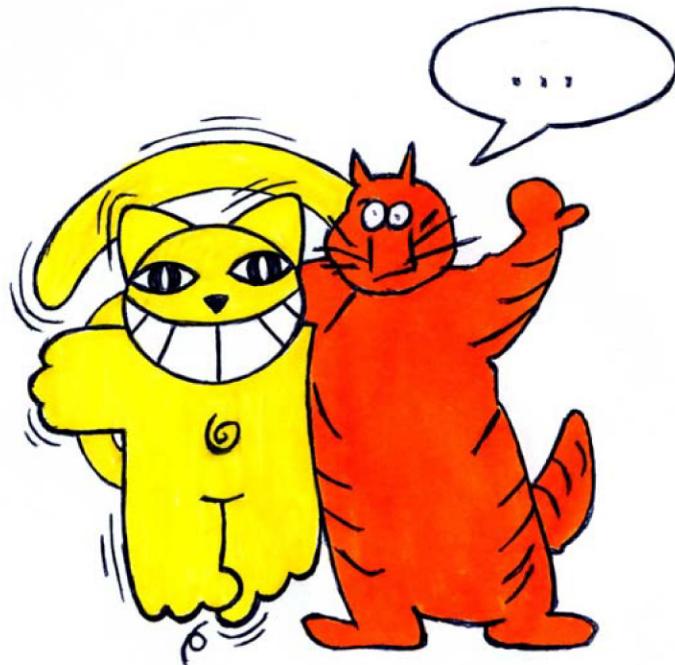


The Case of the Grinning Cat

A Film by Chris Marker

"The most poetic and original of documentarists."—DEREK MALCOLM, THE GUARDIAN



58 minutes / color / 2004

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Synopsis

The Case of the Grinning Cat, the latest creation from legendary French filmmaker Chris Marker, takes us meandering through Paris over the course of three years—2001 to 2004—ostensibly in search of a series of mysterious grinning cats whose stenciled image has sprung up in the most unlikely places: high atop buildings all over the city. The film—of which he has just prepared the English version—begins in November 2001 in a Paris still fresh from the shock of the September 11 attacks on the U.S., and where newspaper headlines read "We are all Americans." Over the next year, in the lead-up to the Iraq war, the city's youth march in numerous demonstrations for all manner of causes as Marker continues his pursuit of the mysterious cats. He finds them again, to his surprise, showing up as the emblem of the new French youth movement. "Make cats not war!" street art is the flip side of the idealism and exuberance driving the young people marching in protests the likes of which Paris hasn't seen since the mythic events of May 1968. While at times it might seem that the spirit of idealism has survived intact, the filmmaker's observation of it is tempered. Causes too, he observes, are a matter of fashion, and the film ends on a somber note. Cats and owls, politics and art, nimbly take their places in this Marker shuffle. The whole is woven together by the filmmaker's at times surreal humor, and by his astute and effortless camera that never fails to linger on the odd, ordinary, ineffable moments that only his eye can turn to gold dust.

DORNA KHAZENI, 2006 TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL CATALOG



(SARAJEVO TRAMWAY / CENTRE ANDRÉ MALRAUX LINE)

Review Excerpts

Jonathan Rosenbaum, Cinema Scope

A bracing new political essay.... might be called Marker's latest State of the Body Politic address,



shot on both sides of the Atlantic and framed by a fantasy-reverie about graffiti of cartoon Cheshire cats mysteriously appearing in unexpected, hidden places, rather like the proliferating post horns in Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49.

J. Hoberman, The Village Voice,

'Best in Show' at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival

As lively, engaged, and provocative as ever (not least

in his use of digital technology), octogenarian Chris Marker meditates on the state of post-9-11

France. Part personal essay, part city

symphony...takes as its premise the mysterious appearance of the enigmatic M. Chat—a wide-eyed, broadly smiling feline mascot who magically appears on Paris rooftops and building walls, as well as at political demonstrations.



Time Out, Critic's Pick at the

2006 Tribeca Film Festival

Investigating a strange rash of feline graffiti that afflicted Paris in recent years, Chris Marker, France's



*84-year-old living legend of the personal cinematic essay (*Le Joli Mai, Sans Soleil*), touches on topics ranging from the Iraq War to pet love. When this genius makes a new film, you go. And when that film happens to concern the director's favorite subject—kitty cats—you go twice. Wrow!*

Filmography

Films

- 2004 The Case of the Grinning Cat
1999 One Day In the Life of Andrei Arsenevich
1997 Level Five
1993 The Last Bolshevik
1990 Berliner Ballade
1989 The Owl's Legacy
1985 AK: Portrait of Akira Kurosawa
1982 Sans Soleil
1981 Junkopia
1977 A Grin Without a Cat
1974 The Loneliness of the Long Distance Singer
1973 Embassy
1971 The Train Rolls on
1970 The Battle of the Ten Million
1970 Carlos Marighela
1970 Les Mots Ont Un Sens
1969 Jour De Tournage
1966 If I Had Four Dromedaries
1963 Le Joli Mai
1962 La Jetée



Multimedia

- 2005 Owls at Noon
1997 Immemory
1995 Silent Movie
1990 Zapping Zone

Co-Direction

- 2001 Remembrance of Things to Come (with Yannick Bellon)
1972 Vive La Baleine (with Mario Ruspoli)
1968 A Bientôt J'Espère (with Mario Marret)
1968 The Sixth Face of the Pentagon (with F. Reichenbach)
1950 Les Statues Meurent Aussi (with Alain Resnais)

Collective Films

- 1975 Spiral
1974 Puisqu'on Vous Dit Que C'est Possible
1967 Far From Vietnam

Credits

A Film by
Chris MARKER

Voice

Gérard RINALDI

Soundthread

Michel KRASNA

Mix

Florent LAVALLEE

“Cats Theme”

Anton ARENSKY (1861-1906)

Musical Quotes

Giovanni FUSCO

Jean-Claude ELOY

Production

Laurence BRAUNBERGER/LES FILMS DU JEUDI

in association with ARTE FRANCE

Thierry GARREL

Luciano RIGOLINI



With the involuntary concourse of

Frédéric TADDEI

Akosh S.

Additional footage courtesy of

AMIS DU CHAT

Still Photographer

J.F. DARS

No cat has been treated impolitely in this movie.

This film is dedicated to “Mr. Cat” and those, like him, who are creating a new culture.

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***“If ever there was a filmmaker to come up with
a Theory of Everything, it’s Marker.”***

—Time Out

an ICARUS FILMS release

For Immediate Release

April 24, 2006

For further information, phone Gary Crowdus at (718) 488-8900 or e-mail gary@IcarusFilms.com

**“March of the Grinning Cats” Scheduled to Celebrate
the Tribeca Film Festival Premiere of Chris Marker’s
New Documentary, *The Case of the Grinning Cat***

To celebrate the New York Premiere of *The Case of the Grinning Cat*, the newest documentary from renowned French documentarian and cine-essayist Chris Marker, the film’s distributor, First Run/Icarus Films, is pleased to announce that “Monsieur Chat,” a principal member of the Paris art collective featured in the film, will lead moviegoers, cat lovers, and other New Yorkers on a “March of the Grinning Cats” through downtown New York following the Monday, May 1st, 1:00 p.m. screening of the film.

The march, which will begin after the screening around 2:00 p.m. outside the AMC Loew’s 34th Street theater (312 West 34th Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues), will then proceed, in full whimsical mode, to Times Square, where spontaneous and absolutely nonsensical fun will ensue.

“Grinning Cat” placards will be distributed free—contact us and we’ll email you a “cat mask” to print and bring along—to willing participants in this “nonsense march” designed to introduce “Mr. Chat” to the Big Apple and to add a touch of whimsy to midtown Manhattan. This New York City march will continue the tradition of such “Grinning Cat” public demonstrations previously held to celebrate screenings of the film in Paris, Sarajevo and Hong Kong. (A special guest appearance by Guillaume-en-Egypte, Chris Marker’s own chatty, feline alter-ego, is also a distinct possibility.)

Those who are not familiar with the appearances of “Mr. Chat” in Paris will find an introductory slide-show at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tofz4u/sets/1691054/show/>

A web site showing worldwide appearances of “Mr. Chat” can be found at <http://monsieurchat.free.fr/MChat.php>

Fans of Chris Marker’s ubiquitous cat companion will find Guillaume’s web site at http://www.unregardmoderne.com/spip/viewauteur2.php3?id_auteur=28

A CAT CONVERSATION

The following discussion, which recounts the artistic encounter between filmmaker Chris Marker and the "Mr. Cat" art collective that resulted in the making of *The Case of the Grinning Cat*, has been translated and excerpted from an interview originally published in *Libération*, December 4, 2004.

Liberation: What relationship do you maintain with Guillaume, your feline alter-ego?

Chris Marker: Guillaume was a real cat who adopted me. He was my advisor, my confidant, my friend, my other half and the only person I accepted near me when I was editing. I could tell by the direction his ears pointed if he agreed with what I was doing or not. And then he went to cat heaven. Some time after, he reappeared before me as a ghost. He really wanted to get involved, and he had ideas about practically everything. While I was listening to the news in the morning, he arrived with a comic strip bubble and that's how he connected with actuality. I am only the medium. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Guillaume is everything I'm not: he's a show-off, an interventionist, an exhibitionist, he just loves to be the talk of the town—we complete each other perfectly.

Liberation: If the yellow cat had so many echoes in you, is it because there is also a closeness between you and his author?

Chris Marker: The two cats have their personality. Mr. Cat was kind enough to find a certain kinship between them and made the famous drawing where they are arm in arm. This drawing was the culmination of the blessed alliance between the two cats.

[This drawing appears on the invitation for the "March of the Grinning Cats"]

Liberation: Under the bridge at Canal Saint-Martin, the mark of the yellow cat disappeared, replaced by a surveillance camera...

Chris Marker: This is where the first meeting took place at the end of 2001. The echo of September 11 was still in the air and the vision of this amiable animal seemed like a sign to me. Someone had decided to send an image of comfort and well-being on the walls.

Mr. Cat: Each location changes the point of view on the city. This cat over there was painted at three o'clock in the morning, a public time that belongs only to you. Then everyone sees it and asks himself how it got there.

Liberation: Was this first meeting enough to give you the idea for a film?

Chris Marker: A little bit after, some newspapers began to spot cats around. And then it didn't stop, voluntary informants called me every week to tell me they had found one here, one there; it was open season. Nearly always strolling with my little DV camera, the seed had been planted for a kind of post-9/11 Paris street-movie. A sort of mood movie, simple and without pretense and above all, for once not political! I was drawn to this cat, by his catlike qualities of course (I belong to the sect that adores them) but above all by the simple and balanced style it was drawn in, so different from the confused virtuosity of tags, or the latent symbolism of graphs. It brought to mind the instinctive perfection of the first constructivist and anarchistic leaflets of the "Rosta windows" era [*in 1919-1921, when a collective of Russian writers and artists created a series of posters for public display*]. Its connection to the grinning cat of *Alice in Wonderland* was clear.

Mr. Cat: The cat fell in our lap: a little Pakistani girl from a neighborhood on the outskirts had drawn a very simple fat cat with a giant smile. The idea that this little girl's drawing was everywhere was lovely. The cat was restyled but the freshness of his smile was preserved. The story of the cat is a kind of Tom Thumb initiative journey. As in the tale, we are all lost. Urban art leaves behind tiny pebbles. There's no art in it, but culture—it's about providing humanity.

Chris Marker: It makes me laugh when he contrasts art and culture. He must have visited too many galleries. As if "providing humanity" was not a good definition of art. Including how he practices it. Malraux said in *Man's Hope*: *"There's a raft of painters here. You must give them walls, bare walls: well, off you go! Draw; paint. The people who pass by need you to speak to them. We won't create masterpieces, it does not happen on command, but we will create a style. It's impossible for people who need to speak and people who need to listen to not give birth to a style."* If Malraux was the Minister of Culture, he would have defended the cats, not have had them erased!

Liberation: The filmed stroll envisioned under a "positive" angle turned pessimist...

Chris Marker: Everything changed with the second round of elections. I had followed the first anti-Le Pen demonstrations on May 1st... But all of a sudden on my television screen, behind PPDA [*the most famous French TV anchorman*] was the grinning cat himself... I threw myself onto the metro, trying to calculate where I could catch up with the demonstration. But by the time I got to Saint-Michel, sarcastic cops told me the procession had passed a long time ago. The small consolation was finding a couple carrying a cat-sign on the metro platform. A girl came up, interested. *"Is that a new group?" "Of course,"* I told her, *"It's the Humanist and Anarchist Confederation of Workers."* She was all ready to join.

Mr. Cat: During one of these demonstrations, alternative militants bonded everyone together. On television that night, our small group looked like a crowd. Mr. Cat was also able to participate in the human manipulation that is demonstrations, as a streamer. Mr. Cat in this context doesn't mean anything, doesn't serve any purpose; he denounces the state of mind of a generation in an awkward position.

Libération: Was it then that you, Chris Marker, entered the political arena in the film?

Chris Marker: By placing themselves in the political landscape, the cats had completely changed the issues. It would no longer be a casual stroll but the chronicle of a year increasingly marked by history, where the elections, the Iraq War, the problems of casual workers or pension funds would scan the very evolution of society and the ebb and flow of a new generation learning about civics.

Libération: Does Mr. Cat seem close to nihilism?

Mr. Cat: Increasingly in the world, you're only allowed to make two choices: join or shut up. The cats chose painting... There is a group called *Urban Nomads* whose terminology I will borrow. I went into seclusion on the street, in Paris, climbing roofs, in this urban desert of zinc.

Chris Marker: Don't tell me that there is no progress anywhere. A nihilist who paints cats, that's at least progress compared to Netchaïev [*Sergei Netchaïev, or Nechaev, was a radical Russian Nihilist, involved with the "People's Will" organization, who advocated revolutionary violence.*]

Mr. Cat: There is something very positive in the yellow cat's nihilism.

Chris Marker: I wasn't trying to find out the intentions of the group of diehards gathering at the Bastille under the Cat's emblem. I pursued my idea, and making a film is always a little like having a dream, with the same illusory feeling of controlling things that come about without you, drawing their logic from your own secret reserves. But I like to think that there were naturally independent people there, people for whom the Extreme Left is already too institutional, people who refuse with all their strength to be expendable. For these people, there is no incarnation more pertinent than the Cat, the sole being in the world that has conquered its place in the foreground of daily life, imagery, of sentiment and mythology since ancient times without ever having been expendable.

Libération: Is there a kind of transfer from one generation to the other?

Mr. Cat: I feel like I've reactivated parts of his memory. Marker is a pioneer but he also needs to find a way of reviving himself through our correspondence. We are potentially taciturn artists. He gave me clues; set off a part of my warrior nature: he sent me a collage-picture of the cat and Commander Marcos, terrible, because in essence an entire generation would want to fulfill themselves by violence

Libération: Is that a lesson Marker would deliver to the younger generation?

Mr. Cat: Marker succeeded in calling attention to the cat, his theoretical contribution structured the story. It's true that the paws of the cat appeared during the war against Iraq. The trap is that when Marker makes a film he doesn't ask permission. We become embedded in the same way, like affected pirates, polite savages. We must have complementary essences that are not far apart from each other. The difference is that by climbing on roofs I looked for death, but it refused to take me. He's not looking for that.

Libération: For this issue, the cat Guillaume gets involved in the news, when he needs to find Mr. Cat...

Chris Marker: Aside from the American elections, when he was raging, it is rare that Guillaume deals with the news making the headlines. He prefers little stories no one has noticed. In particular he is fixated on the mascots of the Royal Navy—parrots, turtles—not the kind of thing that makes the *Libé* headlines

Mr. Cat: I would like to throw out to the readers the following expressions which I am questioning: pyramidal democracy and social cannibalism...

Libération: And international issues?

Chris Marker: I'm watching the march of History. What fascinates me about television is that it's like Cocteau's mirror where you see death at work. Here, it is History at work. Death too, at that.

(Collected by Annick Rivoire)



Musique concrète

Acat is never on the side of power," intones the commentary to Chris Marker's epic 1977 history of the revolutionary Left, *Grin without a Cat*. In his latest video, *Chats perchés*, a cat appears, instead, on the streets of Paris, stenciled onto walls, trees, and the placards and banners of demonstrators. The sudden proliferation of these yellow street-art felines in November 2001 prompted Marker, DV camera in hand, to prowl the city and log their Cheshire Cat grins, Manga-derived forms, and their accompanying "Monsieur Chat" tags. These "perching cats" cropped up everywhere as mysterious emissaries spreading "a smile over the city" in troubled times. Later on, throughout 2004, Marker made regular appearances on a French website of "counter-information" (www.unregardmodeme.com), where, in the guise of his animated alter ego, Guillaume-en-Egypte, he posted acerbic collages commenting on the events of the day. A similar formula of "cats and current affairs" informs *Chats perchés*, a 58-minute work commissioned by the Franco-German TV station Arte and now available on DVD (unsubtitled, via their website). *Chats perchés* is both a "street-movie," as Marker dubs it, and a diary film covering the period immediately after 9/11 and progressing to the invasion of Iraq and beyond.

Flash-mobs, demos, and die-ins; street art, online bulletins, and TV news broadcasts: the cat presides over this constellation of signs like a messenger hovering above the city (in Marker's cosmology it isn't only angels that have wings) and as the manifestation of (dare one say it?) an emergent counterculture. Following the shocking results of the first round of the French Presidential election in April 2001, when the neo-Fascist Front Nationale polled only two points behind the incumbent Chirac, huge anti-FN rallies fill the streets. "An entire generation that was spoken of as being 'apolitical' appeared on the scene" runs Marker's caption, and, as always, he's intensely interested in the political theater of the streets. So we see footage of numerous demonstrations plus a whisker-sensitive attention to changes in the political climate. The Bush gang is lambasted during the buildup to the Iraq adventure, and when Dubya gives Saddam 48 hours to leave Iraq and compares him to Hitler, Marker wonders witheringly whether "one can imagine Churchill giving Hitler 48 hours to get out of Germany." And while there's the

palpable sense of an elderly former militant gratified by such signs of mass solidarity, there are frequent asides thrown in for good measure. Marker is attentive to the cracks, fissures, and inconsistencies in such communal displays as antiwar demonstrations—the sidelining of the Kurds ("always between two enemies") and the hostility toward Israel with its attendant anti-Semitic odor—as well as the way in which the media noise generated by certain issues drowns out other, older, and equally pressing contestations: the highly vocal and heavily media-scrutinized demonstrations about the rights of Muslim women to wear headscarves obscuring the pleas of pro-Tibetan demonstrators.

In this clamor of competing voices, it is Marker's that is uncharacteristically silent, the filmmaker having opted, this time, for pithy text captions rather than a highly wrought voiceover commentary. In its organization, *Chats perchés* is something of a musical work, woven from a "tissue" of sounds and voices. (The credit for the "tissu sonore" goes to one "Michel Krasna." Now who could that be?) Intriguingly, it points to an aspect of Marker that has been, when compared with his feline fixation, somewhat neglected: the musicality of his editing. In 2003, I was granted an audience with the reclusive filmmaker, and when I mentioned that his home production setup, with its banks of monitors and keyboards, resembled the rig of an electronic musician, he agreed, telling me that he'd made a living in the past as a barroom pianist and considered editing a form of composition. In its reliance on computer and synthesizer, *Chats perchés* is an example of "keyboard cinema" as much as it is an exercise in the DV "gleaning" of everyday life (and would make for a great double bill with Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*). In one of the DVD's five bonus features that make up Marker's "mini-bestiaire" is the short video-portrait *Chat écoutant la musique* in which the real Guillaume-en-Egypte is filmed dozing (and perhaps composing) on his master's ivories. The link between cat and keyboard was clearly always already there. □