The significance of Chris Marker’s documentary film practice: Exploring Peirce’s semiotics in Description of a Struggle and Sunless

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In relating a letter from the fictitious filmmaker Sandor Krasna who has travelled between Europe, Asia, and Africa, the narrator of Chris Marker’s *Sunless* (1983) shares the observation that “the great question” of modern the modern era “was the coexistence of different concepts of time”. Through the trope of a letter from a fictitious filmmaker who is a thin disguise for Marker himself, Marker highlights a relational and multiplicative approach to understanding the world. Marker’s nuanced narration and collage-style of imagery in his travelogue documentaries, of which *Sunless* is perhaps the most famous and *Description of a Struggle* (1960) its predecessor, are difficult to unfurl and it seems that this opacity is intentional. Semiotic analysis is often employed in order to analyze cinematic construction and indeed in following this methodology Marker’s films certainly bear fruit. Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of semiosis is a revelatory method for understanding the construction of meaning in Marker’s travelogue films *Description of a Struggle* and *Sunless* because both Peirce and Marker aim for relationality and generativity in the production of meaning. Furthermore, this generative style of semiosis bears implications for the notion of viewer engagement that is so often applied to documentary cinema in general.

Peircian semiotics have been applied to cinema in the past, but perhaps not with the fervour of Saussurian or Lacanian semiotic theory. Notably, however, Gilles Deleuze uses Peirce’s sign categories in *Cinema 1* (1986) and *Cinema 2* (1986) to shed light on what Deleuze himself calls the “movement image”, the “time image”, and the “thought image” (p.x). Deleuze’s Cinema books concern themselves with fictional narrative cinema, however many aspects of his analysis can be aptly applied to documentary cinema as well. Sykes explains that Deleuze’s use
of Peircian semiotics helps elucidate upon “the experience and perception of film imagery, as well as the relationship of director, actor and audience” (1998, p.66) and a simple reworking can interpret “actor” to mean quite simply *onscreen subjects*, which allows for documentary cinema to be held up under Deleuze’s Peirce-influenced lens. Indeed, Deleuze’s application of Peircian semiotics to the cinema will be used to great advantage throughout this essay as Marker’s techniques of signification and their implications are considered.

A recent book by Johannes Ehrat (2005) also applies Peircian semiotics to cinema and develops a method of film analysis that lends itself to Marker’s unique and tangential essay-style of documentary film construction. Ehrat proposes that Peirce’s version of semiotics “implies that something exists to be discovered and that there is someone who discovers it” (p.11), which is most fitting for Marker’s travelogue films that employ the notion of “discovery” on the part of the wide-eyed traveling filmmaker (Marker himself, occasionally fictionalized within the context of the film, such as in *Sunless*) and that encourage “discovery” on the part of the viewer (to be elucidated further in this paper). Ehrat indicates the importance of the process of sign-making and argues that the fact that cinema is a sign in itself is not worthy of investigation (p.114), but suggests that “how it is Sign... is interesting because this involves a dynamic process of mediation” (ibid.), a process which Marker forefronts in his films by highlighting the mutable meaning of images when plucked from their original context and inserted into a length of film, at the whim of the filmmaker. Indeed, and in borrowing Bruno Latour’s terminology (2004), it is worth stressing that it is a “matter of fact” (p.231) that Marker’s films can be interpreted as Signs, fitting into one or more of Peirce’s categories, but just *how* his films fit into Peirce’s
semiotics and demonstrate the characteristics of Peircian sign-making is a “matter of concern” (ibid.), that is, a matter worthy of investigation.

The basic process of signification in Peircian semiotics revolves around the interplay of the object, a representamen of this object, and its interpretant (1931, p.228). In Peircian terms, the images in Marker’s films are the objects. (It ought to be noted that the images within Marker’s films should not be assumed to be synonymous with the filmed instances from which they were captured). Marker’s narration, though not always in Marker’s own voice, produces representamena, which are subsequently interpreted by the viewer, creating interpretants. This much could be said for most any film with a narrator, though it worth noting that Marker’s style of narration works on the level of connotation rather than denotation, and generally unexpected connotation at that. A matter of particular interest in Marker’s film is how signs are employed in creating meaning, and in the overall semiotic function of each film in question.

At this juncture, Peirce’s notion of firstness, secondness, and thirdness (1931, p.229), which Deleuze also utilizes in his analysis of cinematic imagery in Cinema 1, must be introduced into the semiotic analysis of Marker’s films. Following Deleuze’s line of reasoning, Peirce’s firstness can been seen as arising from micro instances that break away from the “spatio-temporal” (1986, p.96) situation of the cinematic narrative. Deleuze cites close-ups on the face as an example of firstness, this image being quite apart from the rest of the film and bearing an element of shock beyond the boundaries of language or narrative (p.95-101), and this precise kind of cinematic firstness can indeed be found in Sunless when Marker shows the audience his
“twenty-fourth of a film frame” in which he has captured in close-up the boldly penetrative
glance of a woman in a marketplace of Bissau. While firstness is associated with the nature of
being itself, outside of - or perhaps before - a larger context, secondness places the object within
fact, and exists in binary distinction between being and not being, what it is and what it is not
(Marks in lecture, October 12th, 2011). Thirdness places the object into relation and comparison
(ibid.). While firstness operates within cinema mainly at the atomic level, secondness and
thirdness are more applicable to the entirety of cinematic semiotic construction. Description of a
Struggle explores secondness through the investigation of a country that, twelve years before, did
not exist.

The very beginning of Description of a Struggle, which opens with the proclamation that
“this land speaks to you in signs”, highlights the role signs and signification play in
communication and the creation of meaning. In a country still learning to define itself, Marker
points out that the process of signification is imperative in “defin[ing] an orderly relationship in
things hostile or mystery-veiled” - settlements blossom out of the desert, signaling the presence
of Israel as fact and distinct from what came before, namely, the non-existence of Israel, the open
desert, as well as a local way of life foreign to the new Israelis. Marker’s exploration of
secondness leads to the examination of objects that contain within them binary oppositions,
bringing to mind Deleuze’s reading of Peircian secondness as “everything which only exists by
being opposed” (p.98). Israel in its entirety points to the oppositional state of being, as a nation
that so recently did not exist at all, and which was birthed out of violence and struggle,
reminiscent of Deleuze’s understanding of secondness as oppositional tensions such as “exertion-
resistance, action-reaction” (p.98). Indeed elements of Israel persist in oppositional contradiction to the very being of this new nation state. Through narration, Marker points out that the insular “ghetto” way of life of pre-Israel European Jewish existence continues to live on in the Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem, despite the fact that this closed-off way of life was meant to be extinguished through the creation of Israel. Marker takes a closer look at Israeli life twelve years after the nation’s birth and uncovers further objects bearing within them opposition, contradiction, or dual significance: the dome shape synonymous with the synagogue is shared by the University of Jerusalem’s planetarium, indicating religion as well as science; bright lights in the desert night may indicate the headlights of a supply vehicle, narrated as “the light that guides”, or the penetrating illumination of security lights around the perimeter of a new settlement, “the light that guards”. Thus, the objects of the young Israel so often carry dual, and frequently oppositional, meaning. Marker draws attention to the objects within Israel and its burgeoning culture that contain double entendres of meaning, which create what Catherine Lupton describes as “fugitive signs that reveal how nations and cultures organize and express themselves” (2005, p.41). Marker’s Description of a Struggle suggests that the very nature of Israel is founded in oppositional signification.

In Sunless, the dual signification of objects gives way to a multiplicity of object significations, arising out of relation rather than opposition, specifically relations between cultures, as Marker grafts together images of Iceland, France, Japan, and Guinea Bissau, and pulls them into conversation with each via narration that stresses the malleability of meaning. Relation is a quality of Peirce’s thirdness (1931, p.229), and as Ehrat explains of Peirce’s
pragmatic predilection, “[p]ragmatism comprehends meaning as relational, and meaning is analyzed in the logic of relations” (p.14). Indeed, Marker analyzes the significance of grandiose issues such as death and time in relation to the aforementioned countries’ cultures, as well as the significance of particular images or instances for various individuals or groups, thus highlights the dynamic, rather than static, nature of signification, allowing for objects to stand for a multiplicity of meanings, depending on the mind in which they are held and the context in which they are presented. For the Japanese middle-class, a large bottle of sake is an offering to the dead which they pour over tombstones; for the under-class of Japanese society, this same large bottle of sake signifies “luxury” in liquid form. The mounds of ash covering Heimaey, Iceland, point to the natural disaster that destroyed the local residents’ way of life, but for the fictional filmmaker Sandor Krasna (Marker himself in a fictional guise) they are iconic of the moon’s surface. Whereas in *Description of a Struggle* the tension lies in binary oppositions held within objects, in *Sunless* the tension rests in the ever-increasing multiplicity of signs for any given object.

Signification and re-signification lay at the core of Marker’s method of constructing a film and the main thread from which the significance of his images dangle is the narration that accompanies the visuals in his travelogue documentaries *Description of a Struggle* and *Sunless*. Catherine Lupton quotes French film critics Raymond Bellour and Jean Michaud in describing how Marker’s interpretation of objects, voiced through his narration, rests on “a moment of defamiliarization” (p.68) in which Marker pulls objects from their everyday context and spotlights their significance from multiple angles, both real and imagined. Lupton’s observations
regarding the narration in Marker’s *Sunday in Peking* (1956) can equally be applied to his later works, *Description of a Struggle* and *Sunless*:

The conversational first-person narration proceeds by associations that do not simply fix meanings to the images that appear, but work at a tangent to them, unfolding familiarity and distance, lyrical observations and conventional stereotypes, as filters through and against which the viewer might grasp something of the reality...” (p.51)

This creative translation of signs in Marker’s narration lends itself to the style of ever-growing signification that Peirce attempted to encompass in his theory of semiotics - in the words of Peirce himself, “the Sign and the Explanation together make up another Sign, and since the explanation will be a Sign, it will probably require an additional explanation” (p.230). Put simply, Marker and Peirce both contend that signification is not fixed and make a point of encouraging the creation of ever increasing numbers of signs for any given object.

Chris Marker’s Peircian style of signification carries consequences worth exploring in relation to the role of the viewer in documentary cinema. Documentary film is often used in the service of a cause or to raise awareness about an issue, and much ado has been made regarding how the viewer can be rallied to apply what they’ve learned from a film in their everyday life (for example see Solanas and Getino, 1971). Jane Gaines describes this call for action as bringing the “movement [of motion pictures] back out again... enacting ‘body back’ effects, translated into actions in and on the world, into the production of new events” (2007, p.12). Marker’s films, while working within the documentary genre, do not rally behind specific causes
nor propel the viewer out of their seat, rather their strength lies in their encompassing of many
causes and points of view and their refusal to offer up inciting discourse.

This does not mean, however, that viewers of Marker’s *Description of a Struggle* or
*Sunless* are discouraged from action. Ehrat argues that watching a film is in itself an “action” (p.
20), as opposed to simply a “cognitive process” (ibid.), but this is not the only avenue through
which to prove that Marker’s digressive style of filmmaking can have an impact on the viewer
and their subsequent actions. Marker’s contemplative essay-style documentaries, stressing a
relational and transformative approach to the process of signification, serve as a template for an
approach to the world that encourages generative engagement. While traditional documentaries
generally present knowledge in narrow discursive form to be ingested by the viewer as directed,
Marker’s films defy any singular conclusions and instead invite the viewer to devise their own
hypotheses, to create further signs from the ones presented in his films. While no single cause or
issue can be pinned down in *Description of a Struggle* or *Sunless*, generative semiotic process is
heralded in Marker’s unconventional style. This holds strong echoes of Peirce’s own goal of
semiotic process in the service of increasing knowledge (Ehrat, p.11). Hand-in-hand, Peirce’s
semiotics and Marker’s filmmaking techniques rally towards the cause of generativity.

Examining Marker’s *Description of a Struggle* and *Sunless* through Peirce’s semiotic
theory does not tie off the thread of Marker’s tangential interpretation, but rather helps to clarify
precisely how Marker’s film construction invites viewer engagement with his documentary
images of the physical world. Peirce’s triad of semiotic elements, the object, representamen, and
interpretant, as well as the nuances of his semiotic theory including firstness, secondness, and thirdness, serve as a metaphorical web which can be spread over Marker’s films to make sense of their significance as well as their mode of signification. The analysis of Chris Marker’s films through Peirce’s theory of semiotics yields two definitive conclusions. First, that Peircian semiotics are imminently applicable to cinema studies, which Deleuze and Ehrat have demonstrated previously, but which has somewhat been overlooked in the semiotic analysis of film. Secondly, that Chris Marker was ahead of his time in his generative and multiplicative approach to signification in documentary cinema, as in the present day such diverse and tangential modes of interpreting objects, most notable on the internet, are a fundamental element in how people navigate and make sense of our highly mediated world.
Works Cited


*Description of a Struggle [Description d’un combat]*. Dir. Chris Marker. 1960. Film.


*Sunless [Sans soleil]*. Dir. Chris Marker. 1983. Film.
