

CARBON INTO DIAMOND

Fantastic Time and Subaltern Aesthetics in the Otolith Group's Otolith II and Chris Marker's Letter from Siberia

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STORIES FROM LIGHT AGES AWAY

"As we sailed down the Lena again on our way back, we didn't recognize her, the big lazy sister of a few months ago had now become this black girl studded with imitation jewels, shimmering with sunlight that was absent from the sky", remarks Chris Marker in his film *Letter from Siberia*. Views from the boat stretch out in the waters in a sequence quoted in *Otolith II* as a boat sails the coastline of Mumbai. *Otolith II* is the Otolith Group's echo to *Letter from Siberia* and it addresses a shared Marxist past and similar critical points that indicate what we once were.

Otolith II and *Letter from Siberia* exhibit traces of each other. I briefly try to unravel how the films build futuristic stories by balancing the imaginary upon the lived experience of characters and places. I found Chris Marker's portrayal of river Lena eerily similar to how I thought of river Bistrica where I grew up. I associated the river's name with legends of strange creatures that hoarded the waters and let the fields nearby risk going dry and the villagers going thirsty. I've heard that rivers of British Columbia are steeped in folk legends not too far of from Marker's description of Lena as magical and harboring mythical stories in her depths. The Otolith Group too look at hidden lives except they film the underground architectures of Mumbai instead and try to narrate a story that may inspire different and better future paths.

Concealing interaction between the films' surface story and its corresponding inner content experience from the viewer is a noticeable storytelling strategy in both films. An exception is when Marker points out the transition of Siberian gold diggers who go from sieving for gold to sieving for freedom and not even noticing that the shift has taken place.

Another pattern runs through the films in the blurring of ethical and time boundaries. Sagar's free movement between posing as her own ancestor speaking to us from the future and her being a filmmaker down and out in Mumbai's slums. It is no surprise that *Otolith II* and *Letter from Siberia* address audiences living in the future.

I rely on enfolding - unfolding aesthetics for theoretical support and hope to creatively accept encounters with the films' art experience. Marks suggests three degrees of encoding of inner experience: experience itself, information, and image (Laura Marks, 2011). To her this means that only some images emerge from the subject at any given time. Some come directly from experience like images of Chris Marker's camera crew following a bear around Siberia. I interpret these as personally lived images and here see Marks' information encodings as flowing in and out of each other in order to avoid any tight categories. However her three-ply model allows me to establish starting points in my approach. *Otolith II* starts on a computer screen then goes on to add in archival footage, only later to expand into considerations of communist utopias. Marker and the *Otolith Group* opt for multilayered storylines that combine the red scarves of the pioneers, deer adverts and mammoth nursery rhymes all in one take.

OTOLITH II AND LETTER FROM SIBERIA

Letter From Siberia is a noticeable influence on the *Otolith Group's Otolith II* and Chris Marker is a key influence on the duo's overall approach to film. Marker builds documentary stories by starting at the surface, as when he frames old photographs of the Siberian gold rush and photographs of the trans-Siberian in all its past luxury and glory. In *Letter From Siberia* he then edits in street views and audio commentary on how the city changed its name to a river that isn't all that close, but 'you can't have everything'. His combination offers the viewer an unexpected turn of narrative in the mixing of clichéd luxury and street photographs. Marker also shows a preference for shades of grey in characterization and dismisses polarities. His story shoots out in many directions while the choice of medium runs the gamut from animation to collage.

Letter From Siberia is Marker's attempt to relate Soviet Siberia to Western audiences in the early decades of the utopia. He narrates the electrification and the public road works over images of the same. I found it helpful to watch Otolith II as follow up to Letter From Siberia. Sagar's narration focuses on faulty urban planning of Indian cityscapes and offers footage of crowded spaces in rundown urban projects.

The most appealing feature of Marker's and Sagar's approach to film narrative is it allows you to fully accept or reject Marker's Siberian story. I find it close to my fabrications of a uniformed collective experience, shames of hindsight, and even joys related to living out one's childhood. I find Marker's Siberian fabrication much closer to my personal experience and perspective than other versions of filmmaking that try to take on Marxist past in classical documentaries that I've come across.

The diversionary form of narrative is not exclusive to film. One may come across Canadian and First Nations Studies that blur lines between polar extremes similarly. A survey of West Coast First Nations' narratives reveals imagery that supports not cut-and-dry ethical attitudes. The Transformers' decision to turn characters they arbitrarily dislike into landscape fragments on a whim sounds as fearful as some layers of utopian lived experiences. Blurring lines and reversing story direction allows for creative approaches that help you draw from lived experience. The more balanced form of this approach builds a contemporary framework that is multilayered and may even replace sheer data-stacking prone to statistical monopoly. At Simon Fraser University for instance First Nations Studies already draw from disciplines as varied as women, race and gender and go to include art history and literature to counterbalance uni-visionary ways of framing colonial history.

Bringing my point back to film, Marker had already accepted that fictional narrative was going to be his choice in how to relate the journey through Siberia. "While recording these images of the Yakutsk capital as objectively as possible, I frankly wondered whom they would satisfy", he says. He then attempts three registers over the same images of workers laying the streets of the capital. The first register is enthusiastic and the second is pessimistic. The third is detailed to the point of absurdity (such as "among them this Yakut, afflicted with an eye disorder"). Marker's perspectives on the images shift along what seems like a winding narrative line that reminds me of films whose storyline is closer to fragment film rather than full narratives.

Marker's editing is personal and based on cutting the story down to fragments and using image association in order to bring slightly related stories together. Sagar too accepts that the human capital she tries to film is not possible to record objectively and sometimes is not even observable on film. Both filmmakers freely travel between mammoth fairytales and Indian textile factories. I personally find their treatments of non-linear time and ways of re-constructing landscape in the two films as one of the most alluring features the two have in common.

CLICHÉ AS KEY TO UNLOCKING THE STORY

At the information level in both films as viewers we face over-consummated images. According to Laura Marks (2011) the images that reach us from information are further removed from experience. I interpret this to mean that experientially interacting with these images engages our personal sensibilities. There are specific points of contact between clichéd images and a viewer, which then may activate the viewer's past personal history. This interaction-activation is one of the most fruitful and creative outcomes in envisioning aesthetics through Marks's method. A good example I can draw from personal experience is that of looking out over the beautiful southwest coast of Norway and hearing a classmate's comment on the landscape and describe living there as 'living in a postcard'. It seemed to me like such a unique thing to say about boarding in some place that the phrase stayed with me for long. It seems as if when combined with specific ways of organizing the landscape settings in my memory the phrase activates sensibilities that are personal to me.

At this layer of information Marker toys with Russian clichés and Sagar recombines Indian ones. "My newsreel would begin with these images of winter", Marker says while Sagar turns to filming old still photographs of people in a hat shop. Marker borrows from broadcast media in his newsreel and it seems his approach is influenced by broadcast media because it reminds of quickly edited tidbits of information that are the trademark of creative services campaigns in places like CBS and PBS and other large scale North American broadcasters. Sagar's method in addressing Indian clichés seems to lean close to museum methods, maybe because her methodologies borrow from archival and preservation inspirations, like utilizing old textile footage. They all seem far closer to art history.

As a result of combinations of art forms and instances of time travelling I find the films operate as art forms in-between genres (between fiction and documentary) and in-between times (between old photos and present footage). The films are freeform and in dialogue with other arts, like animation and still photos. These arts are alien to film proper and call our attention to twists in the plot or to new characters. These twists may be as random as the sequence where Siberian police officers offer to accompany Marker around the capital. This is one of the most important forms of creating fiction in Marker: he picks something from the everyday, like the policemen, or a cliché, like the luxurious trans-Siberian. He then associates these images with other segments of the story and ties them in through voice-over narration. It seems to work well towards a highly creative purpose and result. Sagar uses this method when she films clichéd red phone booths associated with Britain.

She embellishes the cliché in film-set contexts since the red phone booths serve the purpose of a film prop instead of a touristic place of interest. As I think of gold diggers' lives Marker's humor is what first pops to mind: "As for women, they say there were none at all in the beginning, which is a sad thought, and that later there was only one... sounds even worse," he remarks casually of those frontier-settings difficult beginnings.

When the Otolith Group capture night images of corners of the island city of Mumbai and Sagar notes: "there are far too many images like this", I hear reverberations of Marker's approach. Footage of Anjalika Sagar is refreshing and it gives the viewer pause to reflect on the interruption to classical narrative since she has inserted herself in her film.

It is nearly impossible to uncover parts of an experience unmediated by clichéd images. For instance, it is difficult to even address Marxism without employing some philosophical commonplace. This realization may have led the filmmakers to take clichés and use them creatively and turn them into a key that can unlock and promote the story. As an example, Otolith II brings a sequence where the camera pans unregulated slums of Mumbai. "There is little data available on the slums ... they're crucibles, psychological field lapse of testing new ways of being human; stress loads enough to turn carbon into diamond." When I take in the experience of this narrated fragment and think of other utopias, say that of an isolated arrangement of internment camps in B.C.'s interior during and following World War II, I realize that there is some relation between the psychological state of those who live in it and the concrete and tangible form of the utopia that creates it. The relation between the psychological state of one's inner life and the outer landscape of the utopia is similar to the relation between content and form in any creation.

Otolith II opens on granular images. This has the side effect of highlighting the materiality of film. Shots of flickering images are interspersed with the titles. After a brief comment on human capital, the film cuts to old footage of working textile machines. Later on in Otolith II an establishing shot frames archival images of textiles within a computer frame. From this sequence on Otolith II unfolds the archeology and historiography of the image, as Agnes Petho explains in her book:

From this perspective cinema is not defined by its storytelling capacity...but most of all by its possibilities of transcendence, of mediating - as previously mentioned - first of all reality and/or memory...not only a conscious acknowledgement of cinema's cultural associations but also explicitly, the incorporation and re-fashioning of other media and arts.

(Agnes Petho, 2011, pg.324)

I find in *Otolith II* a beautiful sequence showing Anjalika Sagar cuddling a baby. This sequence is framed as if played on the big screen, and the big screen is further framed by a camera enhancing the impression that there are concentric frames which surround one another. This further highlights film labor since each consecutive frame contains labor from the making of the previous frame. I thought the impression was similar to how an item saved for personal value is enfolded in layers of work in cinema archeology. In order to clarify what I mean by film archeology I will use the example of LinkedIn since it is familiar for most. On that network a photograph is not only a simple image of you. It is also endowed with labor because LinkedIn is a professional networking site. A more amusing example would be a postcard or photographs of musicians, like the Rolling Stones performing on stage. I very rarely notice the labor in art performances, but thinking this through film archeology will bring labor into focus. Interestingly, it is a simple framed image like that on a profile on LinkedIn that helps unlock layers of archeology, which further act as layers to a story.

Remediation of different art forms in *Otolith II* seems like an experimental way of building up new cinematic qualities for the film. By remediation here I mean that two art forms, like a still photograph and a film sequence for instance, are integrated into one another and together have the effect of enhancing the impression of immediacy and hold our attention for longer. Sometimes even a comment from a friend or acquaintance works like narration that, when mentally played back some time later it has the effect of creating a gestalt shift in perception. This may yield a different visual image altogether and different personal experience of one's memories and lived past experience as a result.

Otolith II builds on itself by renewing our affective experiences, that is our ability to experience emotional states and feelings. It is closely tied to experiential relations enfolded in the states of remediation. Through associative filmmaking clichés enter in dialogue with what Deleuze calls the virtual*. Both, *Otolith II* and *Letter from Siberia* attempt to create new personal space-time for the viewer and give him or her the luxury to pause and experience the new feelings and psychological states.

This associative method that seems to creep up from underneath both films' visual surface keeps a constant open dialogue with the 'other' and less obvious aesthetic forms or participants. I see some similarities between this method and Bunuel and Dali's way of creating through disjointed brainstorming in surrealism. However, the two methods do not share theoretical and philosophical foundations and are only superficially similar. It seems as though the method used enables and inspires the filmmakers to try and reinterpret the present, the past, and the fantastical future.

*Angelo Restivo explains Deleuze's concept of the shot in "Into the Breach: Between the Movement Image and the Time Image" / "The Brain is the Screen", as follows: "For Deleuze, the shot faces in two directions: toward parts within the frame, and toward a "whole" outside the frame. 17 The cinema, that is, always posits a virtual wholeness or continuum of the world (what Bazin calls "the myth of total cinema"), while at the same time necessarily— by the very requirement of the motion-picture camera— subjecting the whole to discontinuity, dissemination." Pg. 176

BECOMING IN OPENNESS

Chris Marker is one of the better-known filmmakers who used the strategy of open cinema medium. He did so by recombining and remediating images and clichés. This way the past lived experience or memories were renewed and reinterpreted through affect on a personal level. The 'open' medium strategy in *Otolith II* and *Letter from Siberia* is also openness to the frontier.

The frontier itself is openness and *Letter from Siberia* comes close to being an open medium especially with Marker's references to the Western genre and associations with the frontier.

Similarly, *Otolith II* first looks at surface activity in the slums and holds back from inner experience. We see footage of Mumbai's slums threaded together through associative montage. There is someone making pottery, another sewing, and others cleaning. Only later does Sagar intergrate the lived experience with the visual, such as when she comments on 'don't make the same mistakes we did', or when her ancestors call to warn her about other issues.

Vintage photographs and footage of frontiers are intercut with images of new labor in Siberia in *Letter From Siberia*, where electrification takes place. The work on the film sets of Mumbai in *Otolith II* is intercut with sewing and pressing mud with bare feet. Negotiations and recombination of images such as these belong to different layers of filmed experience, where the past often oozes out straight into the present or shoots out to the future, like when Sagar addresses her self in the future in that clip where she cuddles the baby. This opening into different times of past and future is located at the intersection where the two differing images meet and give rise to contrast. It is similar to personal recollections, where your memories come forth to the present and your current state helps redirect them and reinterpret them.

The 'open' medium in *Otolith II* introduces uncertainty in the plot line. I find it fascinating how when two images belonging to two very differing contexts meet they have the ability to create rupture through the encounter. If the meeting of the two is significant enough it sets the plot free from the overly deterministic causality of so-called classical narrative. This to me is the most appealing common feature in Marker and the *Otolith*: their strategy creates personal artistic space for the viewer to experience as enriched affective possibilities. When the film links memory, like that of mouse and deer, or skiing and sailing, with other points of reference, then you grow as an individual when you renegotiate your memories. I've renegotiated many personal moments of my last few years in an unexpected encounter with philosophy.

It is almost as if it allowed me to create my experience anew. I can bypass a negative experience, like lack of freedom in a totalitarian utopia, or maybe place that experience in a new context, like measure it against the results it yielded for me, and from here I am already living that past differently.

Otolith II's futuristic reconstruction, like Marker's Letter from Siberia, introduces thusly freedom.* Otolith II promotes a filmmaking mode that enhances indeterminacy. It also invites the viewer to participate and it gifts the viewer with a becoming in freedom. I find myself looping back to the Native Canadians' s notions of integrating humor with painful experience, and using biting humor in order to take down a notch the experience of pain.

To me the docu-fiction strategies of Letter From Siberia and Otolith II come very close to drawing the viewer to a place away from the mundane. This place can be different for anyone, far way in time, like childhood, or a place close by subjectively since it draws you closer to yourself. Choosing to accept these new affects is difficult but seems like a mini-growth project.

Of the two films I prefer Marker if only because his sense of humor and self-deprecation keeps me anchored, but Sagar's endearing narrative showcases her vulnerability, which is also very appealing in film where all too often one comes across formulas.

* See Grosz/ Becoming Undone: "Life opens the universe to becoming more than it is. But equally, Bergson argues, matter as a whole, the material universe, must contain within itself the very conditions for the indeterminacy of life which it generated, those mixtures or compounds which may yield memory, history, the past, and make them linger, press on, and remain relevant to the present and future. Matter must contain as its most latent principle, its most virtual recess, the same indeterminacy that life returns to it. This is the common point of binary terms (matter and memory, extension and consciousness, space and duration) and that which exceeds them— the fundamental interimplications of mind and matter, of life and the inorganic, their origins in the indeterminacy of the universe itself, the point of their endosmosis— where matter expands into life and life contracts into matter in pure..." p 70.

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