

## ⏮ The “Making of” the *Cornelius Castoriadis* 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party Home Movie by Chris Marker ⏭

[This 15'13" video](#) is the recently digitalized version of a VHS copy of the VHS copy given as a gift by famed filmmaker Chris Marker to my life-partner, the dancer-choreographer [Clara Gibson Maxwell](#) (featured in the opening shots), and [myself](#) shortly after Cornelius Castoriadis's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party on March 11, 1992. This surprise anniversary event was organized for Castoriadis by the two of us along with Cornelius's wife, Zoé, at their Paris apartment. Clara and I had invited Marker to attend and suggested that, if he wanted to, he could videotape this celebration. Marker did not make any copyright claims for his self-described “home movie” and we make none here. The purpose of the present online posting is simply to make his edited audiovisual recording available to all for its public educational interest, with no advertising, paywall, or other monetary recompense requested or received.

We had first met Marker as we were creating Agora International in 1989-1990. This was more than a half decade before the creation—with Cornelius's approval, involvement, and active support—of the [Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website](#) in 1997. The initial impetus for establishing Agora International as an official French “Association loi 1901” nonprofit public educational organization was to form the legal structure that would allow our small, fledgling group to tape, edit, and distribute via television a documentary film centered around the [1990 “Institution, imaginaire, autonomie \(Autour de Cornelius Castoriadis\)” Colloquium](#) at the [Centre Culturel International de Cerisy](#) as a way of bringing to the public greater knowledge of the work of this innovative philosopher and radical political thinker.

On behalf of Agora International, Clara and I contacted the Greek filmmakers Takis Hatzopoulos and Teta Papadopoulou, who had made [an episode of their Paraskiniom television show about Castoriadis in 1984](#) and whom we first met while the two of us were staying with Cornelius and Zoe and their daughter Cybèle at their vacation home on Tinos one summer in the late 1980s. On the basis of Teta and Takis's enthusiastic expression of interest and support for this proposed project (they had been looking for an occasion to do another documentary with their friend Cornelius), Agora International, somewhat naively, contacted a large number of French television documentary shows to solicit a potential producer. We also met, at his Paris apartment, with Costa-Gavras, who kindly gave us general advice and suggestions but demurred at a request for a letter of support, explaining that that was not how things are done in France. Ultimately, we had a meeting at the new *La Sept* (precursor to the Franco-German *Arte* television network) with Yves Jaigu, who was already familiar with Castoriadis's work. We informed Takis and Teta of this positive contact and passed along Jaigu's request that these filmmakers send him a written project proposal.

We then discovered that Teta and Takis, an amorous as well as professional couple, had a fight over Teta's anticipated billing on the credits for this as-yet-unfunded film. (Unlike Teta, Takis did not speak French and Teta wanted to receive proper recognition for her work, after years of being confined to a lesser role.) The proposal they finally submitted amid this squabble was practically unusable, and it became clear that Takis and Teta were incapable of the professional maturity needed to present a credible directorial face for this project.

We then realized that, without a producer or director, Agora International would have to videotape the entire week of Cerisy talks and events on our own. We reached out to Chris. He kindly invited us to his Paris studio/apartment, which was filled with his video editing equipment and the director-style chair he had purchased, on which Kim Novak had sat during the filming of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. A facsimile copy of the draft of T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, as hand-edited by Ezra Pound, lay next to his video editing station for inspiration. Marker proceeded to give us a rudimentary lesson in filmmaking. This caused Clara to burst into tears at the combination of kindness and absurdity in this distinguished documentary filmmaker from the French New Wave freely giving us neophytes his professional advice.

The session was interrupted by a phone call. Chris spoke softly and reassuringly to the person on the other end of the line, as if to a lover. The caller was in reality Yves Montand, the former Communist fellow traveler who, knowing that Marker had recently made [\*L'Héritage de la chouette \(The Owl's Legacy, 1989\)\*](#) at *La Sept* with Castoriadis (which was also how we knew of Marker), was fishing for an invitation to lunch at Castoriadis's rue de l'Alboni apartment. The basic filming advice we received from Chris was that framing was (almost) everything. Marker also took the time to tell us that he considered George Steiner and Castoriadis the two main "stars [*vedettes*]" of his 13-part series on Ancient Greece.

Without much experience to speak of, AI's four original members chipped in together to rent a camcorder and purchase a week's worth of videotapes. And without a separate monitor, we discovered at the very beginning of the shoot that we had only an approximate idea of what the actual frame would be.... Nevertheless, we were able to fill twenty-six 90-minute Hi-8 PAL videotapes with all the Cerisy individual and group sessions. (See now: <https://www.agorainternational.org/videos-cerisy-1990-castoriadis.html>, including [Castoriadis's main presentation during the colloquium](#), the basis for his "[Quelle démocratie?](#)" [text](#).) During breaks in the Cerisy Castoriadis Colloquium, AI also conducted an extensive videotaped interview with Castoriadis, the transcription of which is now available in its original [French](#), as well as in [English](#) and in [Spanish](#). We also videotaped brief interviews with a dozen Castoriadis comrades and colleagues: [Eduardo Colombo](#), [Gabriel Gagnon](#), [Philippe Raynaud](#), [Georges Petit](#), [Christian Descamps](#), [Edgar Morin](#), [Francisco Varela](#), [Eugène Enriquez](#), "[Maurice Brinton](#)," [Vincent Descombes](#), and [Paul Thibaud](#). The framing, while not tight, ended up being broadly acceptable. Thank you, Chris Marker!

As for Marker's creatively-edited, often humorous, and sometimes teasing "home movie" *montage* of Cornelius's birthday *fête*, the only real "technical difficulties" intervened *after* we received our copy from him. Castoriadis's wife, feeling that the original VHS copy should be hers, insisted that we turn it over to her right away. I believe that there was an insistence that Takis and Teta receive a copy, too, but, after more than three decades, my memory is a bit hazy. In any case, with our low-quality consumer video-recording equipment—a VHS player-recorder and a PAL/SECAM↔NTSC and NTSC↔PAL/SECAM transcoder—we made a VHS copy for ourselves and also recorded two VHS copies, with distinctive time codes added, to keep track of any videos that might start circulating beyond the original VHS copy given to us by Marker, which Zoe had almost immediately appropriated for herself. We kept in reserve at Agora International headquarters (our apartment) the copy of the original copy and one of the two time-coded copies.

We were a bit surprised that there would be a request to have a videotape for viewing at the Castoriadis household. Cornelius's extremely dim view of broadcast television is well known.<sup>1</sup> And when, in the late 1980s/early 1990s, Cornelius had to prepare as a guest-commentator for an episode of [Marc Ferro's \*Histoire parallèle\*](#) television show on Arte (which allowed weekly comparisons of World War II-era newsreels from various antagonist countries, accompanied by commentaries, fifty years later, from knowledgeable people who had lived through the events of that week of the war), Cornelius and Zoé asked to come over for dinner at our old apartment (from which we moved in May 1990) to be able to view the material in advance on our primitive audiovisual equipment. Perhaps, I imagine now, the Castoriadis eventually purchased just a monitor/VHS player for their bedroom (the only room in his apartment I had never seen up close).

It was a week or two later that, sheepishly embarrassed before me but also angry at his wife, Cornelius called me up to explain that Zoé had inadvertently placed the original VHS copy into a Woody Allen cassette box and returned it to the video-rental store. As far as I know, the store never was able to find this Marker "home movie." I like to imagine that some knowing *cinéphile* clerk behind the counter—or perhaps a Woody Allen *afficionado* who was a customer at the same video-rental store—discovered the mixup and still has this ultrarare, prized possession.

So, well before Castoriadis's death, his now widow—who began planning, the day of her husband's funeral in 1998, to exclude me from continued collaboration (I had worked closely with Castoriadis the final thirteen years of his life) and [has hired scab translators to replace me despite my having a valid, signed translation contract approved by her](#)—had already changed her position and perhaps her feelings in relation to me. Previously, Zoé had indulged with Clara and me in all sorts of schemes devised and executed together behind Cornelius's back, but that seems to have ended after this episode of embarrassment to her.

As far as I know, all that remains are our two poorly-copied cassettes. Our copy of the original gifted copy turned out to be unsalvageable. The time-coded copy we also retained, which I recently rediscovered while moving out of our apartment after a third of a century, is now available to all, without further hindrance, secrecy, possessiveness, or technical issues: <https://vimeo.com/kaloskaisophos/cornelius-castoriadis-70th-birthday-home-movie-by-chris-marker>

[Enjoy.▶](#)

David Ames Curtis, Agora International: [contact@agorainternational.org](mailto:contact@agorainternational.org)  
Cornelius Castoriadis/Agora International Website (abonnement gratuit/free subscription)  
URL: <http://www.agorainternational.org>

---

<sup>1</sup>In "[The Meaning of Socialism](#)" (1961), Castoriadis wrote: "Men are subject to ever increasing pressures by those who organize production. They work like mad in factory or office, during the major part of their nonsleeping lives in order to get a 3 percent annual rise or an extra day's holiday each year. In the end—and this is less and less of an anticipation—human happiness would be represented by a monstrous traffic jam, each family watching TV in its own saloon car while sucking the ice cream provided by the car's refrigerator!" And he added in a footnote: "With current rates of increase in car sales, current degrees of immobilization in traffic jams, and current production of TV sets, it will certainly become an economic proposition for car manufacturers to install TV sets in cars, probably by 1970."