

Chats perchés / The Case of the Grinning Cat (2004)

Written and Directed by:
Chris Marker



Chris Marker's documentary *Chats perchés* officially premiered on the Franco-German television channel Arte on December 4, 2004. The film attracted wide attention from the press, weblogs, and art house crowds and was screened at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival and Seattle International Film Festival. Throughout his long career, Chris Marker has worked with various media including photography and film, as in *La Jetée* (1962), as well as with interactive media such as his CD-ROM *Immemory*. In *Chats perchés* he brilliantly pieces together fragments of sounds and images of the Parisian landscape to construct a visual essay about French identity following the events of 9/11. A free association of street art, political events, and public demonstrations, the work highlights the emergence of a peculiar presence in the urban wilderness—a figure known as “Monsieur Chat”.

The graffiti caricature of M. Chat, a grinning yellow Cheshire Cat, first appeared in 1997 in Orléans and was immediately reproduced on rooftops, walls, and even trees in Paris. The film begins by locating M. Chat, and his image assumes a relationship with the political as the documentary follows various public demonstrations where the figure of the cat begins to surface. The protests correspond to a range of events between 2001 and 2003: the 2001 French presidential elections that saw the far-right candidate Le Pen go to the run-offs; protests against the American invasion of Iraq; a strike by contractual festival workers; and the reaction to the ban on headscarves. The demonstrations complement the opening sequence of the documentary that shows footage of a flash mob, a pre-organized public gathering in which participants behave oddly in unison for a short period of time and then disperse. Diverse public gatherings including traffic jams, soccer matches, and protests offset the visual nature of public space, as the camera focuses on particular images from advertisements, large crowds, and the free-floating caricature of M. Chat.

Chats perchés is simultaneously humorous and serious, capturing mass movements that have punctuated events of the early 21st century. The cat becomes the visual link between the aesthetics of public demonstrations and their carnival-like atmosphere. Marker reflects upon urban images of graffiti, billboards, and the faces of commuters and offers them to the viewer as beautiful moments in time that traverse moving subway windows, computer screens, and overlooked city corners. Chris Marker's camera asserts that poetry is indeed in the streets, and his film stresses the significance of visual public space among the rapidly changing events of this century.

Program notes prepared by: Eric Dalle, Tricia Dimit, Paul Hartley, Aubrey Korneta, Lauren Messina, Bill Pedersen, Émilie Tarraf.