
H-France Review Vol. 14 (November 2014), No. 181

Gavin Keeney, *Dossier Chris Marker: The Suffering Image*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. xxxi + 268 pp. \$84.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN-10: 144384182X.

Review by Jennifer Stob, Texas State University.

As a postscript to his text *Coréennes* [1] included on the CD-ROM *Immemory* (1997), Chris Marker offers an explanation for his investment in leftist social struggle and the central place he has consistently afforded it in his photographs, films and digital media projects. "If I ever had a passion in the field of politics," he states, "it's a passion for understanding. Understanding how people manage to live on a planet like ours. Understanding how they seek, how they try, how they make mistakes, how they get over them, how they learn, how they lose their way" (qtd. in Keeney, p. 175). Marker's art conveys this quest to us in the conditional tense, in essayistic form, in a wide variety of different media. *Dossier Chris Marker: The Suffering Image* is dedicated to analyzing this "passion for understanding" transversally through Marker's *oeuvre*. Instead of examining the history or the specificity of these heterogeneous media of artistic expression, Gavin Keeney presents Marker's artworks and activism as "one work"; as a "complex" or a "totality" of speculative political and subjective agency (pp. xiii, x, xiv, Keeney's emphases).

In doing so, his book signals a novel departure from the well-researched, but conceptually conventional monographs on Marker from the mid-2000s. Texts like Catherine Lupton's *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, Nora M. Alter's *Chris Marker* and Sarah Cooper's *Chris Marker* chronologically correlate the progression of Marker's intellectual biography and his projects.[2] In contrast, Keeney's text attempts to encompass Marker's philosophical approach in one overarching thesis, reiterating this thesis in a number of discrete, diaristic short essays that reference Marker's more obscure and understudied creations. Keeney suggests that in all of Marker's activity—his travels, his experiments with collectivity and his aesthetic production—we witness a clash of Christic and Marxist visions. This clash may at first be mistaken for a dialectical operation, but the romantic and mystical nature of the affective knowledge this clash produces distinguishes it from the kind produced through dialectical sublation. According to Keeney, Marker locates the true source of the knowledge that his words and images generate in a collective, past anamnesis—a kind of memory-in-progress that is accessible to all, but never allows us to truly secure history or conclude the process of commemoration.

This memory-in-progress is what Keeney is referring to when he subtitles his book, *The Suffering Image*. He does not intend the notion of suffering to merely indicate the content of Marker's images; after all, what they portray is as often whimsical and humorous as it is tragic or elegiac. Instead, "suffering" indicates the paradoxical stasis involved in enduring or undergoing a transformation that is as much effectuated by systemic forces outside of an individual's control as it is by personal morals or actions. This seems to place the entirety of Marker's activities under the sign of existentialism, a controversial but highly interesting move that would have been well served by additional research into the rumors that Marker studied with Jean-Paul Sartre as a teenager.[3] "The suffering image is the very image of the world of becoming (*à venir*)," Keeney writes (p. xiii).

Marker's still photography, with its "preternatural silence that inhabits images that also begin to fall into the state generally troubled as 'iconic'" is especially emblematic of the "super-abundance of non-cognitive, non-discursive knowledge" (p. 169)—or the "suffering"—of all kinds of imagery. Yet despite the importance of still photography's excess and liminality, and its place at the heart of the entire visual archive now associated with Marker, Keeney isn't focusing on photographs alone with his use of the word "image." Just as the meaning of "suffering" is expanded lyrically and metaphorically in Keeney's book, the word "image" indicates the entire scope of Marker's representational project, including his words and experiences. Keeney suggests we think of an image as a "nerve center, or as bundle of forces that merely take up residence, however fleetingly, in the image" (p. 169). In *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1977), Marker rhetorically asks why images "sometimes begin to tremble." Eventually, he provides the answer: the shakiness is an index of fear, excitement or an overwhelming mixture of many such emotions felt by whomever is operating the camera. With the notion of a "suffering image," Keeney extends this idea of the image as a testament to the trembling of hand and heart to a general paradigm of making and receiving visual information.

This paradigm of the suffering image represents a significant, thought-provoking and highly welcome contribution to the study of Chris Marker. Due to the pitch of Keeney's argument, however, the reading audience capable of truly engaging with this contribution may prove to be small. Throughout *Dossier Chris Marker: The Suffering Image*, Keeney constellates his observations on the aims and ethics of Marker's work with the work of twentieth-century romance language philosophy of all different schools, from Emmanuel Levinas to Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben. Key concepts of these philosophers are invoked and employed without a preliminary explanation of their basis and context, making the text best suited to readers either already well-versed in modern and postmodern French philosophy or those looking to glean a shortlist of essential philosophical reading by way of their study of Marker. Indeed, the book requires the same advanced level of familiarity with Marker himself or the same willingness to follow on faith its claims about Marker, as it provides little to no explication of the films and photographic series to which it alludes.

The structure and style of *Dossier Chris Marker: The Suffering Image* is another barrier to accessibility and comprehension. Reframed more optimistically, however, the book could be said to provide its readership with an instructive challenge that mirrors the instructive challenge built into Marker's work. Keeney's short essays are purposefully arranged into what he calls a "decidedly symphonic texture (with repeated themes, counter-themes, and variations crossing the structure of the work) as homage to Marker's methodologies" (p. xiv). They do not provide smooth transitions from one theme to the next, and they are frequently repetitive without foregrounding what conceptual nuance is being added or altered with each repetition. The reader who engages the text with stamina will, however, be rewarded by the supplementary observations Keeney provides in the copious endnotes to each essay. They are arguably the most productive way in which Keeney strives to perform the form of Marker's art inside his own. In the endnotes, Keeney enacts the same sort of chiasmus that he discusses as being a central device in Marker's conception of the world and his creative contributions to it: he turns the conventional annotated bibliography into bibliographical annotation.

Keeney describes the consequences of this sort of gambit (cribbed from the deconstructionists as much as from Marker) in an eloquent passage devoted to Marker's intermediality: "Marker's work, in its unrelenting production of distance (the discordant narration, the troubling of cinema by using still images to produce film-essays, his layered approach to overturning pictorial conventions through montage and distortion, pixellization and disintegration) approaches the image *on cat's paws* (an apt simile, given his penchant for feline interlocutors as the most savvy interlocutors imaginable). Photography under such auspices strangely becomes painting, and painting strangely becomes literature. The incumbent destruction of the suzerainty of the eye also oddly returns the gaze to the inward tableau Levinas wishes to both warn against and save for possible later, post-rational purposes. The post-rational is the valorization of a potentiality in images to become ethical" (p.107).

In other words, treating images as apparitions from a massive experiential archive that accrete only fleetingly in different formats and on different surfaces both calls vision into question and opens up the possibility for moral development. This is a theoretically rich and insightful observation, one that merits further elaboration in the form of discussion of specific sequences in Marker's film-essays as well as in the form of extended treatment of the work of a number of theorists of visual culture, among them Martin Jay and Susan Sontag. Unfortunately, this is not Keeney's intent, and no sustained examination of Marker's place in any French "antiocularcentric" project or photographic ethical quandary is included.[4]

A couple of other instances of Keeney's intelligent propositions that remain unsubstantiated are worth highlighting. The first is his provocative suggestion that Marker's "so called political films (inclusive of the films with SLON in the late 1960s and early 1970s) are not political films as such, but evocations of the broken premises of politics in service to ideology" (p. 121). Marker would likely disagree with this characterization, but Keeney does not anticipate or respond to that difference of opinion. Surely his non-conventional examination of Marker would be strengthened with at least a few paragraphs clearly distinguishing the moments where what Marker hoped to do in his images diverged from what he interpreted from them.

Keeney's insistence on the Christic dimensions of Marker's creative activity may be the topic on which some readers most crave a more carefully laid argument. Despite a number of statements along these lines that may prompt readers to consider heretofore-unexamined alignments of Marker's project with the more allegorical, fictional filmmaking of Robert Bresson or Pier Paolo Pasolini, Keeney never fully fleshes out these Christic dimensions (nor does he mention either of these directors). He does draw a series of comparisons between Marker and Anselm Kiefer (both are "peripatetic artists" who, in the manner of St. Francis, ground their artworks in "the visionary focus on the singular to release and empower a new order for the universal or transcendental worldview" [pp. 117-118]), but these comparisons remain fleeting.

What would it mean to look at images of futurity and immemoriality as an exaltation, as a process of savoring the interrelational emotions of becoming rather than undergoing or enduring them? Joy is always embedded amidst the loss in Marker's images--we need only think of the group portrait of three Scandinavian children that opens *Sans Soleil* (1983)--but that connotation goes unnoticed when his work is situated in a paradigm of suffering. We can assume that Keeney is cognizant of the balance of both in Marker's work; this is reflected in the choice to open his book with the liturgical phrase "*Ite, missa est*" (p. xv, Keeney's emphasis) ("Go, the dismissal is made," or "Go forth, mass has ended") and to end it with the exclamation, "*Maranatha!*" ("Come, O Lord!") (p. 226, Keeney's emphasis). However, as with so many other aspects of this laudable study, this aspect may require a slower and more explicit descriptive analysis than the one provided. Understanding the "passion for understanding" that drives Chris Marker's artworks is no simple task (Marker, quoted in Keeney, p. 175). Those who attempt it must learn to appreciate fragmentary and elusive meanings, but would surely also thrill to the company and attentions of an obliging and patient guide.

NOTES

[1] Chris Marker, *Coréennes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1959); Marker, *Immemory* (Paris: Exact Change, 1997) CD-ROM.

[2] Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Sarah Cooper, *Chris Marker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion, 2005); Chris Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (Paris: ARTE, 2008) DVD.

[3] Alter, *Chris Marker*, p. 6.

[4] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 16.

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ISSN 1553-9172