



THE TOKYO MYSTERY

Tracking down the subject of one of Chris Marker's films, artist Magnus Bårtås finds himself exploring Tokyo's past and present, and Western filmmakers' enduring fascination with Japan

Film-essayist Chris Marker's fascination for Japan, and in particular Tokyo, is most famously apparent in *Sans Soleil* (1983). But he had made a film-essay about Japan almost 20 years previously, a film that had slipped out of distribution – *Le Mystère Koumiko* or *The Koumiko Mystery* (1965). Swedish contemporary artist Magnus Bårtås traveled to Tokyo to investigate further. We conducted a conversation via email while he was artist-in-residence at Arts Initiative Tokyo (AIT).

Ben Slater: Tell me about the context behind *The Koumiko Mystery*. I heard Marker was commissioned to make a documentary about the Olympics but made another film instead...

Magnus Bårtås: Chris Marker came to Tokyo in 1964 in order to document the Tokyo Olympics, which was considered as both the symbolic and real opening-up of Japan to the Western world (after WW2). This is the starting point and the setting for *The Koumiko Mystery*. I'm not quite sure about what actually happened, but in the film the focus on the Olympics is handled in a very absent-minded way. Not long into the film Marker's attention is directed to a woman who appears in the Olympic audience – Koumiko Muraoka. The young woman was actually a friend of one of the production assistants who worked on the film, Koichi Yamada.

After that Chris Marker, with his silent 16mm Bolex camera, and Koumiko are breezing through the streets of Tokyo. Marker (the narrator himself) asks her questions and she responds in a very

intriguing way. She is a student at the French-Japanese institute in Tokyo, and her French is a little 'peculiar', according to Marker.

In the middle of the film Marker goes back to France. He sends Koumiko a list of questions. She answers on a tape. Koumiko comments on identity, violence, beauty and her relationship to animals. The dialogue in this part, together with different sound elements, creates a sort of spatial sound and this leads to a very unusual communication between the narrator and his subject. At the end of the film, the last sentences we hear from Koumiko are edited like a montage to express strong memories (as far as I understand) from the violent events that took place during the last phase of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (during WW2) where Koumiko grew up.

BS: How did you get to see the film, and what's your interest in Marker?

MB: A friend told me about the film and I imagined what it would be like. It's not released on any DVD, and hasn't been shown widely. I finally managed to view a copy at the Swedish Film Institute. At that time I had already decided to apply for a grant to stay in Tokyo, a city I've visited on two earlier occasions. *The Koumiko Mystery* provided me (together with *Sans Soleil*) with the courage to approach some questions of form and content. Marker's works have proposed a possibility, often found in the fine arts but rarely in cinema, to bring together in the same imaginary space diverse subjects – things that 'don't fit together'. *The Koumiko Mystery* and *Sans Soleil* are documentaries without a theme, or rather documentaries inventing an unknown trans-disciplinary theme.

BS: Japan and Tokyo seem to be a major source of interest for Marker in this film and others (most notably *Sans Soleil*). As a Westerner in Tokyo at the moment, does it still hold the same fascination?

MB: I think *The Koumiko Mystery* has an exotic element that has vanished by the time we get to *Sans Soleil*. And there has been a tremendous exploitation of the ancient/modern bipolarity of Tokyo since the 1980s and '90s. In the light of this, Werner Herzog told Wim Wenders in *Tokyo-Ga* that there are no true images left in Tokyo. Interestingly, one notion of Tokyo seems to persist from the Marker films: Tokyo has, unlike most cities, an ontology of a being of its own. This notion is very present here. It actually seems to be inherent. Very few individuals (in relation to its mass-population) have long roots back in time here, very few buildings have a history. It's a changing, organic, non-sentimental and sometimes frightening entity. I sense a certain fascination mixed with fear for this creature among the citizens in Tokyo (a fear also probably enforced by the earthquake-threat that literally can turn the city to a raging enemy). Although my video-essay is concerned with two characters connected with Tokyo – Koumiko and a man named Johnnie Walker – everyone here takes it for granted that my film also reflects Tokyo, and I think this conception of a city is quite unique.

BS: Marker is interested in Tokyo, and in return I have heard he has his followers in Tokyo.

MB: There is a small Chris Marker Fan Club here, but I haven't actually encountered it. But through the owner of the wonderful, tiny bar in the Golden Gai district of Shinjuku, named *La Jetée* I have experienced the tranquil worship of Markers'

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By Ben Slater

deeds here in Tokyo. Chris Marker has openly expressed his devotion for pilgrimage (such as to all the locations from Hitchcock's *Vertigo*), so I admit I follow the same line in Tokyo. The bar *La Jetée* actually appears in one of the episodes of Marker's series for television called *The Owl's Legacy*. A group of Japanese intellectuals perform a spontaneous seminar in the bar, discussing their first encounters with ancient Greece.

BS: Have you found the mysterious Koumiko?

MB: My idea was to trace Koumiko here in Tokyo and to establish a relation to the time that has passed since Marker's film was made. In the library of the French Japanese House I found a book of short stories written in French by a 'Koumiko Muraoka'. Inside the book there was a

portrait of the author, a charcoal drawing. It was possible to imagine the Koumiko from the film as the depicted person in the drawing 'in the future'. Through research at AIT we found out that Koumiko moved to Paris thirty years ago. In January I'll go to there to meet her.

Magnus Bårtås is an artist and writer based in Stockholm. Latest screenings and exhibitions: Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Hollybush Gardens, London; Künstlerhaus Bethanien; Berlin, Shadow Film Festival, Amsterdam; AIT, Tokyo.

Ben Slater is a writer based in Singapore. He is co-editor with Maggie Lee of this issue's Japan pages and also the author of a monograph on the making of *Saint Jack, Kinda Hot* (Marshall Cavendish).



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五 FROM THE FLOATING WORLD



Sparrows feeding their young. To pass a place where babies are playing. To sleep in a room where some incense has been burnt. To notice that one's elegant Chinese mirror has become a little cloudy. To see a gentleman stop his carriage before one's gate and instruct his attendants to announce his arrival. To wash one's hair, make one's toilet, and put on scented robes; even if not a soul sees one, these preparations still produce an inner pleasure. It is night and one is expecting a visitor. Suddenly one is startled by the sound of rain-drops, which the wind blows against the shutters.

The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon