Bourgeois Fantasies

Selected excerpts

Abstract

I wrote about two films, Chris Marker's *Cuba Si!* and Agnes Varda's *Salut les Cubains.* The films are about Cuba, yet they are not made by Cubans. Each plays with the visual language of politically-engaged documentary, the video essay and, at times, poetry. They are examples of many things: the optimism felt by artists, writers and filmmakers about socialism through the 20th century; they are tremendously influential examples of avant-garde cinema; each is a turning point in the life and career of its maker.

The form of this longform essay is discursive and polemical, and offers a reappraisal of a lineage of politically-engaged art and filmmaking. Crucial to my argument is an interrogation of the aesthetics of purpose, critique, didacticism and propaganda, and a consideration of what it might mean to return to such examples today.

Photograph by Agnes Varda, from Varda-Cuba by Éditions Du Centre Pompidou, 2015, scanned at The British Library.

But perhaps beginning with the biography behind the film misses the point. There is a step before we get to the background, and that step is the reason why we would be attracted to such films in the first place. To return to these films now is to encounter a time when artists through the 20th century were moved by the optimism and the promise of socialism. Within these films there is an answer to the question of what it might mean to be a politically engaged artist, and an example of experimental filmmaking practice that is a culmination of what came before and precedes what will follow it.

They are odd turning points within the timeline of Chris Marker and Agnes Varda's lives, sitting awkwardly in between better known films. At times they've been cited to bolster the revolutionary bona fide of each artist, and at other times they have been downplayed or pushed to the side, perhaps to place an emphasis on their status as great filmmakers rather than activists. In a way, this is also the story of politics of politically-engaged art through the 20th century – dramatic stories of artists taking the right side on various conflicts, wars and disputes. Such affinities affirm our hopes for the progressive nature of the arts. Yet, there is something uncomfortable or uneasy about these alternative traditions, particularly now as they have largely faded into the background. The idea that the artist might have a mission or a function is a heavy burden, one which gets in the way of notions of creativity and in individual freedom. That is the side that won the Cold War. When we look back to these past examples, we are looking at the losers who didn't get to write history.

It takes time to learn how to look at these films. To learn how they want you to look and to think. A thrilling observation we can glean from this is that our attention and aesthetic sensibility is something that has been shaped – and can be cultivated in a new direction in the future. Terms that might define this alternative tradition include critique and didacticism. It involves a notion of the artist or someone who has a message. The important thing, of course, is that there is a medium and an audience to receive it, and a cause for all this energy to be channelled towards. The arts

become a kind of vehicle for the masses, or we might say the masses are a vehicle for the arts. As I spent time with these films, I could feel something change, and after repeated viewing, I still feel like there is a lot more to learn, further time is required to fit them into the groove of my attention span and expectations.

Castro 'wings of stone' scene from *Salut les Cubains* by Agnes Varda.

Marker very consciously made *Cuba Si!* to push back against hostile attitudes within the Global North. In a preface of the script, he wrote: 'It also aims at countering the monstrous wave of misinformation in the major part of the press.' By presenting Castro unedited, in raw footage, Marker was optimistically giving audiences a chance to make up their own mind, while also providing the Cuban perspective on independence in full. Such filmmaking is led by purpose: documentary with a didactic aim, art as an expression of solidarity with a besieged revolution.

Yet, for Varda, Castro was illusive. "I was hoping that someone would offer me an appointment with Fidel Castro."[1] When she would meet him, it happened almost by accident and their encounter was remarkably informal. She went to an apartment that seemed to function as a de

[1] Karolina Lewandowska, "Cuba 1963 as Seen by Agnès Varda," in Varda-Cuba, ed. Centre Georges Pompidou. Galerie De Photographies (Paris: Éditions Du Centre Pompidou, 2015), pp 8.

facto office. Men with guns in uniform flowed in and out, perhaps as guards, and other officials were present too, such as Celia Sánchez, a secretary and minister. She had promised to photograph Castro, yet this was a kind of excuse to facilitate the introduction itself. “One day, someone calls me to tell me that he was in a restaurant by the sea, where he liked to go, and that I could stop by. It happened like that.”[2]

He features in various ways through her film and in Marker’s. In scaremongering headlines and newsreels, as graffiti along the street, in children’s drawings, on posters as part of national celebrations, little is needed to evoke the mythos of Castro than a beard and a hat. At times, he seems like a passing character in *Salut*. Except for the ‘wings of stone’ scene: it features Castro against a textured stone wall, with ambiguous shadows marking out a pattern akin to angel's wings. There’s a hint of irony in this sequence, especially when Castro is compared to American movie star Gary Cooper, although a certain naive romance is present too, especially when his speeches are shown. When he’s quoted saying ‘our country is a guinea-pig for Latin American revolution’, you can feel Varda’s shared optimism.

The photographs that compile the ‘wings of stone’ scene were shot during Varda’s impromptu meeting with Castro, in a small garden by an old restaurant and tavern near the water. Varda was accompanied by two Cuban officials, no guards appeared to be present. Their meeting was positive, even casual. She introduced herself as a French photographer who was making a documentary about Cuba. He was friendly, welcoming. She briefly explained her ambitions for the project, and said she was interested in him, in his persona. Mostly, he talked about spearfishing and fishing equipment: “he was a fanatic about it. He told me that in France and Italy, there were better underwater guns and that one of the latest models would have made him happy... I didn't have that in my photographer's bag! All the same, he had a gigantic project: to save his country from colonialism, to have a socialist project. He really wanted freedom, justice for all, the development of the country.”[3]

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Karolina Lewandowska, “Cuba 1963 as Seen by Agnès Varda,” in Varda-Cuba, ed. Centre Georges Pompidou. Galerie De Photographies (Paris: Éditions Du Centre Pompidou, 2015), pp 10.

They would move over to a small garden near the restaurant. Varda had spotted two bulking stones of unequal size. She asked him to sit in front of them and to pose. It was instinctual, immediate, but she felt something important had been captured. “I said to myself: it's incredible, he's a utopian, an idealist, that's obvious. He has a wonderful project and maybe he won't fly away. This portrait, it really is ‘Castro with wings of stone’.”

Screenshot, *Cuba Si!* by Chris Marker.

Cuba Si! has an uneasy position within Marker’s oeuvre. It’s one of the few not available on DVD and is rarely shown. Marker has distanced himself not too long after it was shown. Almost everything produced before 1962, the year after *Cuba Si!* was released, he’s referred to as an early ‘sketch’ of what was to come. When given the opportunity to curate his own retrospective at La Cinémathèque française in 1998, he would publicly state that he no longer wanted to ‘inflict’ his earliest films, mere rough drafts, on the viewing public. The earliest films shown were *La Jetée* and *Le Joli mai* – just eclipsing *Cuba Si!*.

To push against this statement is to interpret Marker’s oeuvre against his wishes. And to advocate for the renewed importance of any work by an influential figure is to push up against the limits of

attention. They are already so well-known, so thoroughly discussed, that almost anything within their oeuvre gains an element of significance simply by their presence. But the case for appreciating *Cuba Si!* is strong. This was a film that was shot about the Cuban Revolution while it was still settling into a new society. Between Marker leaving the island and the film being complete, the Bay of Pigs took place; he had to re-edit the film to respond to this significant moment of the Cold War. When he returned to France and attempted to release the film, it was censored by the French government, who claimed it was a threat to public order. As an historical document, it contains an original interview with Castro.

The film itself would be incorporated into *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1977), which would also be amalgamated into the English version of *Grin Without a Cat* (1988).[4] And despite his later disavowal of *Cuba Si!*, it would feature in *Commentaires* (1961), a publication that accompanies his films, collecting scripts and other written material by Marker about his earliest works, signalling the importance of it to him at the time. *Cuba Si!* is the last film in the collection, which begins with *Statues Also Die*, includes *Letter from Siberia*, perhaps the most notable of the lot. A quick flick through the book is a reminder of how varied his projects were in that period: we see Peking, America and Russia, there's discussions of colonialism, violence and cartoons; each page bristles with found photography, portraits, archival objects, quotes, fragments from letters, actual scripts and essayistic reflections. The exact relationship to the films is somewhat ambiguous: a footnote to expand concerns, a director's extended cut, or an experimental play with image and text that exists beyond the original? Perhaps all at once.

His affirmation of *Cuba Si!* in *Commentaires* is full throated: 'And here's the movie that's closest to my heart, and not just because it's the last.' The affinity he feels in that moment – 1961, the same year *Cuba Si!* is completed and censored by the French government – is in part an expression of the optimism he feels about Cuba. 'Filmed at full speed in January 1961, during the first alert (you know, at the time when most French newspapers laughed at the paranoia of Fidel who thought he

[4] Anon, "Cuba Si! By Chris Marker (1961)," Chris Marker, November 28, 2016, https://chrismarker.org/cuba-si/.

was threatened with a landing...), it attempts to communicate, if not the experience, at least the tremor, the rhythm of a Revolution.'[5]

La Jetée often features as a subject in the extensive writing about his life, work and influence. But I'm surprised at how absent *Cuba Si!* is from this conversation. He also, famously, made *Le Joli mai*, a vox-pop-style documentary, alongside the shooting of *La Jetée* during days off and at quieter moments of downtime. *Le Joli mai* involves numerous on the street interviews with people in Paris. Marker asks them a series of questions, often addressing the Accords, a pivotal political moment in France when the Algerian War (1954-62) ended. Each is a different kind of portrait of war: the Cuban Revolution and the Bay of Pigs, the unravelling of French imperialism in Algeria, and a dystopia speculation about the future. His focus is on the aftermath rather than the heroism of action. He highlights impacts on people, and offers a startling range of ideas.

One of the few to draw the link, Lee Hilliker has argued that the contrast between Marker's perception of the 'joyous revolutionary struggle for liberation in Cuba' and censorship he experienced at home clearly informs the bleak, dystopian tone of *La Jetée*.[6] Set in a Paris beset by post-nuclear fallout, the protagonist's fixation on images from the past, his obsessive nostalgia for a hopeful past amid a ruined present, puts the use of time travel as a narrative tool in a different light. Curiously, Patrick Ffrench had suggested that understanding *La Jetée*[7], Marker's only fictional film, could also be read as a documentary. The protagonist 'views his memory as if he were watching a film.' He doubts his memories, he's haunted by the experiences of torture and war. This concept of the 'separation of memory from consciousness and agency,' Ffrench explains, '... raises the possibility that the image itself is or has a memory....'.

[5] Chris Marker, Commentaires (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961), https://chrismarker.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Marker_Chris_Commentaires_1-web.pdf.
[6] Hilliker, Lee. "The History of the Future in Paris: Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard in the 1960s." Film Criticism 24, no. 3 (2000): 1–22. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44019058?seq=4#metadata_info_tab_contents.
[7] Spring Ulmer, "Can Good Come of the Visual Poetry of Torture in Chris Marker's La Jetee and WG Sebald's the Rings of Saturn?," in Photography and Cinema : 50 Years of Chris Marker La Jetee (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp 311.

La Jetée's time traveller is not selected for the mission due to any particular skill or heroism. It's his fixation on images – a singular image from the past – that qualifies him for the role. The process is not entirely psychological, though. He's injected with a mysterious drug and collapses physically; his body is still situated in the present, but it seems necessary to demobilise him, as if his consciousness is tied to his body but also independent of it. Reflecting on the metaphorical implications, Hiliker says: 'his ability to fixate on an image from the past makes him a pawn in the struggle for the control of history.' Other resonances of Marker's Parisian dystopia would have been apparent to audiences then, and are often referenced in discussions of it since. The preoccupation with trauma performed by authoritarian scientists amid wider societal havoc makes an implicit reference both to the horrors of WW2, the threat of nuclear apocalypse during the Cold War and the unsettled colonial relationship between France and Algeria. Subtle details, such as the subterranean population, also evoke Freudian conceptions of the unconscious of a traumatised individual and society, a strain of thinking increasingly popular amongst French intellectuals, artists and writers then. *La Jetée* emerged at a time when the French New Wave was fully underway; Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais had released some of their most iconic films. A dual sense of optimism and peril could be felt in the scene, notes Margarida Medeiros, as 'the French intellectual milieu was oscillating between an "end-of-times" feeling boosted by the war and the quick decay of colonial empires, and new expectations arising from urban youth, sexual liberation and the overcoming of the many barriers imposed by bourgeois morality.'[8]

[8] Margarida Medeiros, Teresa Mendes Flores, and Joana Cunha Leal, Photography and Cinema : 50 Years of Chris Marker La Jetee (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), pp 7.

Film still, *Salut les Cubains* by Agnes Varda.

There are no socialist revolutions to flock to anymore. Few political projects seem to hold any sense of possibility, especially in the face of the totalising destruction of the climate crisis and the petty resurgence of nationalism. I find it difficult to think of the future; mostly, it feels like things around me – the nation state, institutions, communities, individual rights and freedoms – are coming to an end in one way or another. Perhaps this end has been growing and building for some time, metastasizing until it is inescapable now, or perhaps it was always there, built into the foundations and predictably coming to its inevitable realisation. Against this context, to pay attention to forgotten films might seem like a kind of retreat from a multitude of crises. Perhaps. But to retreat is not to surrender. These films may be artefacts and relics to us now, but they were weapons in their own time. Somehow they still feel spiky and dangerous, demanding, all consuming and full of possibility, still vibrating with an energy that could speak to us anew.

I watched them on subscription platforms that charge by the month. I returned to them again in badly edited YouTube clips. I found writing about them in awkwardly photocopied journals and in

paywalled academic articles – a whole contemporary digital infrastructure is built under and around them, somehow keeping them alive but also keeping them away from contemporary audiences. It is almost like they're contained. You wouldn't expect the algorithm to push them to your feed. You would have to somehow sneak behind a paywall to find them. But first, you would have to care. You would have to know about them to seek them down. Cuba and the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, socialism of the Global South, would have to resonate with you, and there would need to be a means and mechanism for this idea to transform into action on your street, neighbourhood, community and country.

For these films to lead to something now, as Marker and Varda had hoped for their own time, their message would need to test well in a focus group; a politician would need to have a billionaire mention it over dinner; McKinsey & Company would need to include it in a report; *The Daily Mail* would need to print it in all caps. But somehow, both films have globbed themselves on to the digital and intellectual infrastructure of our lives, holding on but still hidden. Alive, somehow. Perhaps they have been carried on by the names of their creators who are much more well known for all their commercial and critical hits. Carried forward by the prestige of Marker and Varda, they have become art – beautiful things, certainly, but somehow this is a tragic outcome.

I think these are special films because of the traditions they bring alive. They stand somewhere in between Russian revolutionary filmmaking, espoused by the likes of Dziga Vertov, and the critical attention paid to image, text and language by theorists through the 20th century. They also suggest that art is not merely a tool of political struggle, a way of conveying messages and drumming up support, but something integral to it, something that changes how we see ourselves. Revolution – both political and cultural – has the capacity to change how we see the world, how we see ourselves and those around us. If there has to be a culture war, that's what it should be.

Once you've paid close attention to the lives and work of Agnes Varda and Chris Marker, you start seeing contemporary versions of their ideas everywhere. Perhaps this influence is an indirect, unconscious overlap – a shared set of concerns and attitudes about what can be done with images, or what they do to us. They approach photography and cinema in a hybrid manner, fluidly shifting

between ideas of time, presence, voice and memory. The temporality of images takes on different connotations between photography and cinema, with the stillness of the former often contrasted with the latter. From this point of view, photography underscores what has happened while cinema puts the past into motion.

Each film is an example of Varda and Marker's career trajectory. They demonstrate the risks that each took, and the innovations that they would contribute to other artists, prefiguring decades of artistic filmmaking practice to come. On an immediate and visceral level, I like these films because of that. Because of how they show Marker and Varda working ideas out, doing things that would resonate with many others that I admire. And in a similar way, I think returning to these films might prefigure something else, might make other things possible. The challenge of slowing ourselves down, of attuning to the moment and motivates off screen, is part of the promise that they offer us.

Screenshot, *Cuba Si!* by Chris Marker.