



*Sans Soleil / Sunless Part I* - Chris Marker

The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked. He wrote me: one day I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black.

He wrote: I'm just back from Hokkaido, the Northern Island. Rich and hurried Japanese take the plane, others take the ferry: waiting, immobility, snatches of sleep. Curiously all of that makes me think of a past or future war: night trains, air raids, fallout shelters, small fragments of war enshrined in everyday life. He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time. Those memories whose only function had been to leave behind nothing but memories. He wrote: I've been round the world several times and now only banality still interests me. On this trip I've tracked it with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter. At dawn we'll be in Tokyo.

He used to write me from Africa. He contrasted African time to European time, and also to Asian time. He said that in the 19th century mankind had come to terms with space, and that the great question of the 20th was the coexistence of different concepts of time. By the way, did you know that there are emus in the Île de France?

He wrote me that in the Bijagós Islands it's the young girls who choose their fiancées.

He wrote me that in the suburbs of Tokyo there is a temple consecrated to cats. I wish I could convey to you the simplicity—the lack of affectation—of this couple who had come to place an inscribed wooden slat in the cat cemetery so their cat Tora would be protected. No she wasn't dead, only run away. But on the day of her death no one would know how to pray for her, how to intercede with death so that he would call her by her right name. So they had to come there, both of them, under the rain, to perform the rite that would repair the web of time where it had been broken.

He wrote me: I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?

He didn't like to dwell on poverty, but in everything he wanted to show there were also the 4-Fs of the Japanese model. A world full of bums, of lumpens, of outcasts, of Koreans. Too broke to afford drugs, they'd get drunk on beer, on fermented milk. This morning in Namidabashi, twenty minutes from the glories of the center city, a character took his revenge on society by directing traffic at the crossroads. Luxury for them would be one of those large bottles of *sake* that are poured over tombs on the day of the dead.

I paid for a round in a bar in Namidabashi. It's the kind of place that allows people to stare at each other with equality; the threshold below which every man is as good as any other—and knows it.

He told me about the Jetty on Fogo, in the Cape Verde islands. How long have they been there waiting for the boat, patient as pebbles but ready to jump? They are a people of wanderers, of navigators, of world travelers. They fashioned themselves through cross-breeding here on these rocks that the Portuguese used as a marshaling yard for their colonies. A people of nothing, a people of emptiness, a vertical people. Frankly, have you ever heard of anything stupider than to say to people as they teach in film schools, not to look at the camera?

He used to write to me: the Sahel is not only what is shown of it when it is too late; it's a land that drought seeps into like water into a leaking boat. The animals resurrected for the time of a carnival in Bissau will be petrified again, as soon as a new attack has changed the savannah into a desert. This is a state of survival that the rich countries have forgotten, with one exception—you win—Japan. My constant comings and goings are not a search for contrasts; they are a journey to the two extreme poles of survival.

He spoke to me of Sei Shonagon, a lady in waiting to Princess Sadako at the beginning of the 11th century, in the Heian period. Do we ever know where history is really made? Rulers ruled and used complicated strategies to fight one another. Real power was in the hands of a family of hereditary regents; the emperor's court had become nothing more than a place of intrigues and intellectual games. But by learning to draw a sort of melancholy comfort from the contemplation of the tiniest things this small group of idlers left a mark on Japanese sensibility much deeper than the mediocre thundering of the politicians. Shonagon had a passion for lists: the list of 'elegant things,' 'distressing things,' or even of 'things not worth

doing.' One day she got the idea of drawing up a list of 'things that quicken the heart.' Not a bad criterion I realize when I'm filming; I bow to the economic miracle, but what I want to show you are the neighborhood celebrations.

He wrote me: coming back through the Chiba coast I thought of Shonagon's list, of all those signs one has only to name to quicken the heart, just name. To us, a sun is not quite a sun unless it's radiant, and a spring not quite a spring unless it is limpid. Here to place adjectives would be so rude as leaving price tags on purchases. Japanese poetry never modifies. There is a way of saying boat, rock, mist, frog, crow, hail, heron, chrysanthemum, that includes them all. Newspapers have been filled recently with the story of a man from Nagoya. The woman he loved died last year and he drowned himself in work—Japanese style—like a madman. It seems he even made an important discovery in electronics. And then in the month of May he killed himself. They say he could not stand hearing the word 'Spring.'

He described me his reunion with Tokyo: like a cat who has come home from vacation in his basket immediately starts to inspect familiar places. He ran off to see if everything was where it should be: the Ginza owl, the Shimbashi locomotive, the temple of the fox at the top of the Mitsukoshi department store, which he found invaded by little girls and rock singers. He was told that it was now little girls who made and unmade stars; the producers shuddered before them. He was told that a disfigured woman took off her mask in front of passers-by and scratched them if they did not find her beautiful. Everything interested him. He who didn't give a damn if the Dodgers won the pennant or about the results of the Daily Double asked feverishly how Chiyonofuji had done in the last sumo tournament. He asked for news of the imperial family, of the crown prince, of the oldest mobster in Tokyo who appears regularly on television to teach goodness to children. These simple joys he had never felt: of returning to a country, a house, a family home. But twelve million anonymous inhabitants could supply him with them.

He wrote: Tokyo is a city crisscrossed by trains, tied together with electric wire she shows her veins. They say that television makes her people illiterate; as for me, I've never seen so many people reading in the streets. Perhaps they read only in the street, or perhaps they just pretend to read—these yellow men. I make my appointments at Kinokuniya, the big bookshop in Shinjuku. The graphic genius that allowed the Japanese to invent CinemaScope ten centuries before the movies compensates a little for the sad fate of the comic strip heroines, victims of heartless story writers and of castrating censorship. Sometimes they escape, and you find them again on the walls. The entire city is a comic strip; it's Planet Manga. How can one fail to recognize the statuary that goes from plasticized

baroque to Stalin central? And the giant faces with eyes that weigh down on the comic book readers, pictures bigger than people, voyeurizing the voyeurs.

At nightfall the megalopolis breaks down into villages, with its country cemeteries in the shadow of banks, with its stations and temples. Each district of Tokyo once again becomes a tidy ingenuous little town, nestling amongst the skyscrapers.

The small bar in Shinjuku reminded him of that Indian flute whose sound can only be heard by whomever is playing it. He might have cried out if it was in a Godard film or a Shakespeare play, “Where should this music be?”

Later he told me he had eaten at the restaurant in Nishi-nippori where Mr. Yamada practices the difficult art of 'action cooking.' He said that by watching carefully Mr. Yamada's gestures and his way of mixing the ingredients one could meditate usefully on certain fundamental concepts common to painting, philosophy, and karate. He claimed that Mr. Yamada possessed in his humble way the essence of style, and consequently that it was up to him to use his invisible brush to write upon this first day in Tokyo the words 'the end.'

I've spent the day in front of my TV set—that memory box. I was in Nara with the sacred deers. I was taking a picture without knowing that in the 15th century Basho had written: “The willow sees the heron's image... upside down.”

The commercial becomes a kind of haiku to the eye, used to Western atrocities in this field; not understanding obviously adds to the pleasure. For one slightly hallucinatory moment I had the impression that I spoke Japanese, but it was a cultural program on NHK about Gérard de Nerval.

8:40, Cambodia. From Jean Jacques Rousseau to the Khmer Rouge: coincidence, or the sense of history?

In *Apocalypse Now*, Brando said a few definitive and incommunicable sentences: “Horror has a face and a name... you must make a friend of horror.” To cast out the horror that has a name and a face you must give it another name and another face. Japanese horror movies have the cunning beauty of certain corpses. Sometimes one is stunned by so much cruelty. One seeks its sources in the Asian peoples long familiarity with suffering, that requires that even pain be ornate. And then comes the reward: the monsters are laid out, Natsume Masako arises; absolute beauty also has a name and a face.

But the more you watch Japanese television... the more you feel it's watching you. Even television newscast bears witness to the fact that the magical function of the eye is at the center of all things. It's election time: the winning candidates black out the empty eye of Daruma—the spirit of luck—while losing candidates—sad but dignified—carry off their one-eyed Daruma.

The images most difficult to figure out are those of Europe. I watched the pictures of a film whose soundtrack will be added later. It took me six months for Poland.

Meanwhile, I have no difficulty with local earthquakes. But I must say that last night's quake helped me greatly to grasp a problem.

Poetry is born of insecurity: wandering Jews, quaking Japanese; by living on a rug that jesting nature is ever ready to pull out from under them they've got into the habit of moving about in a world of appearances: fragile, fleeting, revocable, of trains that fly from planet to planet, of samurai fighting in an immutable past. That's called 'the impermanence of things.'

I did it all. All the way to the evening shows for adults—so called. The same hypocrisy as in the comic strips, but it's a coded hypocrisy. Censorship is not the mutilation of the show, it is the show. The code is the message. It points to the absolute by hiding it. That's what religions have always done.

That year, a new face appeared among the great ones that blazon the streets of Tokyo: the Pope's. Treasures that had never left the Vatican were shown on the seventh floor of the Sogo department store.

He wrote me: curiosity of course, and the glimmer of industrial espionage in the eye—I imagine them bringing out within two years time a more efficient and less expensive version of Catholicism—but there's also the fascination associated with the sacred, even when it's someone else's.

So when will the third floor of Macy's harbor an exhibition of Japanese sacred signs such as can be seen at Josen-kai on the island of Hokkaido? At first one smiles at this place which combines a museum, a chapel, and a sex shop. As always in Japan, one admires the fact that the walls between the realms are so thin that one can in the same breath contemplate a statue, buy an inflatable doll, and give the goddess of fertility the small offering that always accompanies her displays. Displays whose frankness would make the stratagems of the television incomprehensible, if it did not at the same time say that a sex is visible only on condition of being severed from a body.

One would like to believe in a world before the fall: inaccessible to the complications of a Puritanism whose phony shadow has been imposed on it by American occupation. Where people who gather laughing around the votive fountain, the woman who touches it with a friendly gesture, share in the same cosmic innocence.

The second part of the museum—with its couples of stuffed animals—would then be the earthly paradise as we have always dreamed it. Not so sure... animal innocence may be a trick for getting around censorship, but perhaps also the mirror of an impossible reconciliation. And even without original sin this earthly paradise may be a paradise lost. In the glossy splendour of the gentle animals of Josen-kai I read the fundamental rift of Japanese society, the rift that separates men from women. In life it seems to show itself in two ways only: violent slaughter, or a discreet melancholy—resembling Sei Shonagon's—which the Japanese express in a single untranslatable word. So this bringing down of man to the level of the beasts—against which the fathers of the church invade—becomes here the challenge of the beasts to the poignancy of things, to a melancholy whose color I can give you by copying a few lines from Samura Koichi: “Who said that time heals all wounds? It would be better to say that time heals everything except wounds. With time, the hurt of separation loses its real limits. With time, the desired body will soon disappear, and if the desiring body has already ceased to exist for the other, then what remains is a wound... disembodied.”