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► To cite this version:

Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez. Sans soleil by Chris Marker. The Essay Film and its Cinematic Thinking Process: Reflecting on Postmodernity. Studies in European Cinema, In press, 10.1080/17411548.2022.2073173 . hal-03655658v2

HAL Id: hal-03655658

<https://hal.science/hal-03655658v2>

Submitted on 10 Dec 2023

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This article is the Accepted Manuscript on an article published by Taylor & Francis
in *Studies in European Cinema*, on 24th May 2022, available at
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17411548.2022.2073173>

***Sans soleil* by Chris Marker. The Essay Film and its Cinematic Thinking Process: Reflecting on Postmodernity**

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Enunciative Devices of the European Francophone Essay Film

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and Innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 896941.



Abstract

The essay film is defined by its capability to embody an audiovisual thinking process. Chris Marker's *Sans soleil/Sunless* (1983) is undoubtedly one of the highest expressions of this filmic form, which reflects on postmodernity through the nature of images. This article aims to analyse the thinking in act of the film, using Jacques Rancière's concept of sentence-image, and applying Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image and the crystal-image. The cinematic thinking process thus develops through a succession of sentence-images, which forces the spectator to constantly transform the actual image/virtual image relationship of the film until it reaches a time-image and crystal-image of postmodernity. It is possible thanks to the shifts among the different subjectivities created by Marker and the interstices they generate. This shift also reaches a crystal-image as a materialisation of the postmodern concept of alterity as analysed by Paul Ricœur and Zygmunt Bauman. The reflection is constructed by means of an itinerary through four types of images and their screens—film image, television image, electronic image and video game image—in order to develop the image-memory-history axis and to generate an audiovisual reflection on postmodernity in total consonance with Jean Baudrillard's theory of the image, Marc Augé's of non-places or Fredric Jameson's of the postmodern historicism.

Keywords: essay film, cinematic thinking, postmodernity, time-image.

1. Introduction

Sans soleil/Sunless (Chris Marker, 1983) is an essential film in cinema history in general and European cinema in particular, as many authors have analysed it (Bellour 1999; Lemaître 2002; Lupton 2004, 2005; Russell 2008; Montero 2014; Jacques 2018, among many others). Besides, Marker's film is, without a doubt, one of the greatest exponents of the essay film, and as such it has also been the object of multiple studies from different perspectives (Kampër and Tode 1997; Blümlinger 2004; Rascaroli 2009; Corrigan 2011; Montero 2012; Català 2014; Alter 2006, 2018). This article aims to carry out an unprecedented in-depth analysis on *Sans soleil's* "thinking in act" (Moure 2004, 37), considering the essay film as a filmic form that, through the subjectivity of the filmmaker, generates a properly audiovisual thinking process, which arises from the relationships established among the elements of the sound image and the visual image. Continuing the essay film theoretical developments of Josep Maria Català—about "parataxic thinking" (2014, 209), focused on the juxtaposition of different elements—and Laura Rascaroli—

about “interstitial thinking” (2017, 190) centred on the interstice that arises from that juxtaposition—, I will analyse Marker’s essay film and its cinematic thinking process as a materialisation of Gilles Deleuze’s time-image and crystal-image (1989). To do so, I will use the concept of sentence-image defined by Jacques Rancière as the materialisation of the essay film’s thinking in act: “The sentence is not the sayable and the image is not the visible. By sentence-image, I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image” (2009, 46). Thus, the sentence-image, which generates cinematic thinking, oscillates “between two poles, dialectical and symbolic [...] between the image that separates and the sentence which strives for continuous phrasing” (58).

By creating different sentence-images, Marker develops a thinking process that forces the spectator to constantly transform the actual image/virtual image relationship of the film, concepts that Deleuze takes from Bergson to apply to the analysis of the time-image and the crystal-image. The first offers a direct image of time: “It is no longer time that depends on movement; it is aberrant movement that depends on time. The relation, *sensory-motor situation* → *indirect image of time* is replaced by a non-localizable relation, *pure optical and sound situation* → *direct time-image*” (1989, 41). The second achieves the indiscernibility between actual image and virtual image: “the coalescence of an actual image and its virtual image, the indiscernibility of two distinct images” (127). These new images emerge from the instrumentalisation of the interstice: “a spacing which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it [...] an operation [...] of differentiation [...] of disappearance” (179). Therefore, interstices “have a disjunctive, and no longer a conjunctive, value” (248), which transforms them into a “germ of the cinematic thinking” (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2018, 94) and allow them to “make the indiscernible, that is the frontier, visible” (Deleuze 1989, 180). I will argue how Chris Marker constructs *Sans soleil* generating cinematic thinking that materialises thanks to the interstices among subjectivities, to the constant shifts among the points of view of different filmic entities that the epistolary device makes possible.

Regarding the theme of the film, Marker applies the cinematic thinking process to build a reflection on the advent of postmodernity in general and the postmodern image in particular, or more precisely on the appearance of the latter as a consequence of the

former. To do so, he develops an axis image-memory-history through four types of images: filmic images, television images, video game images and the new images of *the Zone*, offering a cinematic materialisation of Jean Baudrillard's (1981) theory about the virtual image as simulacrum, as well as of hypermodernity images conceptualised by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy (2007). The images of the Zone become the materialisation of the postmodern era: the crisis of historicity and its new historicism (Jameson 1991) and the appearance of non-places as non-identity spaces (Augé 1992). Besides, Marker instrumentalises the epistolary device to explore a new paradigm of postmodernity: alterity. From the shifts among subjectivities and the consequent interstices, the three categories of alterity theorised by Paul Ricœur (1990, 410) will emerge, and very significantly the *alterity of consciousness*, just as the *strangeness* defined by Zygmunt Bauman (1991) as an existential and mental ambivalence universalised in postmodernity.

2. Complexification of the epistolary enunciation: multiplicity of subjectivities

Chris Marker's essay films are inextricably linked to the epistolary device. Four of them instrumentalise it: *Lettre de Sibérie/Letter from Siberia* (1958), *Sans soleil, Le Tombeau d'Alexandre/The Last Bolshevik* (1993) and *Level Five* (1997). It is the epistolary device that allows Marker not only to build his cinematic thinking but to make it evolve. In this sense, *Lettre de Sibérie* and *Sans soleil* constitute an epistolary diptych that presents the transition between the first *letter-film* of modernity and the *epistolary film* of postmodernity (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2018). While Marker generated a cinematic epistolary writing in *Lettre de Sibérie*, in *Sans soleil*, he introduces the autonomy between literary epistolary texts and filmed images. Thus, the choice of epistolary reading as a situation of enunciation instead of epistolary writing adds a new gap. Opposite to the realisable device of the letter-film of modernity in the former, Marker now creates an epistolary film of postmodernity in which the epistolary device is unrealisable:

Sound image – Addressee	→	Diegetic reading of the epistolary literary texts
+		+
Visual image – Addresser	→	Diegetic writing of the cinematic images
=		=
Epistolary film	→	Extra-diegetic enunciation, epistolarily unrealisable

Its complexity emerges through the presence of multiple subjectivities, among which the enunciation of the essay film moves. I first analyse the complexity of this framework, expanding the categorisation exposed by Raymond Bellour (1999, 30-31) since it is the starting point of my analysis. If we make an itinerary from the outside to the inside of the discursive progression of the film, we can distinguish three different levels and their corresponding subjectivities:

Extra-diegetic level – Present of the filmic enunciation – *epistolary film*:

– Chris Marker as the author of the film.

Diegetic level – Epistolary correspondence – Epistolary literary texts + filmic images:

– anonymous addressee of the literary letters;

– addresser of the literary letters and cameraman of the images – identified with Marker)-

Intra-diegetic level – Past of the narration – epistolary texts:

– Hayao Yamaneko;

– protagonist of the *imaginary film*.

Furthermore, the film’s prologue with the image of the Icelandic children introduces an interpretative hypothesis on which the spectator must reflect throughout the work to solve it: do the epistolary film we see and the imaginary film recalled turn out to be the same one? As I argue, Marker instrumentalises this possibility to generate the shift between the two creative subjectivities (the diegetic of the imaginary film and the extra-diegetic of the epistolary film) and thus embodying through their interstices the sentence-image of his thinking in act. It is only once the film is finished, and using an intertitle, that Marker proposes a second re-reading of the work, which, once again, brings a new conflict between subjectivities, forcing the spectator to transform the virtual image of the film: “The letters of Sandor Krasna [fictional character] are read by Florence Delay in the French version, Alexandra Stewart in the English version [extra-diegetic identities].” Thus, the diegetic level implodes. The author of the letters and images is fictionalised in Sandor Krasna, fictional subjectivity, while his addressee disappears. The shifts between both authors’ subjectivities must now be reinterpreted, as well as those produced between the diegetic one and his addressee, absent now. If we collect all the shifts among subjectivities instrumentalised by Marker, we obtain a first cartography of the interstices he explores:

- Addresser and addressee:
 - between the sound image of the reading of the letters and the visual image filmed by the addresser;
 - between direct speech: “he wrote:” and the indirect speech: “he wrote to me that”.
- Extra-diegetic filmmaker and diegetic cameraman:
 - between past visual images and present cinematic montage.
- Diegetic cameraman and Hayao:
 - between advocating for and against the electronic image.
- Extra-diegetic filmmaker and Hayao:
 - between filmic image and electronic image.
- Diegetic cameraman and protagonist of the imaginary film:
 - between documentary narration and fictional narration.
- Diegetic cameraman and Krasna:
 - between documentary image and fictional image.
- Addressee and actresses:
 - between documentary narration and meta-discourse.

I will analyse how these shifts generate the thinking process about image as a defining and symbolic element of postmodernity in the image-memory-history axis. Regarding the first shift between the addresser and the addressee, the alternation of the epistolary enunciation between direct and indirect speech, being subjected equally to the pauses of the discourse, causes the dissolution of the limits between first and third person. Thus, subjectivity, in constant shift—direct/indirect speech—, seems to mutate and achieves an entity of superstructure that the spectator can possess.

3. The reflection image-memory-history

Marker's reflection on the image-memory-history axis concerning the advent of postmodernity materialises as an itinerary through the different screens of the first element to carry out their analysis and trace an evolution built through different audiovisual elements that generates different sentence-images of cinematic thinking. I analyse below the audiovisual reflection of these four different images: filmic images → television images → electronic images → video game images.

3.1. Filmic images and their fixation: the impossibility of the memory-image

The reflection on postmodernity that Marker generates is built through the dialectics between Africa and Asia: “He contrasted African time with European time, and also with Asian time. He said that in the 19th century mankind had come to terms with space and that the great question of the 20th century was the coexistence of different concepts of time.” The first is still situated in the time of history and the second is already installed in the crisis of historicity, in the historicism of postmodernity. Marker reflects on this transit by becoming aware of the nature of images, that is, of the impossibility of identifying them with memory. And he embodies it through an audiovisual element: the freeze-frame. Its first appearance visually formulates the issue to discuss without enunciating it orally yet. Marker manages to generate a sentence-image as a synthesis of the issue that the film is going to address: “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?” The awareness of the impossibility of fixating the memory materialises in the first freeze-frame, that of a woman on a ship whose gaze escapes the cameraman’s objective [Figure 1]. This first failed attempt to fixate the memory of a direct gaze into the camera synthesises the theme of the film. The gaze escapes the cameraman in the same way that the memory of thirst is elusive despite the aquatic images that could recall its absence. The filmic, analogue image is capable of embodying the awareness that the film starts from, but this first sentence-image will only acquire its meaning later, when the second gaze into the camera takes place, and this time it is fixated in a freeze-frame. That is, the thinking process of the essay film demands the spectator to constantly transform the virtual image of the film that he/she generates. The first failed freeze image, audiovisual synthesis of the impossibility of fixating the memory, acquires its meaning when Marker continues the reflection: “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.” Now Marker does freeze the gaze into the camera of a man in Namidabashi and, again, he advances elements of the thinking process not yet formulated orally [Figure 2]. It will be the gaze into the camera, the encounter between subjectivities, the element that Marker wishes to keep in his “list of ‘things that quicken the heart,’” but about which he has not yet spoken. It is the equality of the exchanged gaze, the visual encounter between subjectivities, which Marker wants to keep in memory. Thus, he endows the audiovisual element with a total ethical charge;

generating cinematic thinking that unites ethics and aesthetics: “From this force of gaze, captured in the film and in the photo by the man with the camera and offered to the spectator, in *Sans soleil*, Marker made a sort of ethical and aesthetic law” (Bellour 1999, 338).

Figures 1. First freeze-frame. *Sans soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) © Argos Films.

Figure 2. Second freeze-frame. *Sans soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) © Argos Films.

The audiovisual element acquires a reflective gravity that also becomes a criticism of the film industry and, more deeply, of the movement-image of classic cinema on which it has been based, that of the compulsory invisibility of its narration, the erasure of its subjectivity: “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?” Thus, the movement-image has denied the equality of the gaze between the filmmaker and reality, the encounter between subjectivities, the dialogism between the two sides of the camera, and also between the two sides of the screen. Marker thus offers a new symbolic sentence-image of the impossibility of the movement-image to generate cinematic thinking, of the need for the advent of cinematic modernity and its time-image so that a filmic form of thinking could materialise. And when, finally, Marker finds the *equality of the gaze*, that of the woman in the Praia market, that of African women, he shows the spectator the reality of it, its almost inapprehensible duration, its fugacity:

It was in the marketplaces of Bissau and Cape Verde that I could stare at them again with equality: I see her, she saw me, she knows that I see her, she drops me her glance, but just at an angle where it is still possible to act as though it was not addressed to me.

Marker does not freeze the image then, he presents the gazes in their real duration, and it is then when the first freeze image makes sense. It is at this moment when the spectator must transform the virtual image that he preserves to give it its meaning. He then states the fallacy that makes us identify a still image and a memory: “and at the end the real glance, straightforward, that lasted a twenty-fourth of a second, the length of a film frame.” If the continuum of the film image can be broken down into twenty-four still images, the fleeting moment of reality could be remembered through one of them. Marker has already shown how the essence of that moment escapes the fixation of the filmic

image, as indicated by Georges Steiner, whom Marker will quote in *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre*: “It is not the past that dominates us; but the images of the past.” Only at the conclusion of the film, which I will analyse below as a synthesis of the thinking process developed, the freeze-frame of the woman from the Praia market will reappear, already transformed in the Zone, to show the assumption of this impossibility and its transformation into a poetic element already deprived of memory and history.

3.2. Televisión images and their mutation: excess-image of postmodernity

The segment dedicated to television images, enunciated through the epistolary text in direct speech, begins by defining the device as a “memory box”. Marker emphasises this dimension by showing the device frame and its screen, and not the television images directly. Once again, the filmmaker works on the different possibilities of points of view to generate reflection. The definition as a memory box recalls the birth of the television image within the temporality of history, but the reflection will show the spectator how the television image mutates to become a postmodern image. It offers the inverse dialectics to those presented with the filmic image. While the movement of the latter was identified with reality and its need to fix it as the failed attempt to create memory, the television image is not only presented as framed by its screen but the initial images are also frozen.

To begin his reflection, Marker applies the same immobility to television images. The spectator perceives then that the result is not the same. The freeze-frame of the television images does not acquire the value of memory, because of the screen frame, which defines the image as such, and detaches it from its identification with reality. In addition, another equally relevant element appears: the electronic scanning in the form of a beam of light that travels through the television image when filmed by the cinematic camera. This movement within the television image, even if it is stopped, becomes a metaphor for the mutation that the filmmaker discusses. In order to show the different nature of both images, Marker introduces the filmic image after the first two television images: “The willow sees the heron's image upside down.” Marker begins his television journey through images belonging to illustrations and advertising spots. A series of twelve images of female portraits generates, once again, a sentence-image, this time dialectical, before the equality of the gaze found in Africa. The images of women ~~images~~ offered by the television show many of them gazing into the camera, but it is no longer an egalitarian

gaze. It is undoubtedly the subdued gaze of the woman turned into an object. The filmic image is introduced a second time to point out the mutation again: “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.’” The filmic image illustrates Rousseau's television presence, while the horror of Red Khmers is represented through illustrations. The television image thus becomes a prefiguration of the Zone. This first mutation deconfigures the reality of horror into its trivialised fictional representation; first, through drawings, then through the horror film genre. At this point of the showing-reflection on the evolution-mutation of the television image from history to postmodernity, as a precedent of the Zone, Marker generates a new sentence-image of this mutation: “But the more you watch Japanese television... the more you feel it's watching you.” The equality of the gaze of the African women, first transformed into the objectified feminine gaze of advertisements, thus loses its human entity to become the gaze of the device.

The film then shows another series of television gazes that are transformed by the same idea. The fear they transmit moves from the characters' emotions to those of the television spectator, who is monitored by the device. Once again, Marker uses the shift between subjectivities (from the actors/actresses to the spectator) to achieve the revelation of the sentence-image, a synthesis-image of cinematic thinking. The spectator no longer looks at reality through the filmic image, but it is looked at by the television image. And these images remain still. While the freeze-frame of the filmic image was an attempt to preserve reality in memory, the still television image is the way to analyse its mutation, its distance from reality. A new series of television images, also still, follow one another forming a square (alternating horizontal and vertical shifts), thus offering a new representation of the television screen device, which generates a new idea of oppression of the image that, not being able to exceed its frame, can only accelerate its movement. Once the limit of its mutation is reached, Marker then shows its starting point, and it is at that moment when the television image takes on movement to offer its first stage, close to the filmic image, and therefore points out its transformation: “Even television newscast bears witness to the fact that the magical function of the eye is at the centre of all things.” First, the image regains movement, and then the screen frame disappears to access the direct showing of its images; a documentary television image. Next, it recovers its frame momentarily to lose it again when the epistolary text recounts this transition: “That's called ‘the impermanence of things.’” The opposite move then occurs. While the frame of the

television screen alerted us to the mutated nature of its images, its disappearance now allows us to understand the moment in which the spectator forgets this reality. While the freeze-frame is configured as a mechanism of reflection, the moving image becomes its impossibility, the process by which the spectator stops wondering about the nature of images to consume them without generating any critical thinking about them. The movement thus embodies the thoughtless inertia of the postmodern image that it will bring to the Zone.

Marker concludes the reflection on the television image with images of a sexual nature that, once again, objectify women and the female body. The segment concludes with a final freeze-frame, that of a woman in a sex scene, with closed eyes and no longer looking at the camera: “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.” The gaze into the camera, the encounter between subjectivities no longer occurs because women have been stripped of the equality that the gaze represented. Thus, Marker ends an audiovisual reflection of the postmodern excess-image theorised by Lipovetsky and Serroy more than two decades later:

More and more, neocinema is in fact signalled by an aesthetics of excess, a search for the out-of-limits, a kind of vertiginous and exponential proliferation. It is necessary to speak of hypercinema because it is that of never enough and never too much, always more of everything: rhythm, sex, violence, speed, search for all extremes, and also the multiplication of shots, cut editing, films lengthening, soundtrack (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2007, 72).

In the same way, the segment dedicated to *Vertigo* embodies the distance-image, as I will analyse below, and the essay film becomes the quintessence of the multiplex-image of postmodernity. But the reflection about the television image does not end there. Later, Marker offers a new reflection on postmodernity through the description of a dream located in the shopping centres and the Tokyo subway that becomes a materialisation of the non-places theorised by Marc Augé: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place [...] supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places” (Augé 1995, 77-78). The lack of identity of this non-place makes the protagonist wonder about

the similarity between dream and reality, and about the identity characteristic of the former: “I begin to wonder if those dreams are really mine, or if they are part of a totality, of a gigantic collective dream of which the entire city may be the projection.” In the postmodernity of non-places, where identity, memory or history are not possible, the dream also becomes an identity non-place. And, what are the images of that collective dream? Television images. Many of them were already shown in the previous segment, but now they are always presented in motion, most without the screen frame. In other words, the mutation of the television image has conquered the oneiric collective imaginary, which assumes those images in their unthinking flow (without the appearance of the freeze-frame) and without their fictional framework. We could say that television images, the excess-image of postmodernity, also look at us through dreams: “The train inhabited by sleeping people puts together all the fragments of dreams, makes a single film of them –the ultimate film.” The ultimate film promoted by postmodernity is a non-film, since it lacks the same properties of non-places: “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude,” “The community of human destinies is experienced in the anonymity of non-places, and in solitude” (Augé 1995, 103, 120). Later, Marker will continue the reflection, and this oneiric non-film will become a non-image, the video game images.

3.3. The Zone: time-image of postmodernity

Following the transformation of the image reported by television, Marker creates a new subjectivity in order to reflect on the ambivalence generated by its virtualisation. Hayao Yamaneko emerges from the epistolary text at the same time as the Zone, embodying a doubling of Marker's subjectivity that becomes a perfect example of postmodern conceptions of alterity. This alterity of consciousness (Ricoeur 1990, 393) allows him to explore the universalised existential and mental ambivalence in postmodernity (Bauman 1991, 101) before the nature of a new image:

My pal Hayao Yamaneko has found a solution: if the images of the present don't change, then change the images of the past [...] He showed me the clashes of the sixties treated by his synthesizer: pictures that are less deceptive he says – with the conviction of a fanatic – than those you see on television. At least they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality [...] If to love without illusions is still to love, I can say that I loved it.

The alterity created through Hayao's character allows Marker to express the ambivalence that this new image provokes in him. Besides the epistolary addresser's awareness about the inability of the image to preserve memory, Hayao, his alterity of consciousness, believes in finding the solution in the electronic image. Therefore, identity and alterity coincide in the diagnosis –the images do not contain reality, the television images lie– but they diverge in the solution. Hayao proposes to transform these images to make them one's own. The epistolary addresser observes in this assumption the disappointment of a defeat; the verification of the loss of historicity in favour of historicism, as Jameson later analyses:

a society bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dust spectacles. In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as “referent” finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts [...] This situation evidently determines what the architecture historians call “historicism”, namely, the random cannibalisation of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion (1991, 18).

Therefore, the film offers an audiovisual reflection on the Zone based on this new instrumentalisation of the shift between subjectivities, which in this case reveals the interstice between identity and alterity. In the Zone, the analogue images of the past become a flow of forms that sometimes minimally allow us to identify their reference, to lose it later. As Marker does with the first freeze-frame, he presents a new sentence-image, a synthesis of the reasoning that he will develop later. Again, the spectator creates a first virtual image of the Zone that must be transformed throughout the film. It is an electronic flow-image defined as the denial of the previous still filmic image. The flow-image of the Zone does not freeze. That is, this new image makes reflection impossible, offering the spectator the sensory, aesthetic, but unthinking inertia of its fluid. The Zone renounces the attempt to preserve memory through the freeze-frame of the filmic image. It is generated from the acceptance of oblivion, of the non-existence of history, in favour of an aesthetic experience typical of postmodernity, that of the sensation-image (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2007, 72), which also instrumentalises colour: “The colour here modifies the content of the image: not only do the details disappear completely, but the forms tend to dissolve [...] the solarisation of the image blurs the outline of the forms which seem to clump together” (Jacques 2018, 44).

While in their first appearance, the images of the Zone are contextualised by the analogue images, and therefore they are inscribed in the continuity of the epistolary text, their second instrumentalisation emerges from the dialectics since, in this case, it is not Hayao's subjectivity-alterity which reflects on them, but the epistolary addresser. The extra-diegetic filmmaker then generates the images of the Zone in a dialectical relationship with the image that precedes them. While in the segment dedicated to television images, the face of horror was represented through illustration and cinematic fiction, Marker shows now the filmic image of horror: "That's how history advances, plugging its memory as one plugs one's ears [...] She doesn't care, she understands nothing, she has only one friend, the one Brando spoke of in *Apocalypse*: horror. That has a name and a face." Next, the film cuts to the sensation-image of the Zone in which the flow-image reduces its distortion in order to allow us to recognise the actress Arielle Dombasle singing:

I'm writing you all this from another world, a world of appearances. In a way the two worlds communicate with each other. Memory is to one what history is to the other: an impossibility [...] I envy Hayao in his 'zone,' he plays with the signs of his memory. He pins them down and decorates them like insects that would have flown beyond time, and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time: the only eternity we have left. I look at his machines. I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend.

The face of horror, that of a corpse, gives way to the electronic beauty of a new woman's face who looks into the camera from the Zone. While the television images looked at us through the gaze into the camera, the images of the Zone could give us back our own gaze deprived of memory, as a sort of postmodern mirror. Facing this second appearance of the Zone, we observe two of its characteristics: it can modify the degree of transformation into a flow-image and also the colour applied to it. That is to say, it can calibrate the distance it interposes with its reference, recognition/non-recognition, and the colour with which it filters it. It maintains the analogue reference when the images deal with aesthetic beauty, and it deforms them until their disappearance when they deal with horror. When this image leaves the Zone and recovers its filmic nature, the actress no longer looks into the camera; the equality of the gaze does not occur, which again escapes into the sphere of reality. After showing the machine capable of generating the Zone, Marker shows the spectator its power; its ability to transform the analogue image into a

flow-image (now red and black) that can achieve its own demise. Marker succeeds in creating a time-image of postmodernity, that of a new image of the Zone, which shows the annihilation of the temporality of history, and which is absorbed by its own black hole, without leaving behind its corpse, any trace of lost memory [Figure 3]:

There is merely a movement of the exacerbation of reality towards paroxysm, where it involutes of its own accord and implodes, leaving no trace, not even the sign of its end [...] The virtual is, in fact, merely the dilatation of the dead body of reality – the proliferation of an achieved universe, for which there is nothing left but to go on endlessly hyperrealising itself (Baudrillard 1996, 46-47).

Figure 3. Crystal-image. *Sans soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) © Argos Films.

Thus, the time-image reaches the status of crystal-image, where the void of the actual image is indiscernible from the presence of the virtual image: “The crystal-image is, then, the point of indiscernibility of the two distinct images, the actual and the virtual, while what we see in the crystal is time itself, a bit of time in the pure state” (Deleuze 1989, 82). This crystal-image shows pure time, or perhaps we should say the postmodern timelessness of the impossibility of memory-history:

It is not only a question of suppressing the illusion of the presence of the past, but also of proposing a reflection on time: the evocative “vertigo of Time.” To suggest a reflection, but also to cause this vertigo. To do this, Marker uses a poetics of blur [...] The Zone, in its coloured fog, would be the space of the decomposition of the image in memory (Jacques 2018, 49-50).

We observe how Marker generates a powerful sentence-image that synthesises and advances the reflection that occurs later. Faced with Hayao's defence of the Zone in his first appearance, Marker now shows the argument of the epistolary addresser, who sees in the Zone a world of appearances that makes history disappear. Thus, he confronts Hayao's theory, from which he envies his renunciation of historical temporality, concentrating on its aesthetic and creative possibilities. While Africa has symbolised the failure of history, Japan has embodied the new paradigm of postmodernity. The two opposite poles of survival to which the epistolary addressee referred in the first part of the film are perfectly defined with this materialisation of the Zone. Once the ambivalence

that the postmodern image produces in the human being is presented and reflected thanks to the shift between subjectivities, in this case, the identity-alterity split – cameraman-Hayao, thesis-antithesis –, the addresser points out a first synthesis: the Zone can serve to each memory in order to write its own legend.

The third appearance of the Zone provides the spectator with the alienation experience that it can produce through its sensation-image devoid of reflection. They are now the images of Okinawa in 1945 and its kamikaze pilots that are transformed into the Zone, and again Marker uses the metaphor of fire to express the memory-history disappearance: “On Hayao's machine war resembles letters being burned, shredded in a frame of fire.” After quoting Ryoji Uebara’s words, and therefore, telling the origin of the images, the spectator is abandoned to a sensation-image that, even emerging from horror, imposes its aesthetic experience. Thus, the last image of the Zone, which allows us to identify a kamikaze plane crashing, gives way by a simple cut to a filmic image of the wing of a plane soaring in the sky. Only then the spectator is aware of how both images, the first from horror, the second from stillness and serenity, provoke, however, the same sensation: they grant a continuity of aesthetic pleasure [Figures 4 and 5]. The flow-image of the Zone makes the spectator ignore any reference, even when it participates in the horror, to perceive it only at a sensory-aesthetic level. Marker reveals this unconscious process through a parataxis that should produce the dialectics –the plane that crashes in opposition to the plane that soars in the stillness of the sky– but that is instead perceived as an extension of the aesthetic pleasure that only then reveals the perversion of its mechanism. That is, at this point of the thinking process, Marker is able to offer the spectator the aesthetic experience of the Zone and the awareness of its meaning solely and exclusively through images. As already indicated, only at the end of the film will all the images meet in the Zone, as I will analyse in the conclusion.

Figures 4. A kamikaze plane in the Zone.

Sans soleil (Chris Marker, 1983) © Argos Films.

Figure 5. A plane in reality. *Sans soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) © Argos Films.

3.4. Video game images: ludic non-image of postmodernity

The analysis about the video game images is the same one already exposed about the Zone, but it is necessary to point out how it reaches its limit since they can be generated

without real images, and therefore, they are constructed as its denial. This “form of non-image” allows Hayao to reaffirm his argument: “He claims that electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory, and imagination.” It is through this electronic material of non-image that the perfect metaphor of the human condition materialises. However, it has a ludic function, thus obviating, and forgetting, the historical renunciation that Marker points out: “For the moment, the inseparable philosophy of our time is contained in the Pac-Man [...] Perhaps because he is the most perfect graphic metaphor of man's fate.” The entry into the video game images of Marker's favourite animals is made again through some still images that continue to allow reflection. The non-image takes on movement with the Pac-Man game, which transforms the aesthetic experience of the Zone into a ludic evasion as another objective of the new image of postmodernity. Thus, the ambivalence around the postmodern image is reiterated, through the alterity of consciousness that Hayao embodies.

After the above analysis, we confirm how Marker's audiovisual reflection, cinematic thinking, is in complete accord with the theoretical exposition offered by Jean Baudrillard about the same time. The literary reflection of the latter finds its audiovisual materialisation in Marker's film. The phases of the image that Baudrillard describes find their cinematic expression in *Sans soleil*:

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality	→ <i>filmic image</i>
it masks and denatures a profound reality	→ <i>television image</i>
it masks the <i>absence</i> of a profound reality	→ <i>electronic image</i>
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever:	
it is its own pure simulacrum	→ <i>video game image</i>

(Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6)

This simulacrum-image embodies the crisis of historicity and the historicism of the postmodern image analysed by Jameson, which also finds in *Sans soleil* its audiovisual expression:

Yet this mesmerising new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way. It cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but rather merely to demonstrate, through these inner contradictions, the enormity of a

situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience (Jameson 1991, 21).

4. Epistolary film, remembered film and imaginary film: the shift among subjectivities

As already analysed in the second section, since its beginning, the epistolary film that the spectator sees is linked to another film to come. This bond will also allow the shift among subjectivities: Marker's extra-diegetic subjectivity; the epistolary addresser's diegetic subjectivity, which the spectator identifies with Marker until the end of the film when he is transformed into a fictional character; and the fictional protagonist's intra-diegetic subjectivity. Therefore, the spectator creates a starting premise of interpretation in which epistolary literary writing is prior to the cinematic creation that instrumentalises that past correspondence. I will analyse how both writings, and their respective subjectivities, are related.

The film prologue presents a first hypothesis: that the film to come, of which the epistolary addresser speaks (time of the narration), is the same film that the spectator sees, finally made time after (time of the enunciation): "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." That is, in order to make an essay film, Marker filters his own past epistolary subjectivity through the addressee's subjectivity. The second time the epistolary text refers to the cinematic work to come, the proposed structure continues to function: the idea that the epistolary addresser expresses in his literary letter is later put into practice by himself in the montage of the film: "He wrote me that the pictures of Guinea-Bissau ought to be accompanied by music from the Cape Verde islands. That would be our contribution to the unity dreamed of by Amilcar Cabral." Therefore, the identification between the film imagined in the letters and the one made later, the one that the spectator now sees, continues to take place. However, this logic is violated in the segment dedicated to Luiz Cabral. The epistolary text is no longer justified as literary and prior to the film but belonging to it; not to the past narration but to the present enunciation. That is to say, for a few moments, the past subjectivity of the epistolary Marker shifts to the present subjectivity of the cinematic Marker: "And now, the scene moves to Cassaque: the seventeenth of February, 1980. But to understand it properly one must move forward in time. In a year, Luiz Cabral, the president will be in

prison, and the weeping man he has just decorated, major Nino, will have taken power.” The shift between subjectivities produces at this moment a sort of paradox in the epistolary enunciation of the film. The literary epistolary text refers directly to the visual image of the epistolary film. Thus, both seem at this moment to form an impossible cinematic epistolary writing since the diegetic literary epistolary writing is prior to the extra-diegetic cinematic creation, which is generated from its reading. This epistolary paradox identifies the moment of recognition about the impossibility of collective memory, of the subjectivities encounter, which causes the fracture of historicity: “And beneath each of these faces a memory. And in place of what we were told had been forged into a collective memory, a thousand memories of men who parade their personal laceration in the great wound of history.” Thus, this shift between subjectivities generates a paradox sentence-image about the impossibility of the encounter of subjectivities implied in the creation of a collective memory.

The segment dedicated to *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) presents a new and interesting shift between subjectivities. Although it does not include the imaginary film, it is generated through a procedure that will be used later to narrate it, so it is now pertinent to carry out its analysis. Despite most of the epistolary texts being enunciated in direct speech, especially the most reflective moments, Marker enunciates this entire fragment through the indirect speech: “he wrote to me that.” In this way, the addressee's description of the addresser's visit to San Francisco is combined, however, with the more subjective elements of the latter's filming. They are much more individualised subjective images, in which the addresser films the spaces of Hitchcock's film, trying to repeat its frames, which alternates with the original *Vertigo* shots, but these get turned into freeze-frames. That is to say, Hitchcock's images, turned into an attempt at a memory-image created by the addresser-spectator and therefore already subjectified, alternate with the direct experience of that same space a quarter of a century later. Constant camera movements, and even the cameraman's running motion, emerge from them, and his presence thus acquires greater power. Furthermore, the freeze-frames of the film disappear in an abrupt blur that, although they warn of its failed identification with memory, also identify with the cameraman's subjectivity. The segment then becomes a new reflection on this shift between subjectivities. It is through the distance imposed by the addressee's narration that the addresser's subjectivity intensifies. Once again, it is through the shift between subjectivities, in its interstice, that their possibilities and capacities are really revealed.

The reference to *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) also concludes the argument made out about the materialisation of the time-image. Madelaine's gesture in the redwood offers a movement-image of time, an indirect representation. The time traveller's finger of *La Jetée* points to the exterior of the causality of the previous image, to the postmodern timelessness on which the essay film reflects. In the same way, the spiral of *Vertigo's* credits offered a first movement-image of time: "In the spiral of the titles he saw time covering a field ever wider as it moved away, a cyclone whose present moment contains motionless the eye." Marker offers in *Sans soleil* its time-image, that of the Zone, and he will not bring the *Vertigo* images into it. Thus, he seems to choose the failed attempt of a memory-image that aims to preserve history to the postmodern practice of "creating your own legend." Marker uses the distance-image of postmodernity: "Cinema in cinema, cinema on cinema, auto-cinema, peri-cinema, meta-cinema [...] an art which creates its own culture and is nourished by it" (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2007, 73-74), to apprehend the subjective experience of the cinematic spectator and generate through it a new reflection about the opposite nature between the movement-image and the time-image, which arises once again from the shift between subjectivities.

After this segment dedicated to *Vertigo*, the epistolary addresser takes up the idea of the film to come for the third time, in order to deepen the problematisation of the identification between this project of film, now called imaginary film, and the one just analysed: "In San Francisco, I made the pilgrimage of a film I had seen nineteen times. In Iceland I laid the first stone of an imaginary film." The volcanic landscape of Iceland in 1965 and the activities of American astronauts lead him to imagine a film about another time traveller from the year 4001. Once again, Marker then generates a shift between subjectivities. The images filmed by him become the subjective shot of the imaginary film protagonist. A cut between shots, the "connection of memories" he defines himself later, serves to transform the subjective shot of the epistolary Marker into that of his imaginary character:

I imagine him moving slowly, heavily, about the volcanic soil that sticks to the soles of his shoes. All of a sudden, he stumbles, and the next step it's a year later. He's walking on a small path near the Dutch border by a sea bird sanctuary. That's for a start. Now why this cut in time, this connection of memories? That's just it, he can't understand.

While the protagonist's subjectivity moved outwards in the segment dedicated to *Vertigo* to delve into the non-transferable nature of subjectivity, now it moves inwards to provoke the experience of *estrangement*, the alterity of consciousness in its most instinctive aspect. The images change their nature by modifying their interpretation: they no longer belong to a filmmaker in 1965 but to a time traveller in 4001. They are no longer proof of the impossibility of memory but of the impossibility of forgetting. The shift between subjectivities turns them into a crystal-image in which actual-image (epistolary film) and virtual image (imaginary film) reach indiscernibility:

The two modes of existence are now combined in a circuit where the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual, chase after each other, exchange their roles and become indiscernible. It is here that we may speak the most precisely of crystal-image: the coalescence of an actual image and its virtual image, the indiscernibility of two distinct images (Deleuze 1989, 127).

The point of view does not transform the content of the images but their meaning. It is the shift between subjectivities that destroys the causality of the movement-image to generate the indiscernibility of the crystal-image. It previously embodied the impossibility of collective memory, and now it does so with the impossibility of apprehending the experience of others: "He wants to understand [...] that thing he didn't understand which had something to do with unhappiness and memory." The alterity of consciousness explored through Hayao's character now gives way to the alterity of the other in its aspect of greater strangerhood, and the crystal-image is achieved by identifying both subjectivities to embody it. Marker then renounces the identification of both films, although they retain the same title: "Of course I'll never make that film. Nonetheless, I'm collecting the sets, inventing the twists, putting in my favourite creatures. I've even given it a title, indeed the title of those Mussorgsky songs: Sunless." The imagined science-fiction film about the impossibility of forgetting has become an essay film about the impossibility of memory. However, both are linked through a shift between subjectivities that takes place in the cut between two shots and that generates a crystal-image in which imaginary film and epistolary film become indiscernible, actual image and virtual image.

5. Conclusion

Marker takes up the images of the Icelandic children to begin the synthesis of the reflection and the conclusion of the film. And for this, he again problematises the enunciation with the shift between subjectivities, as it already happened with the images about Luiz Cabral. The past literary epistolary enunciation becomes the present cinematic one:

And that's where my three children of Iceland came and grafted themselves in. I picked up the whole shot again, adding the somewhat hazy end, the frame trembling under the force of the wind beating us down on the cliff: everything I had cut in order to tidy up, and that said better than all the rest what I saw in that moment, why I held it at arms' length, at zoom's length, until its last twenty-fourth of a second.

It is the thinking process that allows images to find their place. They come out of their isolation surrounded by the black image in which they appeared in the prologue, and they recover their initial duration in order to offer an equality of the gaze that now extends within the shot and that Marker does not try to fixate. Instead, he accepts its disappearance under the ashes that will cover Heimaey five years later. In the same way, Marker accepts their mutation by allowing the film to enter the Zone and to turn into a flow-image, showing the result the spectator has already seen: "And then, in its turn, the journey entered the Zone, and Hayao showed me my images already affected by the moss of time, freed of the lie that had prolonged the existence of those moments swallowed by the spiral." After a final reference to the epistolary *unrealisation*—the letters destroyed or never sent—, Marker resorts to the alterity of consciousness incarnated in Hayao to understand the ambivalence that it brings up and identify the images of the Zone as a new act of resistance:

Finally, his language touches me because he talks to that part of us which insists on drawing profiles on prison walls [...] the handwriting each one of us will use to compose his own list of "things that quicken the heart," to offer or to erase. In that moment, poetry will be made by everyone, and there will be emus in the Zone.

After accepting the impossibility of memory, the act of resistance lies in an audiovisual self-management, in opposing the consumption of the postmodern image embodied in television images to turn the Zone into a space of free creation available to all. Marker

reaffirms for the last time the shift between subjectivities as a generator of the time-image and the crystal-image. The past of the epistolary texts is updated in the present, as the addressee turns “he wrote to me” into “he writes to me”. The past of the literary epistolary writing has reached the present through the addressee’s subjectivity, with which Marker decides to conclude the film, to project it into the future: “He writes me from Japan. He writes me from Africa. He writes that he can now summon up the look on the face of the market lady of Praia that had lasted only the length of a film frame. Will there be a last letter?” [Figure 6]. Besides, he unifies the subjectivities created by the film in a final sentence-image: the narration of the addressee, the filmic images of the epistolary addresser, the images of the Zone created by Hayao and Marker’s cinematic writing are brought together in the image of the woman from the Praia market, whose fixation already renounces the referential and memory value to become poetic writing.

Figure 6. The lady of Praia in the Zone.

Sans soleil (Chris Marker, 1983) © Argos Films.

As indicated above, it is only at this moment –when the network of shifts among subjectivities has made possible the materialisations of sentence-images to achieve the time-image of the Zone and the crystal-image of subjectivity– that Marker creates one more shift by turning the diegetic character into a fictional one. In turn, his addressee disappears to make an actress who reads the letters emerge. Thus, the vertigo of time and non-memory-history is again situated in a greater spiral. This final intertitle is enough to show again another abyss, that of subjectivity, into which the spectator dives. Through it, the finished film must be rethought one more time to transform the actual image-virtual image circuit. Only through the exercise of shift between subjectivities is it possible to reflect on one’s own identity and the experience of reality. That is how the individual of the essay film:

is forcibly displaced by the existence of a visual discursiveness that occurs outside himself, in parallel with the thinking process expressed orally. The individual represents himself, not through the identity focus that constitutes the reflective voice, but in the visual space of the images of a world turned into a mirror. [...] It is about getting to see oneself in the mirror of the world: seeing oneself as if it were someone else (Català 2014, 375).

The equality of the gaze that Marker wants to preserve, even if it is transformed into a poetic expression of the Zone, is that of the encounter between subjectivities, which in cinematic practice occurs on both sides of the camera and also on both sides of the screen. Thus, the equality of the gaze of the woman from Praia market is also the equality of the gaze of the spectator, to whom a cinematic experience is proposed; a reflection on which he is forced to take an active part, updating the virtual image of the film that cinematic thinking process implies.

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