker, moreover, can present us with her experience of living in Sydney¹⁸, expressing her own sense of entrapment, lured by the glamour and lights of Sydney's largest casino. A Belgian filmmaker can rejoice¹⁹ in the absurdity of two white Australians crossing the country in an old caravan, powered only by horses, in their attempt for meaning and place in a vast country. A Thai, Columbian, Japanese and a Swedish filmmaker can each look out into the vast, impenetrable Australian bush to see living in it the possibility of ghosts²⁰, fairies²¹, a yowie²², or a giant murderous teddy bear²³, respectively.



Back to Me (SFS, 2010), a live action drama by Tiffany Parker

Filmmakers studying in Australia can reflect at a distance on developments back in their home countries. A Turkish filmmaker can depict²⁴ a fully grown woman emerge from a giant, bloody womb, to step out into the confusion of an urban landscape, only moments before student uprisings in the streets of Istanbul give birth to the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring throughout the Middle-East. An Iranian filmmaker can blindfold himself, naked, and set a violin on fire, as - now free to express to himself in a foreign country²⁵ - he rages against the ongoing strict censorship laws in Iran. A Palestinian filmmaker uses the symbol of her childhood swing²⁶ being dug up by a bulldozer to refer to the destruction of a country. A Russian filmmaker conceives of an elevator²⁷, employing the different levels of a building to suggest hierarchy of control and abuse of power. A Portuguese filmmaker, unsettled by the dire economic crisis back in Europe, can construct a camera obscura²⁸ and use this as a metaphor for all the darkness and confusion, while, at the same time, offering us a glimmer of hope in the form of a tiny pin prick in the wall, letting in a thin, but essential, shard of light.



Welcome Home (SFS, 2011), an experimental film by Gozde Koyuncu



As It Is (SFS, 2012), an experimental film by Ehsan Mohammadloo

For a witness to the above hybrid (and discursive) narratives, the conflicting frictions caused between the different perceived “cartographies” can readily erupt and give rise to the tectonic formation of new frontiers of understanding the past. On the importance of friction to the functioning of a healthy society, Claire Bishop (referring to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) writes in *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*: “a fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate - in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased²⁹.”

It will be tempting for any collector/curator of the above films to avoid such “antagonisms” by seeking out safe modes of categorization, the most obvious example being by the form (documentary, animation, drama, etc) in which they are expressed. However, in constructing a cross-referential archive, we must be careful to resist our impulse towards simplification and segregation, thereby diminishing the potential for discordance and meaningful debate.

Marker himself parodies our incessant desire for neat, over-simplified classifications. Instead, his referencing is “purposely eccentric, heterogenous, subjective, discontinuous, reflexive, aphoristic and digressional”. He is “questioning rather than conclusive”, and displays the continual propensity for “subversion, inversion and pleasure³⁰”.

Clearly, enhanced hybridity and intertextuality (also a feature of Marker films³¹), increases the chance for a fuller, more meaningful conversation³², and in triggering such conversations in the present, we actively participate in shaping the future.

In one review of Marker's *Le souvenir d'avenir* it is written: "The film leaves you wondering how the images that litter our present landscape might actually contain signs flashing warnings of what's waiting for us³³." This comment invites the possibility that such a future can be predicted if we pay careful enough attention to the signs playing out around us.

As generators of large volumes of content from all around the world, film schools could play a significant role in the threading together of the thousands of "fragments of memory" belonging to individual voices from different cultural backgrounds. Through a collective exchange of ideas, images and signs – Marker's "continents, islands, deserts" – film schools can help chart the landscapes of our past and, perhaps, by doing so, the contours of our future.

Biography

Ben is a film writer/director whose films have screened at festivals throughout the world. His short film *The Kitchen* (2003) won the Grand Prix at the Akira Kurosawa Memorial Short Film Festival in Tokyo in 2005, and short film *Ascension* (2004) won the Grand Prix at the 4th One Take Film Festival in Croatia in 2004. His debut feature film *Penelope*, an Australian-Croatian co-production, screened in National Competition at the 56th Pula Film Festival in Croatia in 2009, won a Van Gogh

Award at the Amsterdam Film Festival in 2010 and is released worldwide through Contemporary Arts Media. Ben is a research scholar with the Australasian Classical Reception Studies Network, and is currently undertaking a PhD by Research at the University of Sydney, examining the figure of Orpheus in the films of Jean Cocteau. Ben is a founder of the Sydney Film School. He was Founding Director (2004-2013) and currently Artistic Director.

Bibliography

- > Bishop, Claire, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, MIT Press, Vol.110, October 2004.
- > Glissant, Édouard, *Poétique de la Relation*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1990.
- > Guattari, Félix, *Chaosmose*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1992.
- > Hampton, Howard, *Chris Marker: Remembrance of Revolutions Past*, filmcomment, undated. <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/chris-marker-remembrance-of-revolutions-past> (accessed 19 September 2014).
- > Kear, Jonathan, "A Game That Must Be Lost: Chris Marker Replays Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*", Guerin, Frances and Hallas, Roger (eds) *the image and the witness: trauma, memory and visual culture*, London, 2007.
- > Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Random House, 1985.
- > Lee, Kevin B., *Chris Marker's Image Index: As Europe's grasp on the early 20th-century globe tightens into a death grip in "Remembrance of Things to Come"*, Keyframe, 21 March 2014. <http://www.fandor.com/keyframe/chris-markers-image-index> (accessed 19 September 2014).
- > Liandrat-Guigues, Suzanne, "Un cinéma du territoire", *Image and Narrative*, Vol 10, No 3, 2009.
- > Mitchell, W.J.T. (ed.), *The Language of Images*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Notes

¹ A reference to Chris Marker's 2001 film of the same name, which deals with issues of predicting future visions through archiving memory. The film is especially memorable for showing how the photographs of French photographer Denise Bellon double as prophecies of World War II; how "each of her photographs shows a past, but deciphers a future."

[Back to text >](#)

² The French poet quoted by Marker at the end of *Le Souvenir d'avenir*.

[Back to text >](#)

³ See, for example, his films *La Jetée* (1962), *Sans soleil* (1982), and *Level 5* (1996). See chrismarker.org, entitled "Notes from the Era of Imperfect Memory". Also see Jonathan Kear, "A Game That Must Be Lost: Chris Marker Replays Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*", Frances Guerin and Robert Hallas (eds), *the image and the witness: trauma, memory and visual culture*, London, 2007. Kear, in his reading of Marker's *Level 5* (1996), expresses Marker's conception of history as follows: "Inevitably, within a history that explores its own limits, the question of bearing witness to the past cannot be understood as a matter of recuperation, but rather, it must be approached as a constructive process of re-imagining the past. As such, the act of witnessing implies not time regained, but time re-evoked. Within this framework, remembering and forgetting are not antithetical, but rather, two sides of the same coin... The historical past is therefore not something that is static and complete; it is mutable, something continually remade in the present." (p. 135.)

[Back to text >](#)

⁴ *Ibid.* Marker is "retrieving the overlooked, the marginalized and the suppressed components of those histories" (p. 129).

[Back to text >](#)

⁵ For more on this conception cf. Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, "Un cinéma du territoire", *Image and Narrative, Vol 10, No 3*, 2009, p. 59-65. She, in turn, references the seminal Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Paris, coll. Critique, Les Editions de Minuit, 1980.

[Back to text >](#)

⁶ The Sydney Film School (SFS), for example, recently celebrated the production of its 1000th film.

[Back to text >](#)

⁷ Something akin to Guattari's "artistic cartographies". Guattari, F., *Chaosmose*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1992.

[Back to text >](#)

⁸ The issue of an authentic image, though critical to this discussion, is much more complex than I have time to go into here. See for example W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *The Language of Images*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

[Back to text >](#)

⁹ *The Incredible Deepness of a Whale's Eye* (SFS, 2008), a documentary by Gaelle Degallaix.

[Back to text >](#)

¹⁰ *The Whereabouts of Whaling* (SFS, 2008), a documentary by Shunsuke Takei.

[Back to text >](#)

¹¹ *Human Meat Factory* (SFS, 2011), a stop-frame animation by Anna Han.

[Back to text >](#)

¹² *Money* (SFS, 2008), a live action drama by Ayumia Ardhiyati.

[Back to text >](#)

¹³ *Back to Me* (SFS, 2010), a live action drama by Tiffany Parker.

[Back to text >](#)

¹⁴ *Koori* (SFS, 2005), a documentary by Jae-Gu Yi.

[Back to text >](#)

¹⁵ *The Hidden Gem* (SFS, 2012), a documentary by Namratha Thomas.

[Back to text >](#)

¹⁶ *Us and Them* (SFS, 2012), a live action drama by Dru O'Meara.

[Back to text >](#)

¹⁷ *Go Quickly* (SFS, 2005), a live action drama by Michael McLennan.

[Back to text >](#)

¹⁸ *In the Tiger's Mouth* (SFS, 2006), a documentary by Dana Yang.

[Back to text >](#)

- ¹⁹ *Cohee* (SFS, 2009), a documentary by Jan van Roey.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²⁰ *Nowhere to be Found* (SFS, 2013), a live action drama by Chinnapat Pothieng.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²¹ *Nowhere* (SFS, 2013), a live action drama by Carolina Izquierdo.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²² *Mysterious Animals: The Search for the Yowie* (SFS, 2008), a mockumentary by Shunsuke Takei.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²³ *Alpha Bear* (SFS, 2007), a live action comedy by Toby Abrahamsson.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²⁴ *Welcome Home* (SFS, 2011), an experimental film by Gozde Koyuncu.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²⁵ *As It Is* (SFS, 2012), an experimental film by Ehsan Mohammadloo.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²⁶ *Pink Swing* (SFS, 2013), a live action drama by Alaa Al Qaisi.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²⁷ *What You Wish For* (SFS, 2013), a live action drama by Karolina Roberts.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²⁸ *Camera Obscura* (SFS, 2010), a stop-frame animation by Marta Maia.
[Back to text >](#)
- ²⁹ Claire Bishop, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, MIT Press, Vol.110, October 2004, p. 65-66. She, in turn, cites Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Random House, 1985. For more on this concept see especially Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1990, where Glissant

conceives of (and perhaps aspires to) a relational identity that is linked to “the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures.” Incidentally, the Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, at a recent talk in Sydney (*Festival of Dangerous Ideas*, Sydney Opera House, August 2014), spoke of the pressing, increasing need for storytellers in our current times to counter the overtly simplistic, intractable visions of the world driven by the various political, religious, and ideological forces that seek to segregate us.

[Back to text >](#)

³⁰ Jonathan Kear, art. cit., p. 133-134. Also, p. 139: “Marker’s filmic labyrinth, with its infinite array of random pathways, links and traces, present us with fragments of the past, references that lead to other references, but ultimately lead toward neither a final destination nor conclusion.”

[Back to text >](#)

³¹ Howard Hampton, *Chris Marker: Remembrance of Revolutions Past*, filmcomment, undated, <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/chris-marker-remembrance-of-revolutions-past>: “Marker’s conversational, ever-evolving cinematic hybrids (newsreel/fiction, *La Jetée*’s stills-on-film, the gradual embrace of video’s casual plasticity) always seem to be moving in several directions at once, full-circling back to the same eternal preoccupation—our times as they, and we, have seemingly passed into the dustbin of history... Missives composed of so many types of footage that they are then sent gently pinballing back into the world, in a language that’s as public as a political demonstration, reclusive as a secret life, and intimate as a love song”.

[Back to text >](#)

³² What Guattari in *Chaosmose* (op. cit.) refers to as a “mutant production of enunciation” through a process that is “in rupture with signification and denotation”.

[Back to text >](#)

³³ Kevin B. Lee, *Chris Marker’s Image Index: As Europe’s grasp on the early 20th-century globe tightens into a death grip in “Remembrance of Things to Come”*, Keyframe, 21 March 2014. <http://www.fandor.com/keyframe/chris-markers-image-index>

[Back to text >](#)