



The Owl's Legacy is the best symposium on ancient Greece you'll ever sit in on

Chris Marker's multipart essay film screens all month at the Siskel Film Center.

By [Ben Sachs @1bsachs](#) | January 9, 2019



The Owl's Legacy

***The Owl's Legacy* ★★★**

Directed by Chris Marker. In English and subtitled French, Georgian, German, Greek, and Japanese. 340 min. Gene Siskel Film Center, 164 N. State, 312-846-2800, siskelfilmcenter.org, \$11.

This month the Gene Siskel Film Center is screening *The Owl's Legacy* (1989), a 13-part documentary series directed by the late Chris Marker ([Sans Soleil](#), [A Grin Without a Cat](#)), one of the pioneers of the essay film. The Film Center is dividing the series into four programs over the course of four weeks, with each program playing on Sunday afternoon and Monday evening. I recommend checking out the whole thing, but don't worry if you miss one of the parts. The series can be watched in any order, and no one episode is more illuminating than any other. The overarching theme of *The Owl's Legacy* is the influence of ancient Greek culture on modern life, and each episode tackles a concept that comes to us from the Greeks (democracy, mythology, tragedy, etc.). Taken as a whole,

it's a heady and thought-provoking project that asks us to consider our connection to antiquity. Watching it is like sitting in on a superior college seminar.

You could also say that it feels like being invited to a philosophical symposium, which Marker cites in the first episode as the inspiration behind the entire series. Intercut between the myriad interviews (with philosophers, historians, and artists from multiple fields) are scenes set at actual symposia where groups of people hold forth on the concepts at hand, aided by lots of wine. Even when Marker presents one interviewee at a time, *The Owl's Legacy* still feels like an extended discourse, as the filmmaker (who credits himself as "skipper," as opposed to director) edits the reflections so that the speakers seem to be in dialogue with one another. One idea often leads to a counterargument or antithesis; sometimes it feels as though one speaker is building on what the previous one just said. This structure creates the impression that the ideas of the ancient Greeks are still up for debate and that the concept of civilization remains a work in progress.

This impression comes across the most strongly when *The Owl's Legacy* considers how different cultures have appropriated Grecian ideas. In one of the early episodes, Marker has several interviewees sound off on the influence of ancient Greeks on German philosophers from the 18th century to the Nazi era, with an emphasis on how the concepts of empire and permanent culture appealed to the Nazis. The appropriation of Greek philosophy—to which we owe the concept of democracy—by fascists would seem counterintuitive, but then Marker brings out filmmaker Elia Kazan to remind us that ancient Greek society was hardly a democracy either, as most of its population consisted of slaves. This reminder speaks to the contradiction in Greek thought between ideals and reality—a contradiction that looms over much of *The Owl's Legacy*. The frisson is especially pronounced in the episode on mathematics (which Marker wittily subtitles "The Empire Counts Back"), though it can be felt in nearly every part, as the interviewees frequently reflect on the idealism of Greek philosophers.

Comprised mostly of talking heads, *The Owl's Legacy* may not be one of Marker's most visually striking works, though the organization of ideas is characteristically playful and probing. Marker even throws in some intellectual curveballs, such as the assertion that modern Japan is more closely aligned with ancient Greece than any European nation. This digression allows the filmmaker to indulge in his Japanophilia (one of the key threads of his masterpiece *Sans Soleil*), and it raises the question of whether Greek ideals truly belong to the entire world. Located in an episode on tragedy (subtitled "the Illusion of Death"), it finds Marker delineating Japan's integration of art into society at large and presenting striking clips of a Noh adaptation of a classic Greek tragedy. In locating similarities between Greek and Japanese modes of dramatization, Marker invites you to ponder whether certain concepts are universal.

Marker worked on *The Owl's Legacy* for much of the 1980s and premiered it on British television at the end of the decade, around the time that contemporary philosophers were pondering whether humanity had reached the end of history. Given this context, the series suggests a summation of sorts; at the same time, several of the interviewees opine that civilization still has a long way to go toward reaching its ideal form. Marker, who held radical political beliefs and explored them in quite a few of his works, seems to side with these thinkers the most. Still, he engenders a sense of wonder at all humanity has accomplished so far. The world of ideas established by the ancient Greeks comes to seem like a trove so great that *The Owl's Legacy* can only begin to scratch the surface of it. By the end of the series, you may wonder why Marker didn't make it longer.