





CHRIS MARKER: THE ARCHIVAL POWER OF THE IMAGE

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My working hypothesis was that any reasonably long memory—like every collection—is more structured than it seems at first. I think that a collection of photographs, taken apparently at random, or postcards, chosen on the spur of the moment, reaching a certain size, will start to draw a route, a map of the imaginary country inside us. By systematically looking through all these images, I am sure to discover behind the apparent disorder a secret map, like one of those treasure maps in stories about pirates.

—Chris Marker

This underlying logic of Marker's CD-ROM *Immemory* (1997), an inventory of the archive of images that have marked his life and career, articulates a process that Marker has engaged throughout his oeuvre. His work as filmmaker and photographer has been to collect images on travels from one country to another, to chronicle one historical or political topic after another, and then to look through the collected images and organize them into a film or a book. In this, Marker's work has two distinct aspects: the work of the archivist, collecting and organizing, and the work of the author, presenting his findings. But instead of representing an authority *over* the images, Marker's oeuvre and archive tap into the authorial function of the images themselves. Marker's work and position as author and archivist is dialectical: *systematically looking through the images in order to discover a hidden map, drawn by the images themselves*. For the viewer, Marker's work is dialectical in presenting films as archives, as collections and collages of visual, auditory and textual documents which themselves thematize the archival. And, in terms of the archive itself, the dialectic of collection and document is doubly played out: once between oeuvre as archive and films as documents and once between films as archives and images, with a certain archival function.

My own hypothesis, following Marker's, is that the stage upon which this multiple dialectic is played out is that of the image, rather than solely that of the commentary,



which has usually been assigned the role of master-editor, or “dialectician” in Marker’s films and oeuvre.¹ The following is an attempt to examine the image, or the archival function of particular images, in Chris Marker’s work at this juncture between collection and document. Instead of commenting on the oeuvre-archive as a whole, or analysing a film-archive in particular, the focus will be on the mechanism of the image itself as an archival motor and navigational tool enabling and being enabled by the work of Marker as author and archivist.

At the opening of *Sans Soleil* (1982), before the title sequence, a woman’s voice addresses the viewer while the screen is still black: “The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland in 1965.” The image, a tracking shot of three children walking along a road, follows. The screen turns black again and the voice continues: “He said that for him it was the image of happiness. And also, that he had tried several times to link it to other images.” A shot of an aircraft-carrier replaces the black: “But it never worked.” The screen once again is emptied and she continues: “He wrote me: One day I’ll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film, with a piece of black leader. If they don’t see happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the black.” The narrative device of the film’s commentary—reading from letters by a never-seen fictional protagonist-filmmaker—*verbally* frames the image, while the black leader before and after the image has a similar *visual* framing effect. Inside the shot, the moving lens of the camera follows the three children on that road in Iceland, exposing a relational mechanism at the heart of the image. The image does not merely provide factual, representational information but also testifies to the act of seeing and to the involvement of two parties in its recording. While documentary practice often tries to minimize any subjective stake in the image in order to achieve

1. André Bazin’s frequently quoted article on *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958) perhaps set a precedent of analyzing Marker’s essayistic and archival work as a function of its commentary: “Chris Marker brings an absolutely new notion of editing into his films, which I will call horizontal, by contrast to traditional editing which plays over the length of the film through the relation from shot to shot. Here, the image does not refer to the one that preceded it or to the one that follows it, but laterally in a way to what is said about it. . . . The editing is done from ear to eye” (177).

the effect of objective truth, Marker, on the contrary, turns the internal lining of the image—its personal semantic dimension—inside out by insisting, *that for him it was the image of happiness*. Indeed, it is this location of meaning in the image *for him* that can make the image potentially meaningful for a viewer. Raymond Bellour writes: “Marker’s formula is exchange, in the elective modes of conversation and correspondence. But since he does not believe in the communication under which our epoch agonizes, he knows that the only real exchange resides in the address, the way the person who speaks to us situates himself in what he says, with respect to what he shows” (Bellour, 110). In this address, two different modes are interwoven, the informational (*Iceland, 1965*) is turned into the sentimental (*happiness*). It is this excess of meaning in the image which provides the urge, mechanism and criterion for its linkage to other images. Indeed, we are told that “*he had tried several times to link it to other images.*” The following image of the aircraft-carrier, through its own pictorial signification of war, exposes the failure of this connection before it is reinforced by the commentary (*it never worked*). It is this image-mismatch, featured prominently in the film’s opening, that introduces the project of the film, and of Marker’s oeuvre, namely that of finding corresponding images that will connect successfully to one another.

The first successful connection takes place only a few shots later: an image of a heron is followed by the image of an emu. The commentary begins with “*he used to write me from Africa,*” and continues with a discussion of the move from the nineteenth-century obsession with space to the twentieth-century obsession with time. When the image shifts from heron to emu, the commentary interrupts itself with the question, “*by the way, did you know that there were emus in the île de France?*” switching the viewer from Africa to France, but also from the conceptual, verbal plane back to that of the image. The visual correspondence of the images and the relationship between the two species enables the jump from Africa to France and is only reinforced by its articulation in the commentary. The image of the emu, and the pictorial connectivity that it effects, continues to resonate throughout the film as shots switch back and forth from Africa, to Japan, to San Francisco. The emu makes another appearance a few minutes later in a long sequence about neighbourhood celebrations in Japan, where its moving head pops up, ever so briefly, between shots of rhythmically moving bodies and arms. Here, it is no longer the simple visual *similarity* of genus, but rather the visual *analogy* of movements that provides the logic for the linkage, exposing the power of association that is internal to the image. Contrary to the heron-emu image linkage earlier, the dancer-emu connection is not noted in the commentary, but rather is prompted entirely by pictorial affinity, as if the image reminded *itself* of another image, conjuring it up independently from what is happening in syntagm and narrative.

In this way, the image-connection also makes a particular pictorial temporality appear, namely that of images triggering the memory of other images. Indeed, Marker’s credo, “I claim for the image the powers of the *madeleine*,” (Marker, 1998) calls for the recognition of exactly this associative temporality. As in the proverbial experience of the narrator in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, for whom the particular taste of a *madeleine* calls up memories from his childhood, the image-as-

madeleine, through its mechanism of evocation, can trigger the process of memory. In this conception of the image, Marker draws upon Proust's distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory, where the latter introduces a certain passivity on the part of the remembering subject, in the commonly assumed active process of recollection. This memory which comes out of "things" is also similar to Barthes's notion of the punctum which comes out of the image and pierces the viewer—as opposed to the studium which is applied to the image. Accordingly, images in Marker's film-oeuvre do not just passively build up to an archive, but are actively archival. As such, the image-as-*madeleine* questions the assumed equation of the *recorded* and reproduced image, text, or sound with the archival *record*, the stored and retrievable *document* with its privileged status in relation to the past. It defies most conceptions of the modern, mechanically recorded image, which stress its genesis in reality, rather than its effect, mimesis—inscribing the image in an indexical, rather than iconic temporality. Marker's claim for, and use of the photographic image-as-*madeleine*, proposes a radically different conception of pictorial temporality where the image does not so much provide *access* to the past but contains the possibility for entering into a subjective relationship with it;² a possibility that relies on recognition rather than representation.³

To recapitulate, the emu-image and its connectivity provides a logic of geographical and temporal navigation that operates beneath and beyond the film's representational and diegetic realms. Rather than solely serving the film's narrative, the image operates according to its own logic of association that links it to other images, in the same sequence or across the film, effectively becoming a kind of hinge between places, times, and images. This connectivity of the image—its potential to create a network of relations, or to trigger a memory—is not generated entirely without an agent, a maker or viewer of the work. Recognition of this connectivity of the image is a pre-condition for the work of such an agent. Moreover, the principle of association (by similarity, analogy, affinity) that defines the relationship between two corresponding images is an accumulative principle. The image of the heron is joined to that of the emu, and the pair is further linked to the image-connection dancer-emu, creating the pictorial chain heron-emu-dancer-emu, as well as, conceptually, the geographical chain Africa-France-Japan-France. The chain is further extended when, toward the end of the film another, much longer sequence of the same emu, is inserted between shots of the desert on the Island of El-Sal off the African Atlantic coast. The accumulation of this chain across the film, through the pictorial-conceptual mechanism of association serves as an archival gathering of documentary information that takes place alongside and beneath the narrative. By adding junctions between images, places and times—between documents—Marker structures his filmic archive and maps its inventory.

2. As such Marker's image-conception is opposed to that of many photography theorists from Sigfried Kracauer to Susan Sontag who considered *pastness* as photographic essence *per se*—or Barthes' *has-been* as *noeme* of the photograph (in *Camera Lucida*). His image-centered notion of time (rather than past-centered notion of the image) is more akin to that of Walter Benjamin who writes that "whereas the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, that of the past to the now, on the contrary, is a dialectical one: not of a temporal nature but of a pictorial one" (577).

3. The image as *madeleine* also echoes Walter Benjamin's insistence on the dialectical historicity of the image: "The historical index of images does not only indicate that they belong to a particular time, but it indicates above all, that they only become readable at a particular time" (577).

In the film *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (1966), a precursor to *Sans Soleil*, a similar gathering, connecting, and mapping of images collected on travels is at play. At the beginning of the film the voice of one of the fictional photographer-commentators describes the motivation for compiling, and the seduction involved in displaying a

particular kind of photographic/filmic inventory of place and time:

Well, I don't know, this feeling of bringing together the world, of reconciling it, flattening out all the time-zones. . . . That must be part of the nostalgia of Eden: that it would be the same time everywhere. Me, I can't help going for the kind of films that take you from one sunrise to the next, saying things like: It's 6 AM all over the world, 6 AM over St. Martin Canal [in Paris], 6 AM over Gøta canal in Sweden. . . .

Again, it is language that *articulates* the linking up of the early-morning images from the St. Martin Canal, the Gøta Canal, Havana, or Beijing, in an operation which Laurent Roth appropriately defines as *rapprochement*: “Not only does [Chris Marker] use all the rhetorical possibilities allowed by directive commentary (irony, antiphrasis, hyperbole, understatement, personification, etc.) but he uses the image to hollow out gaps in the immensity of space and time, gaps which language stitches up, relying only on its own legitimacy. Here is where Chris Marker's master figure takes the stage: *rapprochement*, the art of bringing together the distant, which in his work is a veritable tic of imagination and thought” (Roth, 52). Further illuminating this operation in reference to the same sequence, Roth continues, “The zero degree of *rapprochement* is the simple enumeration of geographically separate places, rendered contemporary by the magic of the commentary” (Roth, 53). While the poetic licence of the commentary—its magic—certainly assists in the definition of a shared criterion in the series of images, the images are themselves effecting a *rapprochement* of a somewhat different kind. For, whereas the *rapprochement* effected by language is a *quantifying* operation—numerically describing time (“it is 6 AM”) or enumerating geographically separate places (“over St. Martin Canal, over Gøta Canal”)—the images we see connect to one another through shared *qualities*. That is, the sense of their “morningness” provides a common associative criterion, measurable only upon





entering into language, and effects the *rapprochement* of the places depicted in the images, gathering them in a qualitative inventory.

Between the first two appearances of the emu in *Sans Soleil* Marker stresses this qualitative principle at the heart of his inventory and elaborates its form. Continuing to read from the fictional film-maker's letters, the female narrator tells us of Sei Shonagon, a lady-in-waiting to princess Sadako in tenth-century Japan, "Shonagon had a passion for lists. The list of elegant things, distressing things, or even of things not worth doing. One day she got the idea of drawing up a list of things that quicken the heart. Not a bad criterion I realize when I'm filming." Indeed, Marker draws up filmic lists according to personal-qualitative criteria throughout his oeuvre. In *La Jetée* (1962), Marker's only work of fiction, the first images that crop up, or in the words of the commentary, "*begin to ooze, like confessions,*" do so as a result of the time-travel experiments to which the protagonist, a prisoner-survivor of a future World War III, is subjected. These images add up to such a *list of things that quicken the heart*: goats grazing on a field bathed in hazy early morning light (*a peacetime morning*), an unmade bed, a window lit up by the morning sun (*a peacetime bedroom, a real bedroom*), the face of a child (*real children*), pigeons in flight (*real birds*), two cats on a bedspread (*real cats*), a peaceful cemetery in the midst of trees (*real graves*).⁴ Images are linked in this inventory through a shared visual-conceptual quality—their "morningness," peacefulness, realness—forming a list of a particular *kind* of image. Above all, we are witness to the personal meaning the images hold for the protagonist; that is the key to the image-list. In *La Jetée*, it is the protagonist's investment in images—or more precisely in a specific memory-image of a woman he once glimpsed as a child—that catapults him into time, rather than, as is usually the case in science-fiction films, some elaborate technical device. An image list—of peacefulness, of a particular light quality etc.—similar to that conjured up by the protagonist in *La Jetée*, follows the neighbourhood celebrations sequence in *Sans Soleil* and is accompanied by this commentary, "He wrote me: Coming back through the Sheba Coast, I thought of Shonagon's list; of all those signs one has only to name to quicken the heart. Just name. To us a sun is not quite a sun, unless it's radiant; and a spring not quite a spring, unless it is limpid. Here to place adjectives would be so rude as leaving price-tags on purchases. Japanese poetry never modifies. There is a way of saying, boat, rock, mist, frog, crow, hail, heron, chrysanthemum that includes them all." The images we see, not just here but throughout *Sans Soleil* and Marker's other films,

4. Perhaps this last image of a peaceful death, which the protagonist yearns for in his after-life, is the condition of the whole series.



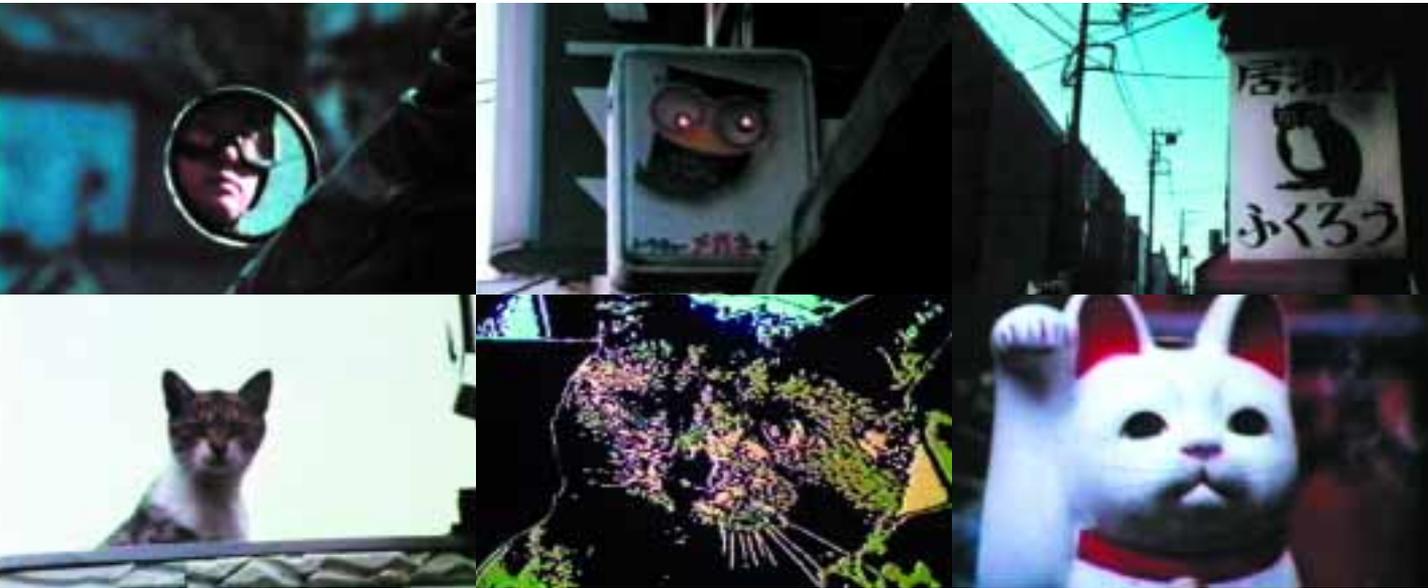
imply that there is a method of exposing an image of a beach, a boat, a heron, or emu that includes or pre-empts all possible descriptions by the commentary. There is a way of showing images of Paris, Havana, and Beijing that, without a word, evokes just this paradoxical, utopian sense: it's early morning all over the world.

With the help of Sei Shonagon, Marker points to the two powers of the image that implicitly drive his own image-practice: the powers of evocation and association. Marker's production of an inventory for his filmic archive through gathering—shooting, finding existing footage, and editing—is enabled by this double power of the image. On one hand, the image-inventory simply lists images as instances of a collection, allowing each to resonate on its own, evoking its own possible meanings, descriptions, feelings, and thoughts and on the other, the shared qualitative aspect that links the images creates a pictorial inventory or catalogue of the growing filmic archive. The particularity of this catalogue is noteworthy. In linking images or collection-items by shared qualitative criteria, rather than by quantitative measures, this inventory constitutes a *thesaurus* of the collection rather than a *taxonomy* or classification. For, whereas the former loosely groups instances conceptually (words/images sharing a concept), the latter tightly organizes the archive nomologically (according to a law: alphabetically, chronologically, etc.). This difference is crucial: classification is linear, laying out flat the vast heterology that is the archive, taming difference through a system that is based on sameness—items or terms belonging to the same letter of the alphabet, originating in the same year, being related to the same place etc.—imposing order through a movement from the many to the one. The inventory-building of the thesaurus, on the other hand, is rhizomorphous, starting from similarities and affinities and proceeding three-dimensionally from the one to the many, from similarity to difference. The shared quality or concept, the broader term of the thesaurus, moves through analogical bifurcations and creates a network of related, narrower terms, an arborescence of possible meanings without a classifi-



catory claim on, or hope for, precision, certainty and unique locatability. As such, the thesaurus enables a radically different kind of access to the archive from that gained through classification. Classification privileges individual items of a collection through a structure which allows their precise tracking while the thesaurus creates a conceptual architecture for the archive that highlights the connections between items. Just as a single image-as-*madeleine* evokes an associative, relational connection with the past, the collection of such images in a “thesaurical” list profoundly affects the understanding of the archive’s claim on history by locating historical value, not in a single document—and the proof of, or access to, the past it might provide—but in the network of associations, interrelations and affinities between documents. Indeed, when Marker (in *Sans Soleil*) introduces us to Sei Shonagon’s practice of making highly personal and aesthetic lists in an era of political intrigue and corruption, he stresses that the gathering of instances according to qualitative criteria is not only an aesthetic-poetic enterprise but also a highly historical-political strategy, “By learning to draw a sort of melancholy comfort from the contemplation of the tiniest things, a small group of idlers left a mark on Japanese sensibility much deeper than the mediocre thundering of the politicians” and continues by posing the question, “Do we ever know where history is made?”

The image list of desert-water-pipes running through desert-market scenes at the beginning of *Description d'un combat* (1960) creates such a poetic-political thesaurus, circumscribing a visual archive of a place which is only named by the commentary at the very end of the list: “Signs. [pause] This land speaks to you in the language of signs. Signs of land. Signs of water. Signs of man. . . . This is Israel. We’ve heard everything about Israel.” Again, the commentary articulates, rather than produces the connections between the images. Moreover, it exposes the limitations of its own role with respect to the filmic document/archive. For, if we’ve heard everything, that is, if nothing new remains to be *said*, perhaps only images are still in possession of *their* power. Indeed, their power to evoke beyond mere depiction or representation, that is beyond showing as an extension of telling, and to create associations and linkages through affinities with each other, allows images to communicate and create new meanings through an editorial capacity of their own, a kind of pictorial montage which becomes a historical or political montage through images calling up other images or “joining arms” for the same cause. In *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1977), for example, existing, left-over and repressed clips from the nineteen sixties and seventies: from anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, Prague in the spring of 1968, the



guerrilla movements in South America, and May 1 in Paris, are connected over the four-hour duration of the film according to political affinities inside the images rather than chronological or geographical classifications. In *Description d'un combat* the commentary tells us not without understatement: "Signs are not for the eye alone. [. . .] They express a timeless urge to connect. To connect, to establish an order, to establish a relation *between hostile things, between hardly knowable things*. Oscilloscopes, deep in computation, akin to contemplative birds."⁵ Switching back and forth from a shot of an oscilloscope to a pair of owls turning to the camera, back to the oscilloscope and back to the owls, the sequence seems to edit itself into a list, which Sei Shonagon might have called, *things that connect to a distance, or things that see what is invisible to us*.

The image of the owl recurs throughout Marker's oeuvre. Owls are inserted between shots, crop up inside a shot about something else, are filmed in the shape of neon signs and inside poster adverts, appear in manipulated images in *Zapping Zone* (1990–1994) and *Immemory* (1997) and feature in the lead of the three-minute video *An Owl is an Owl is an Owl* (1985–90) and the TV-series *L'héritage de la chouette* (1989). The owl is, in Western tradition, associated with Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom and is a symbol for a particular philosophical insight. Hegel wrote in the preface to his *Philosophy of Right*, "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk" (Hegel, 13). That is, the owl's vigilance sets in at the close of day. When darkness makes us blind to the previous day's events, the owl's work of seeing begins. On its flight, the owl's watchful eyes are scanning the forgetful night of history, picking up images on the way, putting them together in order to make sense of it all.⁶ The recurring image of the owl in Marker's work—along with that of the cat, another animal that sees in the night⁷—silently and watchfully manoeuvres through the entire oeuvre. It traverses both archive and inventory, navigating back and forth from one to the other, searching for invisible connections. On Marker's CD-ROM *Immemory* the cartoon cat Guillaume-in-Egypt pops up in different places with

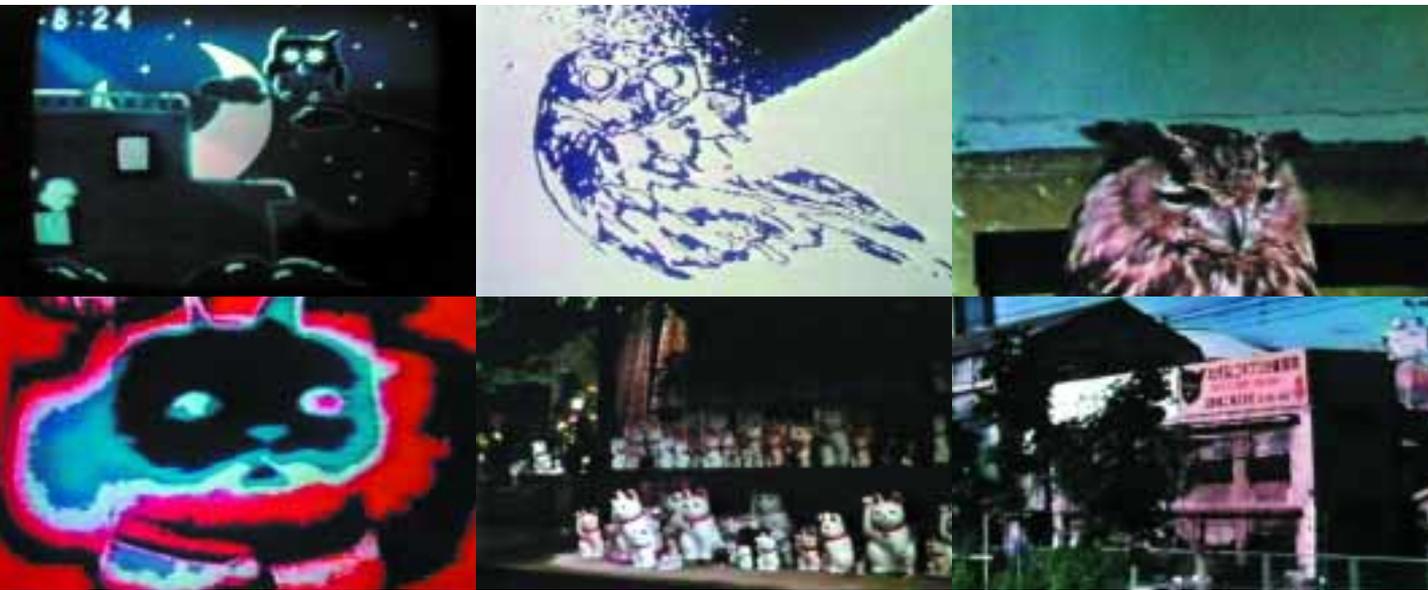
5. My italics.

6. Gathering and conceptualizing history out of actuality, Hegel's owl is flying towards the end of history and Marker's, similarly, towards *Sans Soleil's* year 4001 where total recall and total forgetting have become indistinguishable.

7. . . . and associated with the ancient Egyptian goddess Bastet.

8. One of the photographer-commentators in *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* says simply: "There is life and there is its double, and the photograph belongs to the world of the double."

9. The zone in *Sans Soleil* also alludes to that in Tarkowski's *Stalker*.



suggestions for further bifurcations in the network of image-and-theme-zones, exemplifying the role of the cat-or-owl-image as navigator. Reaching from one image, from one zone, or theme, to another, and connecting them without even relying on visual association (similarity/analogy) or a shared qualitative criterion (affinity/evocation) as in the gathering of images in lists, it takes the relational aspect of Marker's list-images onto a purely conceptual level. In his classification of different types of cinematic images, Gilles Deleuze calls the relational image a mental-image: "It is an image which takes as its object relations, symbolic acts, intellectual feelings" (199). Deleuze stresses that it is, "not merely a matter of adding images to one another, but of classifying types of images and of circulating in these types" (Deleuze, 198). Whereas the mental list-images create groups or categories of images, namely the inventory of Marker's image-archive, the mental-image of cat or owl circulates through this inventory or thesaurus and becomes the navigational tool of the archive, its search-engine.

After the long shot of the emu on the île de France toward the end of *Sans Soleil*, we are back on the island of El-Sal where the dialectic at the heart of Marker's image and archive is exemplified. His alter-ego tells us, "My memory superimposes two towers. The one at the ruin castle of Monte-Pilois that served as an encampment for Joan of Arc and the lighthouse tower at the southern tip of Sal, probably one of the last lighthouses to use oil." To the visual dialectic of the two towers and their respective locations and histories, the film's memory—or our memory of the film—superimposes yet another tower, seen only minutes earlier: the fake tower of the mission of San Juan Battista in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, itself remembered in *Sans Soleil* on a trip to the other film's locations in and around San Francisco. The imaginary tower exists only as image in *Vertigo* and then as memory of its image and image of this memory in *Sans Soleil*. At the top of this tower Scottie succumbs to his vertigo



—a vertigo which is also that of time, that of memory—and lets Madeleine (!) die her second death. “From this tower,” that is from this memory-image, the fictional correspondent in *Sans Soleil* imagines *Vertigo*’s Scottie, “as time’s fool of love [...] inventing a double for Madeleine in another dimension of time, a zone that would belong only to him.” The zone, the other dimension of time, is its double: memory or image.⁸ The complex super-imposition of the towers, the doubling and re-doubling of the image exposes the dialectical nature of Marker’s archival image. Indeed, it asserts that his archive takes place in this dialectical zone of the image where memory or history are recognized as doubles—of the world and of events, but also of things that might have happened or are hoped for—operating between world and image, between time and image, in a network of relations, associations, and evocations travelling back and forth from image to image. Indeed here, as elsewhere, this is realized long before on the CD-ROM *Immemory* (1997) the networked, interactive and dialectic memory, finally finds its hypertextual technology and rhizomorphic format, with each image literally becoming a link to another, forming an organizational and navigational tool of Marker’s archive.

Close to the end of *Sans Soleil*, before the three children from Iceland come back, and before the emu finally enters the “zone,”⁹ images and commentary conjure this “clickable,” “triggerable” memory, this *madeleine* at the heart of Marker’s mental images, at the heart of the inventory and navigation images of his archive in the correspondent’s claim, “The memory of a precise colour in the street bounces back on another country, another distance—endlessly.” The image’s work of creating new connections in Marker’s films and oeuvre, of producing new meanings, new associations in his archive, is never exhausted. Some material-pictorial condensation remains unassimilable by archive and oeuvre and continues to bounce back on another image from another film, another place, another historical event. The evocative and associative power of Marker’s mental-archival images renders them vigilant,



on the lookout for new images with which to connect. And if each image on its own would be somewhat trapped by its representational constraints, by “joining-arms” with other images, it has the power to free itself from representation, to point to something else, outside the order of representation or mimesis, to the gap between itself and another image: a gap that cannot be closed completely, “stitched up” by the commentary, but wherein a different image, a different place, a different history can always be imagined. The extraordinary inventory of face-images, that grows throughout Marker’s oeuvre and literally oversees the entire archive, shows us again and again this power of the gap between one image and another, one face and another. A single face always signifies a particular person, the expression of the face a particular mood, and the direction of the gaze a particular relationality. In a list, however, the eyes of all the faces join up, their gaze is concentrated, no longer looking at this or that, over-here, over-there or away, but *elsewhere*. The list of all their looking is not an accumulation, a sum of all their gazes, but rather a radically different gaze, one which is not represented by any one image but is situated between them; a gaze which doesn’t quite exist in this world but rather belongs to, looks for, or onto, another world, a dreamed up world, a world of the future, a different or better world, a world whose very utopian nature is both poetic *and* political; a world and its future that exists in the gaps between images, between documents hidden in the archive. This is the world we find when we follow the secret treasure map—the thesaurus—drawn by the archival images in Marker’s films.

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