

A CINEMATIC PATH THROUGH THE VIRTUAL MUSEUM. EXPLORING CHRIS MARKER'S *OUVROIR*

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From the Linden Arcade to the Linden Lab

The Lindenpassage (Linden Arcade) has ceased to exist. That is, it remains a means of passage between Friedrichstrasse and Linden Avenue in terms of its form, but it is no longer an arcade... The time of the arcades has run out.

Siegfried Kracauer, *Farewell to the Linden Arcade*

The *Lindenpassage* was a Berliner arcade that resembled a magical passage, one that we traversed, writes Kracauer, as if one were underground between this street and the other¹. Walking through it implied entering a fascinating world, full of sensuous stories, where everything that was excluded from the bourgeois life, that could not be fit as an adornment for the facade, would find its place². The space of the passageway was a space of dwelling, it implied a path which inscribed the subject within its structure. Moreover, it required a practice of space that was meant to bring forward the construction of a narrative that could not be limited by its frames. Holding inside a bazaar, a world panorama, an anatomical museum, and a bookshop filled with paperbacks whose titles aroused desires, the passage projected onto its surfaces images that crossed its physical borders and brought other stories and other places into its dark and porous structure, transforming it into a lived place.

By the time Kracauer writes his *Farewell to the Linden Arcade* the *Lindenpassage* had been rebuilt as a new arcade, and the dark three-story structure replaced by a one-story construction made of bright marble panels and a glass roof. These were understood as being more adequate to the commercial nature of the arcade than the anarchic, sensual, somber structure of the passage³. However, even after having lost its previous form, the arcade retained something of its earlier function: that magical world remained in the objects it held inside, that functioned like passages in the context of the bourgeois life, still implying a complex relation between illusion and reality, proximity and distance.

Linden Lab is the name of the corporation which created *Second Life* (SL), a virtual world which first went online in 2003, and where everything is coined by Linden: we trade real dollars for Linden dollars, or Lindens, that we use to buy from Linden the 1024 sq.ft. of virtual terrain where we build our house, and before being able to customize our avatar, we are designed by Linden. The Linden Lab also imposes on *Second Life* its own logic of circulation, one marked by a cartography of links that we are supposed to go through by means of teleporting, or hyper-linking. In this sense, the virtual space is no longer a passage and not yet an arcade. By rule, there is no path in which the subject can be inscribed, the passage is not meant to be traversed, and the

possibility of inscription of the *promeneur* is reconfigured when both space and body are displaced from their logic of projection and brought together in an image transmitted through a digital screen. The virtual space resembles a fragmentary, non-traversable space, where we are not meant to take the time for traveling, the time for erring; we just have to click; and, by clicking, everything is brought to a sense of proximity, all seems reachable.

Chris Marker, a “multimedia-filmmaker” who has always been concerned with the idea of passage, not only in relation to the passages between images and memory, but also through their different configurations in an array of media, has recently created on *Second Life*, by joint initiative with the Museum of Zurich and in collaboration with the architect Max Moswitzer, the archipelago of the *Ouvroir* (fig. 1). As I will try to explore throughout the passages here proposed to tra-

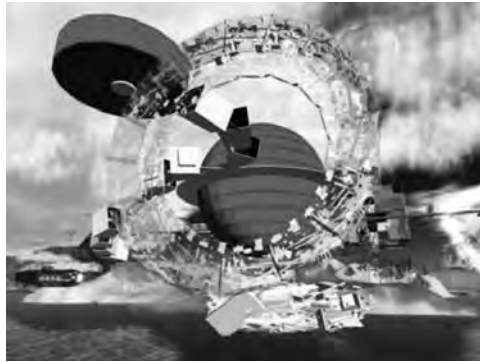


Fig. 1 – *Ouvroir*.

verse Chris Marker’s museum, the *Ouvroir* opens a space for wandering – through its islands, its means of transport, its museum, or through its screens – and places it in the limiting and bounding space that the virtual world creates for the inscription of the subject in its forms of circulation. In that sense, it seems to be transporting the *Lindenpassage* to the space of the Linden Lab, proposing a circulation that is closer to the promenade – and to the ways in which this promenade connects both architectural and cinematic space and perception – than to virtual teleporting, and thus bringing back to the virtual space of the digital screen different forms of passage between material and immaterial. Instead of obsessive mapping, Marker creates a form of circulation through the virtual museum that takes into account the possibilities of losing oneself, going back and forth, wandering, repeatedly coming back and arriving at something different.

The configurations for ethics and aesthetics Marker here puts in place, this questioning of a cartography of the virtual space and how to transform it into a mapping that does not imply enclosure or domination but instead opens zones for a nomadic spectator to live the space, could not come but from the nomadic cineaste *par excellence*. Marker has always been concerned with putting in place a path through images, countries, and stories, but a path that also corresponds to a circulation through different media, through different ways of traveling. From *Letter from Siberia* (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1957) or *Cuba Si!* (*¡Cuba sí!*, 1961) to *La Jetée* (1962) or *Sunless* (*Sans soleil*, 1983), Marker shows a concern with traversing *zones* between documentary and fiction, personal letter and political manifesto, the mapping and remapping of memory. He writes: “My idea was to immerse myself in this Maelstrom of images to establish its geography,”⁴ an affective path through their obtrusive inscription in our daily lives. And as he travels from cinema to video, CD-Rom or videogames, Marker mobilizes cinematic memory in order to open the

space for his works to inhabit the fissures between a collective oblivion and a continuous moving forward, enkindling an overlapping past which comes to inhabit the present images. Marker reframes this question in his own terms through the relation he establishes in the CD-Rom, *Immemory*, to his reference film, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), writing over an image of Scottie facing the Golden Bridge:

Scottie will have received the greatest joy a man can imagine, a second life, in exchange for the greatest misfortune, a second death. What else is offered us by video games, which say so much more about our unconscious than the complete works by Lacan? Neither money nor glory: another game. The possibility to start playing again. "A second chance". A free replay⁵.

A "second life" for cinematic forms, and a remapping for cinematic spectatorship, which are now brought to the space of the virtual museum.

Chris Marker's *Cinématographie sans Films*: Exploring the cinematic passages of the virtual museum

As we begin our journey through the framework here proposed for understanding the circulation through the space of the *Ouvroir*, I hope it will become evident the ways in which Marker brings to the virtual space his idea of a *cinématographie sans films*, the ways in which cinematic forms, as well as a cinematic frame for working perception, expand themselves throughout this new media space, transforming its forms of circulation⁶.

Kracauer's passage articulated a complex relation between proximity and distance, between the objects that were close and evoked the distant, and the distant time-spaces that the images brought into proximity⁷. These spaces were circulated through the haptic path the subject performed, which brought together an inherent relation between reality and image that was inscribed in the spatial and temporal textures of the *passage*⁸. Mary Ann Doane, on her essay on indexicality and medium specificity, argues that the digital cannot make such claim of contact, touch, a physical connection where the dynamics between close and distant is played, since it negates it in favor of a fantasy of immateriality⁹. In fact, while approaching the cyberspace of virtual teleporting, we inherently lose an obvious material relation to haptic perception by the loss of a physical relation to reality that is inscribed on the image. Within this framework for perception, wandering through the passage becomes mapping and teleporting through what seems a disorienting and paradoxical space, a space that seems as expansible as it seems devoid of any structures, fighting the inescapable paradox of presenting itself as an always-expanding territory, at the same time that we have been responding to our profound disorientation with an obsession for bounding and enclosing.

In fact, if a material relation, or an idea of distinction, between body and space is undermined by the fact that they are both brought together in one image, the dynamics between close and distant is reconfigured. There is no center on the virtual world and no journey between one place to the other since it all extends itself through the same surface. The virtual space is navigable but not traversable, it is a space in which we are not meant to take the time to perform the journey, we just have to click to be able to travel immediately from one location to the other. Constructing maps that frame and bound space seems to be the means to master its defying structures¹⁰. There are a number of maps that are put in place on our *Second Life* screen (fig. 2), and there is even a



Fig. 2 – Map on the *Second Life* screen.

website dedicated to map *Second Life*¹¹. However, these maps are entropic structures, without a center or a sense of direction, composed by units that are not connected, where the main idea is to discover the coordinates so that we do not lose a second to get there. Its own mappability is a way of limiting an expansive world within defined borders, making it apprehensible even if we cannot fully master its structures (in a sense, what we have been mobilizing in a different way, more open to disturbance and resistance, by framing the world through a film screen). We are caught within systems that propose spatial coordinates and require a form of perception we cannot fully master at this point, and we try to make sense out of them by applying the same old predicaments. We domesticate these environments in order to transform its fearful spaces into habitable places. In this sense, “the modern metropolis and the new technologies” are both “wild territories to be domesticated, if not urbanized, with maps”¹².

As we travel to Marker’s *Ouvroir*, it is precisely the idea of a traversable path that is instead brought forward, in a space where it seems to be, by definition, absent. Instead of obsessive mapping, Marker puts in place a return to cinematic configurations for perception which require us to trace an affective path, an emotional relation to the images which are displayed. In the same movement, he engages in a critique of both the limits of the space and how it is configured in its duration. Instead of constructing limiting maps, he makes the user perform subjective paths, creating a space that is more open for the inscription of the subject and which takes him as part of its modulation. By drawing back to filmic modes of perception, Marker creates a form of circulation through the virtual museum that takes into account the possibilities of losing oneself, going back and forth, wandering, repeatedly coming back and arriving at something different. The *passeur* who traversed the passage and who was mobilized by the film screen is not displaced from the virtual space of Marker’s museum (fig. 3). Instead, as it will be here explored, it is



Fig. 3 – *Ouvroir*, entrance in the main museum.

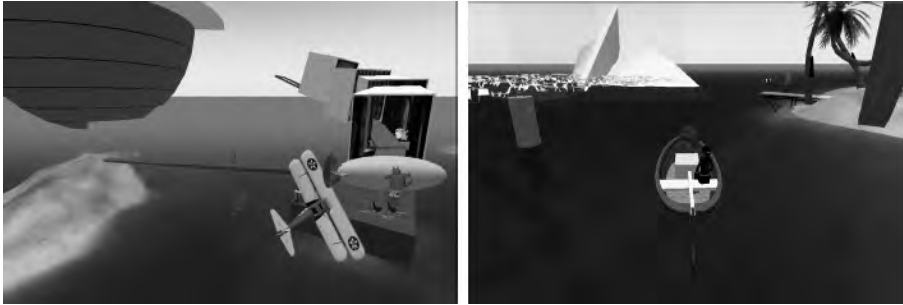


Fig. 4 – *Ouvroir*, modes of circulation.

through his trajectories that he creates the space he circulates through, molding through time the virtual spatial forms.

To begin with, in order to go through the *Ouvroir*, Marker proposes a circulation that goes beyond flying or teleporting, the usual means of mobility of the avatar. If not walking through space, as it was previously implied, we *traverse* it by using a balloon, two different boats, or a train which runs through the landscape (fig. 4). Moreover, inside the space of the museum, what would simply suppose rapidly moving from one structure to the other is transformed into a reflection on the temporalization of space: Marker displaces the traditional walk/run forms of movement of the avatar in favor of a cinematic journey through a series of images that are placed along the structure, or through the ways in which the construction frames the surrounding landscape, working on the duration of the space by framing a path which extends temporality, requiring us to take time to traverse its passages.

Secondly, instead of presenting a cartography of obvious liaisons, always framed by a “back” button, Marker hides the links and makes us take decisions that are definitive, where the possibility of going back implies arriving at something different. The islands are in a continuous transformation, since Marker and Max Moswitzer are always creating new objects and altering their configurations. Moreover, visitors are able to alter the museum’s images by clicking on their screens, and these never return to a predefined disposition. Marker works on the feeling of endless construction that the virtual space seems to promise, while at the same time he explores its desaturation, undermining the idea that empty virtual space just waits to be filled out. He does so either by building labyrinths that lead nowhere, or by presenting an horizontal construction which opens zones of void that are not meant to be closed. He undermines the unending linkage and substitutes it for an architecture that works on its disruption, on the creation of a temporalization of space that implies the possibility of inscribing oneself, going back and forth and always arriving at something different.

Thirdly, in the *Ouvroir*, not only the memory of cinema remains inscribed throughout, but also we are supposed to follow a cinematic path through it, slowing down, stopping, traveling through its walls. In two of the floors of Marker’s museum we can see two of his video installations: *Silent Movie* (1995) and *Owls at Noon Prelude: The Hollow Men* (2004). Right next to the main museum, we find a futuristic film theatre, that links to Marker’s YouTube channel. And even below water, hidden and without any indication of their location, we find screens which transmit some of Marker’s new work. In sum, when we “get in touch” with the virtual world we have to learn how to be the nomadic subject created at the crossroads between the passage and the film theatre, to descend into this Maelstrom, the vortex Marker recalls from Poe’s story, that draws into itself all the objects and reconfigures them¹³. However, if we are here engulfed by the Maelstrom, then find solace in Morel’s Island (fig. 5)¹⁴.



Fig. 5 – *Ouvroir*, map of the Morel's island.

Concluding, cinematic configurations for spectatorship, worked by the medium throughout history, expand into the space of Marker's museum, creating new forms of passage through the virtual space. Cinema, as a *moving sensation*, reaffirms the presence of the subject, his embodiment and inscription in the uncrossable passages virtual space proposes, and re-inscribes a shared experience of spectatorship, the potential for affection and change, by implying that we traverse passages where bodies are not merely dis-placed but space is open for appropriation and transformation by traversing its surfaces, thus mobilizing the articulation between a private travel and a shared experience that is performed *in movement*. Marker opens the space for us to circulate through this unfolding places, disorganized, and disframed, by modulating them within the process of our transitions, affecting them through the temporalization the spectator performs. On the one hand, as we go through the *Ouvroir*, it is neither the bird's view nor the street view that we face: one can never have a total view out of the island, and space builds itself as we walk through it. On the other, the screens do not resist to the movements of the avatar, but allow us to become part of the image, to be *screened-through*.

An evident example of this logic are the screens place on the third and last floor of the museum. The same images that are placed in the loop presented in *Pictures at an Exhibition*¹⁵ (fig. 6) – a work by Marker composed from the images he had included in the Museum section of the CD-Rom *Immemory*, and released on his channel on YouTube through which the viewer circulates in an unending loop through a gallery's walls – are positioned in the *Ouvroir* in a different disposition: they are exhibited in screens which are literally posed one on the other and they merge into one another; and as we walk through, we become part of them too, since instead of

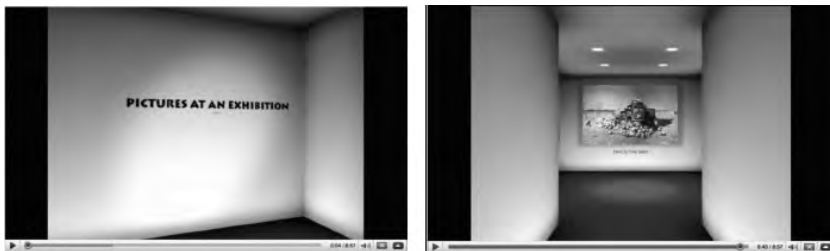


Fig. 6 – *Pictures at an Exhibition* (Chris Marker, 2001).

resisting to the movements of the avatar they allow us to become part of the image. What this disposition tells us about the *Ouvroir* is that here, in the bounded virtual space, the place constructed by Marker's museum is meant to be traversed by a nomad that can take part of the fluidity of the screens he walks through. An *errant* cartography, as Giuliana Bruno argues in relation to film, displaces here the directed topography at stake for the virtual world's structures of mappability¹⁶. A mobile, inhabited map of traversable passages is here played at the surface of the digital screen. Through the construction of this *cinematic-virtual-space*, cinema is re-located as a *moving inter-face* capable of re-mapping the rigid division between a collective and private experience of spectatorship, between the limiting forms of immediate location and the act of traversing an affective path in which the subject is both projected and affected.

Lamenting the transformation of the *Lindenpassage* into the Linden Arcade, Kracauer writes: "Now, under a new glass roof and adorned in marble, the former arcade looks like the vestibule of a department store. [...] All the objects have been struck dumb. [...] What would be the point of an arcade [Passage] in a society that is itself only a passageway?"¹⁷.

However if, as Mark Wigley writes, either in architectural, filmic or virtual space, we are never lost nor found, but caught in between, then the time of the passages is not lost while we still may inhabit its fissures, making use of the fluidity of its screens¹⁸. Marker puts in place a path through a constrained space that implies the possibility of inhabiting its intervals. Creating fissures, openings, inscribe oneself. In Marker's *Ouvroir*, we circulate through this transitory virtual space, disorganized and disframed, by modulating it within the process of our own transitions, screening-through its passages, passing through its windows, traversing cinematic dispositifs which were dis-located into the virtual space of digital interaction. Cinematic configurations, and their de-localization into virtual space, are here explored as a moving cartography, where a relation to materiality, to traversing the crossroads between the physical and imaginary space in the passage inscribed within the city-space, is transported to the frame of the filmic screen, creating a mobile spectatorship which articulates interior and exterior space where the cinematic encounter takes place. In the same movement, to explore the virtual museum through a relation that recalls the modes of framing and circulation of both the arcade and the film theatre does not imply to fall back into nostalgia but precisely to start delineating the transformations here brought forward by this re-location of the cinematic dispositif in its second life in the virtual space. It is from within this space of transition that we can open lines of resistance, rather than retreating that we can indeed inhabit a world we continue to frame and bound through the screen.

1 Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1977 (engl. ed. *The Mass Ornament* Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1995, quot. at p. 338).

2 *Idem*, p. 337.

3 Regarding the aesthetics of the arcade from within the commercial culture in which they are inscribed, in *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999, Walter Benjamin writes (p. 31) : "These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings [...] The arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which consumers will find everything they need."

4 Chris Marker, *A Farewell to Movies*, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, Zürich 2008.

5 Chris Marker, *Immemory* (1998), Exact Change, Cambridge (MA) 2008.

6 Marker's exhibition, "A Farewell to Movies", had as its original French title: "Cinématographie sans

- Films”, a play of words with *télégraphie sans fil* (also known as TSF) that revealed itself impossible to translate.
- 7 See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2008, and Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, cit.
 - 8 I am here relying on both Giuliana Bruno’s and Mary Ann Doane’s frameworks for the relation between indexicality and the haptic. See Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York-London 2002, and Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2002.
 - 9 Mary Ann Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, no. 1, 2007, p. 142.
 - 10 My framework for this relation is based on Mark Wigley’s approach to the feeling of being lost in space. See Mark Wigley, “Lost in Space,” in *The Critical Landscape*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 1996.
 - 11 See SL-URL, a location-based linking on Second Life. SL-URL works by providing immediate teleport to in-world locations. In terms of representation, it is composed by a series of squared parcels of land, which we can zoom in, read the tag, and click. Each resident can build his own sl-urls. It can be found at <http://slurl.com>, last visit 6 June 2011.
 - 12 Mark Wigley, “Lost in Space,” cit.
 - 13 Edgar Allen Poe, “A Descent Into the Maelstrom,” in Id., *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Poems, Tales, Criticism*, Harper Perennial, New York 1970.
 - 14 Morel’s Island refers here to the island pictured in *The Invention of Morel* a novel written by Adolfo Bioy Casares and published in 1940, that is understood to be a meditation on the cinematic image. See Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel*, New York Review Books, New York 2003.
 - 15 Marker’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* can be found on his channel on *You Tube* at the address <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PThypeEt1Y>
 - 16 See Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, cit., and Id., *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, cit.
 - 17 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, cit.
 - 18 Mark Wigley, “Lost in Space,” cit.