

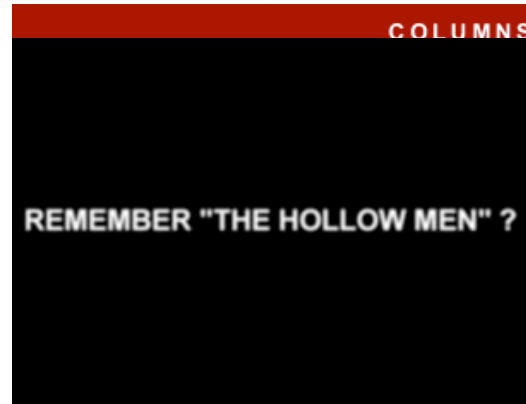
LATEST ISSUE HOMEPAGE	IN THE MAGAZINE	PRINT ARTICLE PDFS	SUBSCRIBE ONLINE	BACK ISSUES
EDITOR'S NOTE	MASTHEAD	WEB ONLY	WEB ARCHIVE	LINKS

FILM/ART:
Prelude as postscript: Chris Marker's *The Hollow Men*

By Andréa Picard

The alchemy of thought can conceivably engender residual gestalt with the sudden illumination of another idea whose provocation rests immeasurably within a space of impossible stasis. To put it bluntly, something is always burgeoning. Excavating from the scattered cinders of a problematic and programmatic past, Chris Marker, in his latest installation *Prelude: The Hollow Men*, has chosen a direct poetic reference to conjure a modern world of in-between wars, of taciturn ideologies always on the brink of hasty discharge. With 2001's *Le Souvenir d'un avenir* (co-directed by Yannick Bellon), the French ciné-essayist* has shown how post-war is, in effect, pre-war: by way of Denise Bellon's photographs, we are led into a corrosive cycle of mistakes, of false missions, of memories denied their rightful place—of a world perpetually made strange to which Bellon's real but Surrealist images would continue to attest. Marker had discovered the light of morning to be the dawning of night and vice-versa. An end is always a nascence, but why or how has reconstruction become the rebuilding of destructive power, he asked rhetorically, the contemporary proof being in the photographs recorded during numerous wars and across major cultural movements. Whereas Bellon's Agence-France photographs served as visual aid to Marker's conversant argument in *Souvenir*, T.S. Eliot's 1925 WWI elegy "The Hollow Men" forms the basis for Marker's new digital installation, the first part of a planned, elaborate multi-segment examination of the 20th century which the French artist has already titled *Owls at Noon*.

Commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art on the occasion of its widely anticipated Manhattan re-opening, *Prelude: The Hollow Men* was curated and produced by Mary Lea Bandy and Colin MacCabe, specifically for the Yoshiko and Akio Morita gallery where for the first time a work of video art would fill the entire gallery space, effectively being spared the sensorial competition of other moving images and the clashing or melding of sounds—an inexcusable problem encountered far too often in the museum and gallery exhibition of video/film installations.* I missed the MoMA presentation, but the Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art brought the installation to Toronto for the Canadian premiere. Judiciously, the entire gallery space was devoted to the piece, forming a semi-enclosed, dark, longitudinal room in which the looped material was repeatedly shown during gallery hours, the aural dramatics of Toru Takemitsu's "Corona" (1962) filling the room with unsettling tonal tonnage. Gravity hangs in midair effectively slowing down the physical approach to the work. But one mustn't hesitate to advance closer toward the eight flatscreen monitors which are perhaps too small to properly convey the poetic lament that Marker has wittily composed in JavaScript language. From the centrally positioned bench, the composition collapses into a m ê l é e of disintegrated images in contrasting motion, of eerie foreboding without much formation.



The Hollowmen

Articles in this Section

Film/Art: Chris Marker's *The Hollow Men*

By Andréa Picard

Global Discoveries on DVD

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

Back Page: Against Insight

By David Bordwell

Editor's Note

By Mark Peranson

and in the magazine..

Books Around

By Olaf Moller

The eight monitors are the recipients of two synchronized digital feeds alternating an AB pattern across the strip, the swaying movements created through programmed computer commands, with the continuous appearance and disappearance of images and text. As is to be expected from one of the world's chief visual intellectuals, the work is dense; once an appropriate position of observation is attained, *Prelude: The Hollow Men* begins to haunt with its aggrieved but sorrowful sympathetic position. An engaged and engaging dialogue with Eliot's poem, Marker's *Prelude* seeks to extract an abscessed memory, which adumbrates the future within its historical past and present. Marker acutely mounts an affront to our imperialistic penchants, yet there is consideration for Calvinist predestination, of horrors to be committed in perpetuity, of unaided fallacies. As a chronometer of wartime abuse is circularized through a technological circuit, Marker works like a cobbler to create his dialogue with Eliot's poem. He apparently set out to adapt the text in its entirety, but copyright issues prohibited verbatim usage, resulting in a compromise that undoubtedly yields more compelling results. Ever a sharp wordsmith (in the Godardian sense), Marker composed verse of his own combining the conspicuously curious expressions in Eliot with his own preoccupations. The result is not unlike the work of W. G. Sebald, his prose as much as his verse. (Therein lies an interesting comparative essay—examining the intersections of Marker and Sebald's respective lifelong "postwar" projects—one which Susan Sontag should have had claims on). To quote from the great Argentine author Ernesto Sábato, Eliot, Marker, and Sebald, in similar but differing ways, embody the "writer in the catastrophe of our time."

Elegiac in tone, *Prelude* excoriates the atrocities committed since and including WWI, the *moiré* images of devastation serving as testaments to horrors afflicted and horrors endured. The images, all black and white, seem digitally degraded in instances, fragments from a sordid time, their levels of decay increasingly wrought through Marker's knowledge of subsequent wars. History rescinds and we must instead read *re-sins*. The precise placement and sequencing of text creates clever play among and within words as they travel across every alternate screen. As AND AND AND slowly makes its way from left to right across the screens, the apocalyptic nature of the music and images allow the leap to END END END. In one case, a word is so completely broken apart via sluggishness that the "S" from "Sightless" which is often repeated (from Eliot's employment of the word to Marker's reference to *Sans soleil* and his general concern with the gaze), but its systematic disintegration gives way to S S S S and the implications could not be clearer: SS SS SS SS.

Sightless, unless

The eyes reappear

As the perpetual star

Multifoliate rose

Of death's twilight kingdom

The hope only

Of empty men

Whose eyes do we confront? Marker offers us images of victims, perpetrators, devastated cities and landscapes, martyrs, witnesses, broken families, the dead.

Some of the wounded we recognize from Bellon's images ("they are the smashed faces"), twisted and hollowed into Surrealist creations. Faces are charred, carved, etched. The women, mostly beautiful and doe-eyed, seem to be borrowed from Godard: saddled with knowledge they bear the beatific halo of profound regret for a world in everlasting "shadow." Camille Claudel sits among them, but hers is the image of sacrifice (or martyrdom?). Having relinquished herself and her art for an unattainable love, her image rests uncomfortably amid the more anonymous faces, which we ascribe to the same human predicament. But Claudel's story we know and as such her fate bears the weight of personal saga—enclosed within a smaller universe does her struggle for love teach us the tenets of another sort of human sacrifice? She did, however, "pray to broken stone"—her own. The word tenderness thus appears.

Marker is drawn to Eliot's "Multifoliate rose," its counterpoint image a tight multifoliate flower, which, with a zoom in, is revealed to be an upsweep upon a woman's head. An entwined bun—not Kim Novak's, but the inference is absolute. Next door in the adjoining Prefix reception area, Marker's CD-ROM *Immemory* is set up for patrons to navigate. Under the cinema heading, Marker bluntly points out: "If you don't know *Vertigo* by heart, there's no use reading on." I don't think the CD-ROM does, in effect, allow one to navigate beyond that point, Marker being well aware of the limits of memory:

Between the conception
 And the creation
 Between the emotion
 And the response
 Falls the Shadow

This interstice of memory bespeaks the intangible imprint of experience. Camille Claudel stood in Rodin's shadow, a whole culture was relegated into the shadows by another. The tenebrous shadows of the Holocaust are prefigured in these words from 1925, words that responded so desperately to the "War to end all wars":

Between the idea
 And the reality
 Between the motion
 And the act
 Falls the shadow

This historical accrual of mass destruction is "sans soleil," but the nighttime "valley of dying stars" has not gone unrecorded. Adorno's infamous dictum that poetry cannot exist after the Holocaust has been rallied against by artists like Marker and Sebald, and countless others. Their "images of the world and the inscription of war," to borrow from Farocki (whose work is often compared to Marker's, but I hold that Sebald's project falls closer), serve as dialectical poetry

meant to do battle against a reigning Darwinian ethos that rescinds, then re-sins. *Prelude: The Hollow Men* builds dramatically over the course of its 19 minutes, an increasingly graphic montage of images (of dead soldiers in soiled trenches, of men hanging from leafless trees) serving as a death march. A gong is sounded (the death knell), then there is silence. A shadow. A whimper.

Despite this categorical condemnation, Marker does not adopt a censorious tone. Staying true to Eliot's poem, the men who hid together in the trenches (and faced death together, a moment of unspeakable intimacy) were fathers and lovers, victims of regrettable circumstance. These are "the hollow men," "the stuffed men," those who had the "unbearable task of being men." Marker asks us to remember them, but also to recall the poem who bears their title and whose cadence is brought to life by the artist's own elegy, which he has described in Duchampian terms: "It's from that raw material, the petty cash of history, that I try to extract a subjective journey through the 20th century." And sadly, we are "no nearer." "Thine is the kingdom" proves to be "untrue 80 seasons later," Marker points out. This topography of grief breaks apart quite literally as the images increasingly deteriorate and the text becomes fuzzy. To further mark history as his own, Marker personalizes Eliot's poem (which is also testament to its command):

Eliot wrote it in 1925

The ashes of World War I were

Barely cold

And we 4 year old toddlers

Barely made out

A world of strange forms

Shaped by that war

The war to end all wars they said

That 4-year-old toddler is Chris Marker (b. in 1921).

* Many of course feel media artist is more apropos for Marker (and perhaps it is as a matter of semantics), though his visual essays and lyrical image compiling (aside from *Immemory*) retain a cinematic vocabulary.

*On that note, the inaugural Forum Expanded section of this year's Berlinale suffered greatly from the sound bleed syndrome. Apparently the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, where installations by Amos Gitai (ineffectual), Amy Siegel (inspired and witty), Matthew Buckingham (ambitious but defective), and Harun Farocki (surprisingly simplistic) were displayed on two floors is notorious for sloppy presentation standards despite the high quality of work routinely curated. The real gem was on display at the Arsenal: Jenny Perlin's *Review / Possible Models / Amend (Trilogy)*, three 16mm hand-drawn films that demonstrate crafty interplay between cultural detritus, mundane taxonomies, and absurd journalistic texts.

[BACK TO TOP](#) |