The Crisis of Cognition

On Memory & Perception in Chris Marker’s *The Hollow Men*

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Chris Marker, “*Quelle heure est-elle?*”

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Courtesy of Chris Marker and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.
I discover naïve impulses and images, raw products of my needs and of my personal experiences. It is my life itself that is surprised, and my life must, if it can, provide my answers, for it is only in the reactions of our life that the full force, and as it were the necessity, or our truth can reside.
—Paul Valéry, “Poetry and Abstract Thought”

If someone looks into the mirror, a man, and in it he sees his image, as though it were a painted likeness; it resembles the man. The image of man has eyes, whereas the moon has light. King Oedipus has an eye too many perhaps. The sufferings of this man, they seem indescribable, unspeakable, inexpressible.
—Hölderlin, “In Lovely Blue”

For Anna

Is the end not always already here? And thus the beginning? Yet if everything keeps happening again and again and again but happens only once and repeats, then there is no end and there is no beginning.—There is only an eternal circling through a circular labyrinth.

In turning, we keep pivoting toward the dark like Orpheus descending, down, down, down. And the moment of that turn, the instant of that anxious Ereignis, the crisis opening towards death, transfixes poets, invites them into the mise en abyme, which is an inescapable void, the still point of the turning world. There, the numbers on the clock have faded and the hands of time seem to have faded too, or been washed away as if by the sea. Or the mistral. When reflecting on how classical sculptures have been mutilated throughout history, both by men and by time—and what are men but agents of time—Marguerite Yourcenar accentuated the world of violence that turns about those calm forms. It is to violence that they in part owe their beauty, and we cannot elide that fact. “The classical work of art is thus infused with pathos,” she affirms, “the mutilated gods have the air of martyrs.” Are we, too, not akin to such classical works of art? Infused with pathos, mutilated, redolent with the air of martyrs? Are we not the trembling figures in Goya’s etchings? The pathological dreamers of Kubin’s Angst-ridden taxonomy? The whittled and fragmentary beings of Kafka’s drawings and Giacometti’s sculptures? Disfigured, mutilated
like the ruptured bodies of Bacon, we scream, wounded by that mighty sculptor time. Devastated, erased, and reconstituted, we collapse and return—we are the hollow men, stuffed, headpiece filled with straw. Alas.

"The battle to remember
the battle to death
the battle to life"

Is every age not apocalyptic, thereby annulling the very notion of apocalypse? When asking if there was measure on earth, Hölderlin answered: There is none. Life is death, and death is a kind of life. The way upward and the way downward are the same. It is the turning inward and the turning outward, the ceaseless circling in the labyrinth.

*The Hollow Men* (2005), which is the focus of this essay, is one installation amongst a larger exhibition of work by Chris Marker featured at the Peter Blum Gallery in Chelsea. The other works include *Koreans* (1957), a series of 51 black and white photographs, *Crush-Art* (2003-2008), a series of 16 black and white digital scans, "*Quelle heure est-elle?*" (2004-2008), a series of 36 black and white photographs from which the exhibition takes its title, an intriguing set of six photogravures, *After Dürer* (2005-2007), another complex installation, *Silent Movie* (1995), which is a response to the one-hundredth anniversary of the invention of cinema and also includes 18 framed black and white photographs, and other miscellaneous works. This is, without question, a rich, provocative, and challenging offering that provides us with abundant passages for ruminating on subjectivity, beauty, death, war and its aftermaths, hope, hopelessness, cinema, and, as Marker himself asserts in the notes to the exhibition pamphlet, Time itself.
In asking what time it is, Marker may perhaps be asking what it is time for in addition to reflecting on temporality itself. With this exhibition, it is time to encounter the hidden and the silent, that which has been obscured, that which has been ignored, that which has been eclipsed, that which has been disfigured, and that which erupts from us without control, spontaneously, our becoming-animal, which is both beautiful and terrifying.

*The Hollow Men* was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art on the occasion of its Manhattan re-opening in 2005 and is a prelude, the first part of the still in progress *OWLS AT NOON*, a larger elaborate visual history of the 20th century that Marker refers to as “a subjective journey” through that epoch. As a reflection on Eliot’s poem, the prelude to *OWLS AT NOON* concerns the First World War, the founding moment of the last century, one of the major events that ushered us into this new oblivion, an event that continuously unfolds into the present and the future. *The Hollow Men* consists of two synchronized 19 minute digital feeds alternating an AB pattern across a horizontal strip of six monitors (when presented at MoMA in its original format it included eight) that display images Marker gathered from the limbo of his memory, which is to say from the limbo of the 20th century, as well as a variation on Eliot’s poem that is at once an embodiment of and commentary upon it. What is especially conspicuous about the commentary is that it is not spoken but written—this is the first time that a work of Marker’s does not feature spoken narration.

In itself, this marks a decisive turn for the artist. But then, conceptually, the work demands the commentary be written, and while the words that cross the monitors largely remain words, they also become images that Marker deploys cinematically, mobilizing but fragmenting and shattering them in order to further question the possibility of any narrative at all. This exploration of fractured time is accompanied by Toru Takemitsu’s “Corona” (1962), a menacing and unearthly aural soundscape performed by Roger Woodward. In its dissonance, the violence of “Corona” is palpable, and with its almost hostile rumbling and reverberations, which are often reminiscent of the napalm...
bomb sound Mickey Hart and the Rhythm Devils created for Apocalypse Now, it sustains a continuous tone of disaster. Marker’s video essay is a profound attempt at thinking disaster, in particular the founding disaster of the 20th century and those following it, and evokes Blanchot’s similar endeavor, The Writing of the Disaster. As that work, Marker’s The Hollow Men embodies the fragmentary imperative, which it must. History does not end and it cannot be unified. Narration is impossible, or only fragmentary narratives are possible, narratives that rupture any sense of beginning or end and are forever in extreme media res. Is it permissible to speak of beginnings and endings when the direction of time is not known? Are we not, like Yasuko in Black Rain, destined to reset the clock every evening? Narrative, said Blanchot, “is a forgetting, so that to tell a story is to put oneself through the ordeal of this first forgetting that precedes, founds, and ruins all memory. Recounting, in this sense, is the torment of language.” In form, Marker articulates the anguish of ruptured time through the continuously recurring digital feeds of the video installation as well as through his refusal to close his text with periods—nothing ever ends and nothing ever can end. There are only brief pauses and questions. To truly experience the implications of the work then, to be jettisoned into timelessness, one must view it several times in a single duration, and its density warrants this continuous engagement. To refuse this imperative is to refuse to engage with the work on its terms, to encounter it only superficially, to reduce it to a consumable object, which is to say, something that isn’t actually art. Even art that isn’t concerned with disaster, or art that has less stringent demands, is challenging for it forces us to confront the problem of perception. Looking isn’t seeing. To see, to actually perceive, requires practice, for we are habituated against perceiving and are caught or deceived instead by the familiar and are thereby sightless, like the haunting figures in one segment of the installation whose eye sockets are but dead beams of light. Or Oedipus. It is as if the struggle to perceive results in sightlessness, but that risk must be taken.
Marker’s *The Hollow Men* is a demanding work and necessarily so for perception is demanding and he compels us to perceive, invites us into the recurring anguish of speaking and remembering, soliciting our complicity through what is being remembered, commanding us to surrender to the timelessness or repetition to recognize that our lives are folded into the events that we are witnessing for we are not merely witnesses but are also those who are being observed. The cosmos is the dreamer and we are figures in its dream; we are figures in death’s dream kingdom.

While asked again and again to remember the very impossibility of remembering is reinforced by what we are asked to remember as well as the challenge of perception that one undergoes in the encounter with Marker’s *The Hollow Men*. In *Sans soleil*, Marker’s alter ego Sandor Krasna conveys that he has spent his life “trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory as much as history is rewritten.” In *The Hollow Men*, Marker rewrites history in order for it to be remembered anew as the 20th century verges into the distance and we continue on into the 21st. Words, images, and words made images stream across multiple monitors: they disintegrate, are fragmented, bleed from monitor to monitor to monitor fluidly crisscrossing in manifold directions. When the words are complete they are not always legible, for they enlarge, stretch beyond the frames of the monitors, are distorted, move swiftly, or are broken into syllable fragments, such as when the word “sightless” is broken into pieces. Once it decays, all that we are left with is a haunting remain: SS.

Due to their proliferation and mobility, as well as their multiplication, one cannot capture all of the words streaming across the monitors, nor can one read all of them, for memory is impossible and absolute perception is occluded by the limits of cognition as well as the form of the installation. In giving multiple trajectories to the text, Marker challenges cognition itself, but in particular, it
is through moving the text horizontally across the monitors from right to left that cognition and narrative are subtly undermined. In this reversal, there is a strong sense of disorientation, for the Western order of reading text is disrupted. Our ability to remember, to truly recount, is broken down. At one point, the word “RECOGNIZE” is dissembled and the word “COGNIZE” is made to briefly hover, trembling in blackness. Marker achieves another kind of disorientation through the constant movement of the still images and the text as well. Similarly, Jancsó employed complex choreographic cinematography in his early films in order to disrupt any notion of the real, forcing the viewer to question the verity of the seen, and constant movement is put to comparable effect in *The Hollow Men*.

But while we are bombarded with a proliferation of images and words that impede our ability to remember, they are simultaneously meant to aid the act of remembering. In fact, the beautiful and traumatic images that compose *The Hollow Men* are ones that Marker claims have escaped everybody, including their authors. Once he captures with his eye, and the eye is a kind of net, the 1/50th of a second that has eluded everyone else, those fleeting instances he professes become his. Through various processes of distortion they thereby become new images, and he makes them his own. “I claim, for the image,” Marker once said, “the humility and the power of a madeleine.” Modest and potent, the image is to function as a catalyst for memory, a vector on which we can travel and be carried to another realm, that instant perhaps of timelessness where past, present, and future become graspable, even if only for a fragile instant. We must, as Seneca counseled, annex every age to our own. “We are,” he believed, “excluded from no age, but we have access to them all; and if we are prepared in loftiness of mind to pass beyond the narrow confines of human weakness, there is a long period of time through which we can roam.” Now, with Marker, we roam through the long period of the 20th century haunted by a war that surpassed the war that was to end all wars, haunted by the ghosts of Viet Nam, haunted by “THE BARE PLAINS OF THE SOMME AND THE SANDS OF IWO JIMA,” haunted by “THE DOGFIGHTS OVER DUNKIRK AND THE FINGER THAT TRIGGERED THE BOMB.” If to remember is to continuously live with things in our consciousness, the task is threatening.

The eyes that Eliot dared not meet we encounter again and again as Marker gently forces us—and himself—to confront the faceless horror, the sightless, the day without sun, the nuclear holocaust whose repercussions continue to endlessly recur. To feel the savagery, the utter savagery, we no longer have to go into the heart of darkness—the heart of darkness has entered us. We are the darkness. “The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valor, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look

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1 The name of Marker’s installation is *The Hollow Men* whereas the text used in the installation is given the title “OWLS AT NOON” in the accompanying pamphlet to the exhibition. Marker makes a similar but even more pronounced gesture with *La jetée*. The subtitle of that work is *photo-roman* whereas the subtitle of the book version, which Marker authorized, is *ciné-roman*. The latter difference is more significant though and is a naming that potentially destabilizes or raises questions about the nature of each document. Is *La jetée* a film, or a photographic-novel? And is the book strictly a book, or is it a cinematic-novel? These acts of naming are not innocent.
on without a wink.” Look on we must, perceive we must, fail as we may. If Marker never directly cites Conrad or Coppola’s phantasmagoric film, the whispered words with which Kurtz’ life ends and the hulking enigmatic behemoth that Brando transformed Kurtz into haunt us like specters. The horror, the horror. Rent in two, those final words are breath escaping a sacrificed body, the body’s last gesture: gentle, fragile, broken. The tender roar of death, which is what, in part, we are made of, echoes silently within us, recurring like the incessant feeds of Marker’s installation. No one is innocent, no one distant from death, no one free of the horror. We are all born of the death interred earth. And that land, the dead land in which the bodies have been interred, is the site of the trauma that is emblazoned in the six monitors and emblazoned in our consciousness as we surrender to the images:

“THIS IS THE DEAD LAND” HE WROTE, AND IMAGES OF TRENCHES OOZED FROM OUR CHILDHOOD FOR THERE OUR FATHERS HAD MET FOR THE FIRST TIME THE UNBEARABLE TASK OF BEING MEN

WHAT IS “CACTUS LAND” IF NOT BARBED WIRE?
AND WHAT WOULD THOSE FADEING STARS BE IF NOT THE BLAZING TRAILS OF BATTLESTRUCK AIRPLANES?
—“OWLS AT NOON”1

As these words hover in the blackness of the monitors, images of “dead land” appear, but this is not mere barren land as we quickly discover. When Marker
closes in on each new image, we realize that they are battle sites, trenches compacted with bodies, trees forking into the sky like the contorted hands of Hijikata, trees with bodies that have become branches, and blood saturated earth. Literally, this is dead land. Strange fruit, indeed. The blood is not visible but the landscapes are aflame, as if blood had turned to black and white smoke, as if everything were burning in gray tones, the color washed away by the horror. Bodies indiscriminately accrue in the earth, become part of it, part of the soil, part of the earth that bears us—this is the dead land that Marker goes deeper and deeper into, this is our inheritance, these the atrocities for which Marker makes his elegy. Do you remember “The Hollow Men”? The concatenation of images concurrently intensify and decay throughout the duration of the loop with victims, perpetrators, soldiers, and martyrs rising as if from the dead, or immobilized in death, their faces permanently rent in horror like the gnarled, twisted, and torturous figures of Pompeii. If the visages of the people in Marker’s installation are readily discernible, they are also disfigured, burnt, or whittled like Giacometti’s sculptures, their once beautiful faces at times erased, mutilated through history. One thinks again of the wounded classical sculptures Yourcenar described. Life is ephemeral and fragile but in our fragility there is also resilience, the fortitude of the vulnerable, like the ever-receptive anemone Rilke found so astonishing. If we are sightless, the possibility for vision remains as Marker repeats:

“SIGHTLESS UNLESS NEW EYES OPEN
AND LEAVE US WITH THAT CRYPTIC EPITHET
“MULTIFOLIATE ROSE”

We return, once more, to the question of perception, of remembering, and if it is possible in the labyrinth of atrocities. For Eliot, the multifoliate rose is an evocation of Dante’s beatific vision of heaven wherein the redeemed are arranged like tiers of rose petals. If loved has failed, in heaven it is transformed into spiritual awareness, a superior form of perception. For Marker, the multifoliate rose seems to signify the possibility of memory, of impossible memory, for one of the images that appears subsequent to this text is the
rose-like bun of hair of the unnamed woman from *La jetée*. In turning in on ourselves like the petals of the rose, we keep pivoting toward death and thus toward life, reaching toward the instant of that anxious *Ereignis*, the still point of the turning world where memory, if but for an instant, is possible. With the *The Hollow Men*, Marker has given us his most superlative and consummate work since *La jetée* and *Sans soleil*. This prelude to his visual history of the 20th century only compels us to await the further segments as children await gifts: anxious and ready to burst with wonder. As the Turks say when someone sneezes: May you live long, Mr. Marker, may you live long ~

from the series Koreans
Courtesy of Chris Marker and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.