

Chats perchés

Chris Marker's mimetic, comical and historical prophecy

Gertrud Koch

Jokes between sight and said

Let me start from scratch – with an unspectacular filmic operation that has the minimalistic charm of a one-liner joke. A one-liner joke is a type of verbal joke, one that has it all in one line, just like the joke that Karl Valentin, a Bavarian comedian, once made and which points to my situation here regarding Chris Marker: 'Everything was said already, but not from everyone.'

A one-liner joke is said to be the better the shorter it is – nevertheless its wit comes from the multiple meanings it entails. Marker's wit often unfolds between words and images, as in the following shots from his video-film *Chats perchés* (2004).

It starts with the title card: 'Un pigeon se change en homme' – this is the first part of the one-liner. The second part is the camera's tracking shot through the subway station, starting with the pigeon on the floor, and following its flight via a pan. The camera turns the corner, and then focuses on the back view of a man who is about to leave the station through the door at the end of the stairs in the background. Shot in real time the joke has a double structure. First it answers the rhetorical question underlying the title card: How does a pigeon change into a man? And the shot finally answers the question by suggesting that in cinematic poetics a pan can be a pun. The sight gag, often used in slapstick films, alludes to the magic power of film and its capacity to turn real things into

fictional objects without even touching them – just by modulating the perspective.

Such capacity in this shot nevertheless depends on a performative act, the one the title card enacts. The propositional sentence that claims that what we will see is 'a pigeon changing into a man' alters our expectation above all, giving no clue that we should expect to see a short glimpse of men and other animals moving through a subway station. The joke works via the decentering of our viewing habits, or, in Roger Odin's terminology, by shifting semio-pragmatics from documentary to fiction. But the joke is also about special effects as an aesthetic and rhetorical procedure of producing extra value in 'big' films. The joke only functions in so far as deep down we are convinced that the 'magic Marker' has a magic pen that combines pen, pan and pun.

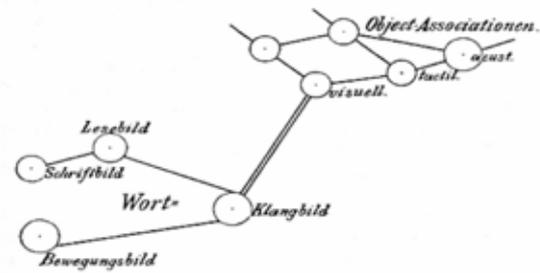
Objects and words

But the joke not only involves the fragile status of the material picture that has been taken and turns into an image of something totally immaterial. It also bends back towards language itself. The auctorial sentence sets our imagination in motion and assigns to language the power of poetic creation. In Marker's film, images seem to shift between different modalities: they may signify both the world in front of the camera as well as the mental image that results from the interplay between what Freud



called *Wortvorstellung* (word representation) and *Sachvorstellung* (object or thing representation):

The word therefore is a complex representation consisting of such as the images as mentioned above, or to put it differently, words correspond to a tangled process of associations, in which elements of visual, acoustic and kinesthetic origin such as have been cited are engaged.



But the word acquires its meaning through its connection with the 'object representation', at least if we restrict our observations to substantives. Object representation itself is once again a complex of all kinds of different visual, acoustic, tactile, kinesthetic and other representations.¹

In many ways Freud's scheme reflects the synaesthetic qualities of language once it is distanced from the mere grammatical and logical functions it performs. The fluidity between visual, acoustic, tactile and kinetic streams, which channel the modality of the production of meaning in words, could serve in many ways as a blueprint for mapping the complex ways in which language and image are interwoven in Marker's films. Written, spoken and heard language, which is shown and listened to as voices, typefaces, letters, songs and sounds, works into the scenic representation of the said and the heard. The representation of the word 'change' has to do with movement, with the imagination of something being transformed in time. Therefore our fantasy is ready for this moment of transition when a pigeon becomes a man. But in actuality this moment can only take place in front of our eyes in animation or in special-effect sequences. Marker's joke refers to the moment of animation in exactly this sense, inasmuch as the spectator is here animated to imagine something that cannot be seen in a literal sense. The transition from the real to the fictional is not a transition between genres, but rather a mental process that is indispensable for our being in the world as acting, reacting and reflecting bodies. Whatever might be said about Marker being predominantly an intellectual film-maker, it should not be forgotten that thinking is also a process of embodied activity, which constantly involves the sensomotoric dimensions of language and perception. The poetic agenda in Marker's work provides us with a complex fabric of sounds, signs and images that activate us to navigate through this stream of consciousness – a consciousness that leads us to those strata of perception where word and object representation are constantly influencing each other. The constant struggle over the meaning and

understanding of what we see and hear is a human condition that turns all of us into travellers without any determined end – and therefore willing fellow travellers with the voyager Marker.

The short sequence that allowed me to say few words about the role of language in Marker's essay films stems from the video-film whose French title is *Chats perchés* (translated as *The Case of the Grinning Cat*, which is an allusion to Marker's film on the Paris May of '68, as well as to Lewis Carroll's famous cat). When the film was shown in New York, Jim Hoberman gave a summary in the *Village Voice* of the topics at stake throughout the film:

Marker's hour-long video *The Case of the Grinning Cat* meditates on the state of post-9-11 French politics, taking as its apparent subject the enigmatic M. Chat, who in late 2001 began appearing, as if by magic, on Paris rooftops, walls, and métro stations.

This anonymously produced graffiti – a wide-eyed, broadly smiling, boldly cartooned, bright-yellow feline – spread to other cities, and Marker does his part, matting M. Chat into artworks from cave paintings to van Goghs. During the 2002 French election that saw right-wing centrist Jacques Chirac defeat right-wing extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen, M. Chat took to the streets. Cat placards and masks dotted the anti-Le Pen demonstrations and appeared in crowds rallying against Bush's war.²

Chris Marker made a video-film out of this graffiti, interrogating the historical moment when they appeared. The video-film as a whole asks about the future of history. Space is opened up for an essay on history and agency, which is entirely worked into the visual, scriptural and auditory proceedings.

Video aesthetic

Video allows for poetic procedures that are different to those in film. It allows for a complex layering of levels on one surface plane, as Marker is prone to do. This is evident in *Chats perchés*. It is often possible to see something in the shot that has the strange status of a hallucination or an anamorphic extension of the plane into another spatial order. Mark B. Hansen

focuses on anamorphosis as a result of the shift in perspectival construction from analogue to digital images, writing:

What is fundamental here is the radical resistance of this data space to any possible human negotiation. Thus, one way of making sense of this negotiation would be to understand this data space as a form of radical anamorphosis, in which the cumulative perspectival distortions that lead to the final image do not mark a 'stain' that can be resolved from the standpoint of another single perspective (however technically mediated it may be). Unlike Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, where an oblique viewing angle reveals the presence of a skull within an otherwise indecipherable blob, and unlike Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, where photographic magnification discovers a clue initially invisible in the image, what we confront here is a multiply distorted technical mediation that requires the abandoning of any particular perspectival anchoring for its 'resolution'.³

Marker frequently uses the aesthetic potential of anamorphosis. It enables the images to bring forth another image that is neither behind the surface nor hidden in it. It evolves from and in the image. One could say that the image gives birth to another image within the same space and in the same frame. Different from filmic double exposures, it is not composed of separate images that are worked into one, but rather the image that appears within another image suggests a temporal character that signifies a possible future: an image, which was not and now is, appears to be emerging from the future into the present. In the stills from the video, one can see how the cat materializes in the image on the blue sky and out of the clouds. The cat appears like a prophecy of historical time and an imagined future that flows from it.

History: memory and its discontent

In many films by Marker memory is seen as a function of the future and history is perceived as the open end of unfinished business. 'Will the cats come back?' is a guiding question in *Chats perchés*, and it seems that questions of this type are crucial for Marker's poetics. My focus is on the fictionalization of history as an unsettled future.

Let me provide a quote from a novel by an author who is known to have been crucial for Marker's concept of memory. 'I would ask myself', wrote Marcel Proust in *Swann's Way*,

what o'clock it could be; I could hear the whistling of trains, which, now nearer and now farther off, punctuating the distance like the note of a bird



in a forest, shewed me in perspective the deserted countryside through which a traveler would be hurrying towards the nearest station: the path that he followed being fixed for ever in his memory by the general excitement due to being in a strange place, to doing unusual things, to the last words of conversation, to farewells exchanged beneath an unfamiliar lamp which echoed still in his ears amid the silence of the night; and to the delightful prospect of being once again at home.⁴

There is a homology between Proust's description of several scenes around a train station and a fictional traveller about whom he writes in conjunctive terms, blending the spaces of the narrator and the space of the narrated into each other. In visual terms one could argue that this resembles an anamorphosis. The poetics of blending temporal and spatial aspects into one sentence or one image creates what Foucault called heterotopias and what might be transferred to chronotopia. The opening of other spaces and times at one plane is indeed a way to look at history in a non-linear way, whereby history is not so much about the factuality of the past as about the projection of the future it entails. *La Jetée* was maybe the first essay to modulate this anamorphic time, which in this case projects the future death into the past as re-enacted scenes, accompanied by the whispers (in German) of the scientists who conduct the experiment.

Even in a less sophisticated and less, strictly speaking, fictional film such as *Chats perchés*, history, present and future are permanently interwoven. And the jokers who perform these transgressions are the multiple cats, who come and go, vanish and greet us as only fictional characters can. The cats, no doubt, are playing (or played). They perform as agents and avatars of history to come, and they emit signs.

If the cats open up the possibility of their return, then one can conclude that their presence was a kind of interlude or an overture of things to come.

The role of play or the game seems to be precisely to leave open the horizons of action. The cats perform a set of possibilities that radiate into the realm of virtuality. They are speaking signs in so far as they are deployed as comments not only on the political situation in relation to which the demonstrations react, but also as rehearsals of the demonstrations themselves in the horizon of the political future that they are attempting to change. The cats perform as angels of peace with wings or as observers who are looking down from the tops of the Parisian roofs to the street life below with its strange signs that advertise presidential candidates in the same fashion as they advertise sporting goods and cars. Marker takes the cats out of the hands of M. Chat and lets them circulate through the paintings in museums, as well as in the media, in order to communicate with the dead. As stamps they decorate the envelopes of letters addressed to Michael Powell and other great dead men of film history.

To attribute magical powers to cats is by no means Marker's invention, as the historian Robert Darnton emphasized in his famous study of the Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin, which in essay form bore the main title 'Workers Revolt':

What about cats? It should be said at the outset that there is an indefinable *je ne sais quoi* about cats, a mysterious something that has fascinated mankind since the time of the ancient Egyptians. One can sense a quasi-human intelligence behind a cat's eyes. One can mistake a cat's howl at night for a human scream, torn from some deep, visceral part of man's animal nature.⁵

Darnton makes an essential analytical point, alongside the historical explanations relating to the printers' coup in 1730, which led to the cat massacre. This involves the mimetic and performative aspect, which links history and its representation to the great scenes of theatre. The historical events are in the case of the Great Cat Massacre the thing yet to come, namely the French Revolution. The joke the printers played on the bourgeoisie was a comical rehearsal of the big scene. The mimetic impulse, nevertheless, linked the main actor of the uproar with the cats he then killed for symbolic purposes. In the memoir that is at the base of the narrative of the great cat massacre, its author, Nicolas Contat, tells the story many years after the event took place and he emphasizes the repetition by which the joke was told and retold:

Léveillé has an extraordinary talent for imitating the voices and the smallest gestures of everyone



around him. He is a perfect actor; that's the real profession that he has picked up in the printing shop. He also can produce perfect imitations of the cries of dogs and cats. He decides to climb from roof to roof until he reaches a gutter next to the bedroom of the bourgeois and the bourgeoisie. From there he can ambush them with a volley of meows. It's an easy job for him: he is the son of a roofer and can scramble across roofs like a cat.⁶

Darnton's task as a historian was to explain why such a terrible thing as a cat massacre could be passed on and on as a joke and his study tries to explain the

joke as the 'worker's revolt' – which is the first part of the essay's title.

What a splendid subject for their laughter, for a *belle copie!* They will amuse themselves with it for a long time. Léveillé will take the leading role and will stage the play at least twenty times. He will mime the master, the mistress, the whole house, heaping ridicule on them all. He will spare nothing in his satire. Among printers, those who excel in this entertainment are called *jobeurs*: they provide *joberie*.

Léveillé receives many rounds of applause.

It should be noted that all the workers are in league against the masters.⁷

The cats in *Chats perchés* are the revenants of things to come – their rhythm of appearances and vanishings are linked to the coming past in a system of osmotic tubes – foreshadowing the failures of the past as lack of a future. But poetically this system works entirely through the mimetic capacity to

assimilate oneself into the animal. The camera climbs on the roofs, looks into the dead angles of the unseen and allows the performance of the theatre of upcoming history. Memories in this concept of history are the time shifters that constantly interweave past, present and future; memories are the *chats perchés* of our representations.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, *Zur Auffassung der Aphasien. Eine kritische Studie*, Franz Deuticke, Leipzig and Vienna, 1891, pp. 79–80. Translation by author.
2. Jim Hobermann, 'Cat Power', *Village Voice*, December 2006; www.villagevoice.com/2006-12-12/film/cat-power.
3. Mark B. Hansen, 'Seeing with the Body', *Diacritics*, Winter 2001, p. 57.
4. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, Volume 1 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Wordsworth, London, 2006, p. 25.
5. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, Basic Books, London, 2009, p. 89.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 102f.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 104.



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