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Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme, directors, *Le Joli mai*, 145 min. DVD. (Icarus Films, 2013). Institutional: \$398.00; Individual: \$34.98.

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Say “Paris in the month of May” to a French historian and she is likely to think of 1968. But for fans of filmmaker, photographer, writer, and artist Chris Marker, “Paris in the springtime” also means *Le Joli mai* of 1962.[1] The recently restored and re-released black-and-white film, translated as *The Lovely Month of May*, chronicles Paris and Parisians during “the first springtime of peace” since 1939 that followed the Evian Accords and the ceasefire in Algeria. Marker himself put the idea in quotation marks to acknowledge the continued violence and killing in North Africa as well as the racism and class conflict present in the hexagon. Marker, cinematographer Pierre Lhomme (credited as co-director) and a small team took to the streets to capture this paradoxical peace in interviews with Parisians on the subjects of social and individual happiness, freedom, the past, and the future.

H-France subscribers will find *Le Joli mai* a veritable treasure-trove, a time capsule of the early 1960s. Here, the rue Mouffetard housed produce stalls and artist studios, not cheesy tourist restaurants; one in twelve households did not have running water; the towers sprouting up around the city gleamed with newness; workers still built cars at the Paris Citroën and Renault factories; the refrigerator represented the height of civilization; and in the evenings the French watched a single national television channel. The film’s voice-over, read in French by Yves Montand and in English by his longtime partner Simone Signoret, predicted that even “in 10 years, these images will be more disorienting [*dépayseront*] than those of Paris 1900 today.” Fifty years later the effect is much stronger. Those who teach twentieth-century French history should consider showing *Le Joli mai*, or even individual interviews, as part of discussions about urbanization, immigration, gender, decolonization, labor, or consumerism. As a self-consciously historical film, it could also make a thought-provoking addition to units on oral history or the utility of documentary and film in a graduate-level methods class.

Le Joli mai spans cinematic (and non-cinematic) genres. The bulk of the film consists of interviews interspersed with footage of events such as the *Foire de Paris*, celebrations of the 1945 victory at the Arc de Triomphe, and a wedding, as well as explorations of individual neighborhoods. Each interviewee (identified by initials or profession) or scene is labeled with date and place, linking the content to a material trajectory through the city. Pointing to its interviews, scholars and critics most often identify the film as a work of *cinéma vérité* or *cinéma direct*. The method/genre used new portable 16mm cameras and microphones equipped for synchronized sound to capture the lives and opinions of ordinary people.[2] The film’s opening, however, also places it within a longer-standing genre of Paris odes. It begins with still rooftop shots of monuments and neighborhoods at dawn, accompanied by a similar panorama of the city’s soundscape: church bells, sirens, incessant traffic, and snippets of radio. The voiceover professes love for the capital and the desire to encounter it with fresh eyes or to leave and return to see what has changed. This sequence evokes the tradition of Paris chronicles from Louis Sebastian Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris* to the opening scenes of films such as Rouben Mamoulian’s *Love me Tonight* (1932) and, more recently, Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011) as well as one of the hit songs of that later Paris spring, Jacques Dutronc’s 1968 “Il est cinq heures, Paris s’éveille.” The

interviewees' thoughts about happiness, freedom, the future, and death combined with the film's exploration of Paris in long traveling shots and in still images, as well as its jazzy score by Michel Legrand, create their own poetic vision of the capital. In that sense, *Le Joli mai* seems to have just as much in common with Agnès Varda's fictional *Cléo de 5 à 7* (in theaters in May 1962, with music by Legrand) as with Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un été* (of 1960) to which it is more often compared.

The film reveals and explores a widening gap in French society between the desires of the individual—happiness, money, marriage, children, and consumer goods—and the needs of society—freedom, equality, democracy, and justice. It consists of two parts (divided by a musical interlude): “Prayer on the Eiffel Tower” and “The Return of Fantômas.” The first explores Parisians' individual communion with the constraints and promises of modern life, exposing, at times, a troubling lack of social solidarity. It opens on May 1, not with the Fête du travail, but with a suit salesman's complaints about the heat, his boss, and his wife. His response to Marker's question, “When are you free in all of this,” is only when driving to and from work (as long as there is not too much traffic). And it ends with the declaration of a young soldier whose departure to Algeria is imminent. Holding his sweetheart tight, he proclaims: “I believe in eternal happiness.” In between, the interviews often reveal selfish preoccupations. We meet stockbrokers who think first of how the latest news from Algeria will affect the market and their teenage employees whose ambitions go no farther than the corner office. The soldier and his girlfriend explain that they avoid thinking about politics or “historical events” because, if they started, they could never stop. But the film is often sympathetic to these personal concerns, especially the need for better housing. Although the voiceover expresses uncertainty as to whether “happiness is possible” in the new tower blocks, the team shares the joy of a housewife (with nine children) at the news that she will trade her one-room lodging for a three-bedroom apartment with running water and electricity. “Prayer on the Eiffel Tower” also sympathetically captures the immaterial desires of Parisians—a poet, inventors, a tire repairman-turned-painter, a little boy—for beauty, art, and knowledge.

The second part of the film opens with the rumor that the early-twentieth-century fictional character Fantômas has risen from his grave to haunt the capital. [3] In popular novels and films, Fantômas traveled the world stealing, torturing, and killing, often framing his victims for the very crimes he committed. Marker and Lhomme find his shadow in graffiti (OAS=SS), in the addition of *plastiquer* (or to use plastic explosives) to the dictionary, and in the thoughts of Parisians themselves. This part explores the war in Algeria with archival footage of the February 8 demonstrations and the 500,000 Parisians who lined the streets for the funerals that followed. The voiceover reminds us that, at the beginning of 1962, many thought France was on the brink of a civil war. And yet, the filmmakers talk to numerous Parisians who found the weather the only remarkable thing about that May. Uniformed soldiers and a heavy police presence flit in and out of shots, but the only Parisians who talk about the war in Algeria—or even racism and the treatment of colonial subjects in the metropole—are those who are victims of it. One man simply shrugs his shoulders at the thought of violence in the colonies, and a young woman living on the avenue Matignon declares that the French could be happy under a dictator. Others dance the Madison at the Garden Club the night after Raoul Salan's death sentence is commuted to life in prison. Several Parisians, among them striking union workers, refuse to discuss politics with the filmmakers. One claims, “we don't have the right to say what we think,” while others explain they prefer not to think at all any more. The most radical says she will not talk to the “whores” of government broadcasting.

The characters with the most striking sense of social engagement appear in “The Return of Fantômas.” A Dahomean student describes his life in France without a single white friend. A young Algerian, perched on a grassy knoll above a shantytown, recounts a savage beating by five members of the DST (*Direction de la surveillance du territoire*) in front of his parents. He subsequently spent a week on a psychiatric ward but still believes that his future is in France and that Algeria's depends on maintaining close ties with its colonizers. He declares he has no time for love. A middle-aged union activist reveals

his past life as a priest. He left the Church to align himself with a tribe that believes in humans' ability to make life better in the here and now. And while it is obvious that Marker, Lhomme, and their colleagues admire these figures' social awareness and engagement, the film seems equally sympathetic to the female costume designer who seeks refuge in a fantasy world of curated objects and be-hatted cats. After all, Marker's favorite animals--the owl and the cat--featured here in funny and pointed shots, are hardly the social organizers of the animal kingdom.

The film concludes with a sequence of time lapses of the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs Élysées, and the rue Mouffetard set to jazz, heavy on the synthesizer and drums. A series of statistics sums up the month: the average temperature was 53°F, 50,000 tons of vegetables were sold at les Halles, 999,003,000 trips taken in the metro, et cetera. But this note of playful optimism--that consumption numbers and streets give us the city as a whole--abruptly shifts with the introduction of the last interviews. For the inmates of Paris's prisons, the voiceover explains, every day was exactly the same. The female prisoners at the Roquette (heard but not seen) introduce viewers to their world, where the bathroom with its cold water taps forms the shape of a hexagon, the shape of France itself. The voiceover explains that these women dream of "doors that open from the inside and steps that go in a straight line." Lain over traveling sequences through the streets of Paris, again at dawn, the voiceover describes how the film has approached the city through the eyes of a newly freed prisoner, attempting to understand Parisians. It generously praises its subjects who were not always right, but tried to be true to their own beliefs and pities the others trapped inside prisons of their own making. While the camera focuses on unhappy faces in the crowd, the voiceover asks them what is wrong, why they are sad. It concludes hopefully that perhaps they know that they can never be happy unless everyone is happy, free unless everyone is free, rich unless everyone is rich. It calls Parisians to understand that their own personal happiness is inextricable from society's betterment. This generosity and compassion for its subject, mixed with firm convictions that individuals need to come together, make the film a call to arms, not just a compelling portrait of Paris in May 1962.

Le Joli mai won numerous prizes at film festivals in 1963, including the International Critics Prize at Cannes (it also premiered in North America at the New York Film Festival). The new version was completed in 2009 thanks to the *Centre national du cinéma* and the *Archives françaises du film*. The film enjoyed a limited international theatrical rerelease in 2013 and is now available on DVD. The DVD includes bonus features (*Jouer à Paris* by Catherine Varlin, *D'un lointain regard* by Jean Ravel, a short piece about the making of *Le Joli mai* with commentaries by Pierre Lhomme), as well as twenty minutes of scenes cut from the theatrical version (these are particularly worth watching for an interview about the use of torture in Algeria and discussions with high school students about their military training and political apathy). The distribution of *Le Joli mai* coincided with retrospectives and celebrations of Marker's work on both sides of the Atlantic that followed his death in 2012.^[4] While discovering Chris Marker would be a treat in any year, his *Le Joli mai* resounds in important and interesting ways across the social and political landscape, namely the Front National's triumph in the European elections, of France's most recent month of May.

NOTES

[1] For more about Marker's work, start with Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion, 2005); Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[2] These new technologies also facilitated the formal innovations of fictional New Wave films. For more about *cinéma directe*, start with chapter five of Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993 [2nd edition]).

[3] Fantômas appeared in several series of books as well as films directed by Louis Feuillade in the first half of the twentieth century. For more about the villain, start with Robin Walz and Elliott Smith's rich *The Fantômas Website*: <http://www.fantomas-lives.com>, accessed May 31, 2014.

[4] These included *Planète Marker* at the Centre Pompidou, *Chris Marker: Guillaume-en-Egypte* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University (with screenings at the Harvard Film Archive), and *Chris Marker: A Grin Without a Cat* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London (screenings at the Ciné Lumière and the Barbican).

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