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Chris Marker and Yannick Bellon, *Remembrance of Things to Come (Le Souvenir d'un avenir)*. Les films de l'Equinoxe, produced for ARTE. 42 minutes. VHS format. B&W. First Run Icarus Films, 2001. \$390.00 U.S. (rental \$125.00).

Review by Venita Datta, Wellesley College.

Co-authored by filmmakers Chris Marker and Yannick Bellon, *Remembrance of Things to Come* is ostensibly a biography of Bellon's mother, photographer Denise Bellon (1902-1999). In actuality, this "ciné-essay," based on photographs taken by Bellon from 1935 to 1955, is as much an examination of the times she recorded for posterity, ranging from the Popular Front, to the Occupation, to the post-war period. Bellon was an active participant in the age in which she lived. An intimate of the Surrealists, she signed a pacifist manifesto, along with André Breton, on the eve of the Second World War. She was also a pioneer in photojournalism, part of the original *équipe* of the Alliance photo agency, founded in 1934, and a contributor to such publications as *Match*, *Paris-magazine*, and *Arts et métiers graphiques*. Her photos were eclectic, their subjects including such disparate subjects as holiday makers of the Popular Front, artists Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, prostitutes in Morocco, colonial subjects in Africa, and wounded World War I soldiers. Like other photojournalists of the time, she successfully documented both the cultural and political events of the age, opening up heretofore unseen worlds to an eager French public.

There are, of course, frequent references in the film to Denise herself and her two daughters--Yannick and her sister, actress/playwright Loleh. We learn, for example, that their collaborations were family affairs, with Yannick and Loleh often serving as subjects for their mother's photos, including a famous one for hot chocolate. But most of these bits of information are thrown out casually and sparingly, and not elaborated upon, including, during a discussion of Vichy, a brief reference to Denise's (née Hulmann) Jewish origins. Instead, Marker and Bellon choose to present their subject largely through her work and also as a window onto the period in which she lived.

The film begins with Bellon's photographs of Dali's "Rainy Taxi" for the International Surrealist Exhibition of 1938, which the narrator describes as a "unique moment in time, when post war was becoming pre war." The narrator goes on to note that "each of Bellon's photographs shows a past yet deciphers a future." These comments set the tone of the film. For the filmmakers, the haunting images of the Surrealists seem to echo not only the distorted faces of the *gueules cassées*, the mutilated faces of World War I soldiers photographed by Bellon, but also to announce the destruction of the war to come. So, too, do the bodies lying in repose alongside streams and beaches during the heyday of the Popular Front seem to suggest the mangled bodies of civilians and soldiers in the wake of the coming German bombings. A photo taken by Denise of a Gypsy wedding, published on the cover of a popular magazine, is accompanied in the same issue by an excerpt of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, thereby foreshadowing the horrors of the Holocaust, during which Gypsies, second only to Jews, were exterminated. For all its haunting qualities, *Remembrance of Things to Come* is filled with humorous anecdotes, witty musings, and word games. The "parachuters" of the 1930s become the "paratroopers" of the 1940s; the Citroen car is also known as a "citron." The title of the film is itself a play on the English translation of Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*. Through the course of their wide-ranging commentary, the filmmakers tell us that during the Universal Exhibition of 1937, photographed by Bellon, the Soviet and German

pavilions faced/confronted one another, with the narrator noting archly that the “architects saw farther than the politicians.” One especially amusing anecdote, accompanied by Denise’s photograph, documents the famous collection of films piled up in the bathtub of the future founder of the Cinémathèque, Henri Langlois. During the German Occupation, these treasures, including the reels for *The Battleship Potemkin*, were transported in a baby carriage in order to protect them from German hands.

The same technique that Marker displayed to brilliant effect in his classic *La Jetée* (1962) is in evidence here. The images move back and forth through time, playing with chronology, but the end result is to draw viewers into the images as if they themselves were reliving these memories. This effect is rather disconcerting, yet extremely effective. Certainly Bellon’s images, in and of themselves, are a standing testimony to an important age. Her eye, clever and nuanced, sees beauty in the quotidian and also observes the haunted quality of everyday life. Yet the arrangement of these images, together with the commentary, presented in the English version by the matter of fact, yet wry voice of Patricia Stewart, heighten the quality of the images presented.

Throughout the film, the directors are determined to read the past as a function of the future; that is, the events of the inter-war years are viewed through the lens of the Occupation and the Holocaust, thereby giving Denise Bellon’s photos a prescient quality. This technique may not be appropriate for the historian, but it is entirely suitable for a work of art. Denise Bellon’s photographs, presented by the filmmakers as a journal or a photo album, remind us that, when we look at images of the past, we often imbue them with memories and knowledge of subsequent events. The film is more an exercise in memory than in history, but it is very useful to historians nonetheless. A *tour de force* of photomontage, *Remembrance of Things to Come* serves, literally, as an illustration of the themes covered by historical works of the period. Students of today, so closely attuned to the visual, will find the film both engaging and appealing.

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