



*Sans Soleil / Sunless Part III* - Chris Marker

He was pleased that the same chrysanthemums appeared in funerals for men and for animals. He described to me the ceremony held at the zoo in Ueno in memory of animals that had died during the year. For two years in a row this day of mourning has had a pall cast over it by the death of a panda, more irreparable—according to the newspapers—than the death of the prime minister that took place at the same time. Last year people really cried. Now they seem to be getting used to it, accepting that each year death takes a panda as dragons do young girls in fairy tales.

I've heard this sentence: "The partition that separates life from death does not appear so thick to us as it does to a Westerner." What I have read most often in the eyes of people about to die is surprise. What I read right now in the eyes of Japanese children is curiosity, as if they were trying—in order to understand the death of an animal—to stare through the partition.

I have returned from a country where death is not a partition to cross through but a road to follow. The great ancestor of the Bijagós archipelago has described for us the itinerary of the dead and how they move from island to island according to a rigorous protocol until they come to the last beach where they wait for the ship that will take them to the other world. If by accident one should meet them, it is above all imperative not to recognize them.

The Bijagós is a part of Guinea Bissau. In an old film clip Amilcar Cabral waves a gesture of good-bye to the shore; he's right, he'll never see it again. Luis Cabral made the same gesture fifteen years later on the canoe that was bringing us back.

Guinea has by that time become a nation and Luis is its president. All those who remember the war remember him. He's the half-brother of Amilcar, born as he was of mixed Guinean and Cape Verdean blood, and like him a founding member of an unusual party, the PAIGC, which by uniting the two colonized countries in a single movement of struggle wishes to be the forerunner of a federation of the two states.

I have listened to the stories of former guerrilla fighters, who had fought in conditions so inhuman that they pitied the Portuguese soldiers for having to bear what they themselves suffered. That I heard. And many more things that make one ashamed for having used lightly—even if inadvertently—the word guerrilla to describe a certain breed of film-making. A word that at the time was linked to many theoretical debates and also to bloody defeats on the ground.

Amilcar Cabral was the only one to lead a victorious guerrilla war, and not only in terms of military conquests. He knew his people, he had studied them for a long time, and he wanted every liberated region to be also the precursor of a different kind of society.

The socialist countries send weapons to arm the fighters. The social democracies fill the People's Stores. May the extreme left forgive history but if the guerrillas are like fish in water it's a bit thanks to Sweden.

Amilcar was not afraid of ambiguities—he knew the traps. He wrote: “It's as though we were at the edge of a great river full of waves and storms, with people who are trying to cross it and drown, but they have no other way out, they must get to the other side.”

And now, the scene moves to Cassaque: the seventeenth of February, 1980. But to understand it properly one must move forward in time. In a year Luis Cabral the president will be in prison, and the weeping man he has just decorated, major Nino, will have taken power. The party will have split, Guineans and Cape Verdeans separated one from the other will be fighting over Amilcar's legacy. We will learn that behind this ceremony of promotions which in the eyes of visitors perpetuated the brotherhood of the struggle, there lay a pit of post-victory bitterness, and that Nino's tears did not express an ex-warrior's emotion, but the wounded pride of a hero who felt he had not been raised high enough above the others.

And beneath each of these faces a memory. And in place of what we were told had been forged into a collective memory, a thousand memories of men who parade their personal laceration in the great wound of history.

In Portugal—raised up in its turn by the breaking wave of Bissau—Miguel Torga, who had struggled all his life against the dictatorship wrote: “Every protagonist represents only himself; in place of a change in the social setting he seeks simply in the revolutionary act the sublimation of his own image.”

That's the way the breakers recede. And so predictably that one has to believe in a kind of amnesia of the future that history distributes through mercy or calculation to those whom it recruits: Amilcar murdered by

members of his own party, the liberated areas fallen under the yoke of bloody petty tyrants liquidated in their turn by a central power to whose stability everyone paid homage until the military coup.

That's how history advances, plugging its memory as one plugs one's ears. Luis exiled to Cuba, Nino discovering in his turn plots woven against him, can be cited reciprocally to appear before the bar of history. She doesn't care, she understands nothing, she has only one friend, the one Brando spoke of in Apocalypse: horror. That has a name and a face.

I'm writing you all this from another world, a world of appearances. In a way the two worlds communicate with each other. Memory is to one what history is to the other: an impossibility.

Legends are born out of the need to decipher the indecipherable. Memories must make do with their delirium, with their drift. A moment stopped would burn like a frame of film blocked before the furnace of the projector. Madness protects, as fever does.

I envy Hayao in his 'zone,' he plays with the signs of his memory. He pins them down and decorates them like insects that would have flown beyond time, and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time: the only eternity we have left. I look at his machines. I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend.

He wrote me that only one film had been capable of portraying impossible memory—insane memory: Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. In the spiral of the titles he saw time covering a field ever wider as it moved away, a cyclone whose present moment contains motionless the eye.

In San Francisco he had made his pilgrimage to all the film's locations: the florist Podesta Baldocchi, where James Stewart spies on Kim Novak—he the hunter, she the prey. Or was it the other way around? The tiles hadn't changed.

He had driven up and down the hills of San Francisco where Jimmy Stewart, Scotty, follows Kim Novak, Madeline. It seems to be a question of trailing, of enigma, of murder, but in truth it's a question of power and freedom, of melancholy and dazzlement, so carefully coded within the spiral that you could miss it, and not discover immediately that this vertigo of space in reality stands for the vertigo of time.

He had followed all the trails. Even to the cemetery at Mission Dolores where Madeline came to pray at the grave of a woman long since dead, whom she should not have known. He followed Madeline—as Scotty had done—to the Museum at the Legion of Honor, before the portrait of a dead

woman she should not have known. And on the portrait, as in Madeline's hair, the spiral of time.

The small Victorian hotel where Madeline disappeared had disappeared itself; concrete had replaced it, at the corner of Eddy and Gough. On the other hand the sequoia cut was still in Muir Woods. On it Madeline traced the short distance between two of those concentric lines that measured the age of the tree and said, "Here I was born... and here I died."

He remembered another film in which this passage was quoted. The sequoia was the one in the Jardin des plantes in Paris, and the hand pointed to a place outside the tree, outside of time.

The painted horse at San Juan Bautista, his eye that looked like Madeline's: Hitchcock had invented nothing, it was all there. He had run under the arches of the promenade in the mission as Madeline had run towards her death. Or was it hers?

From this fake tower—the only thing that Hitchcock had added—he imagined Scotty as time's fool of love, finding it impossible to live with memory without falsifying it. Inventing a double for Madeline in another dimension of time, a zone that would belong only to him and from which he could decipher the indecipherable story that had begun at Golden Gate when he had pulled Madeline out of San Francisco Bay, when he had saved her from death before casting her back to death. Or was it the other way around?

In San Francisco I made the pilgrimage of a film I had seen nineteen times. In Iceland I laid the first stone of an imaginary film. That summer I had met three children on a road and a volcano had come out of the sea. The American astronauts came to train before flying off to the moon, in this corner of Earth that resembles it. I saw it immediately as a setting for science fiction: the landscape of another planet. Or rather no, let it be the landscape of our own planet for someone who comes from elsewhere, from very far away. I imagine him moving slowly, heavily, about the volcanic soil that sticks to the soles. All of a sudden he stumbles, and the next step it's a year later. He's walking on a small path near the Dutch border along a sea bird sanctuary.

That's for a start. Now why this cut in time, this connection of memories? That's just it, he can't understand. He hasn't come from another planet he comes from our future, four thousand and one: the time when the human brain has reached the era of full employment. Everything works to perfection, all that we allow to slumber, including memory. Logical consequence: total recall is memory anesthetized. After so many stories of men who had lost their memory, here is the story of one who has lost

forgetting, and who—through some peculiarity of his nature—instead of drawing pride from the fact and scorning mankind of the past and its shadows, turned to it first with curiosity and then with compassion. In the world he comes from, to call forth a vision, to be moved by a portrait, to tremble at the sound of music, can only be signs of a long and painful pre-history. He wants to understand. He feels these infirmities of time like an injustice, and he reacts to that injustice like Ché Guevara, like the youth of the sixties, with indignation. He is a Third Worlder of time. The idea that unhappiness had existed in his planet's past is as unbearable to him as to them the existence of poverty in their present.

Naturally he'll fail. The unhappiness he discovers is as inaccessible to him as the poverty of a poor country is unimaginable to the children of a rich one. He has chosen to give up his privileges, but he can do nothing about the privilege that has allowed him to choose. His only recourse is precisely that which threw him into this absurd quest: a song cycle by Mussorgsky. They are still sung in the fortieth century. Their meaning has been lost. But it was then that for the first time he perceived the presence of that thing he didn't understand which had something to do with unhappiness and memory, and towards which slowly, heavily, he began to walk.

Of course I'll never make that film. Nonetheless I'm collecting the sets, inventing the twists, putting in my favorite creatures. I've even given it a title, indeed the title of those Mussorgsky songs: Sunless.

On May 15, 1945, at seven o'clock in the morning, the three hundred and eighty second US infantry regiment attacked a hill in Okinawa they had renamed 'Dick Hill.' I suppose the Americans themselves believed that they were conquering Japanese soil, and that they knew nothing about the Ryukyu civilization. Neither did I, apart from the fact that the faces of the market ladies at Itoman spoke to me more of Gauguin than of Utamaro. For centuries of dreamy vassalage time had not moved in the archipelago. Then came the break. Is it a property of islands to make their women into the guardians of their memory?

I learned that—as in the Bijagós—it is through the women that magic knowledge is transmitted. Each community has its priestess—the *noro*—who presides over all ceremonies with the exception of funerals.

The Japanese defended their position inch by inch. At the end of the day the two half platoons formed from the remnants of L Company had got only halfway up the hill, a hill like the one where I followed a group of villagers on their way to the purification ceremony.

The noro communicates with the gods of the sea, of rain, of the earth, of fire. Everyone bows down before the sister deity who is the reflection, in the absolute, of a privileged relationship between brother and sister. Even after her death, the sister retains her spiritual predominance.

At dawn the Americans withdrew. Fighting went on for over a month before the island surrendered, and toppled into the modern world. Twenty-seven years of American occupation, the re-establishment of a controversial Japanese sovereignty: two miles from the bowling alleys and the gas stations the noro continues her dialogue with the gods. When she is gone the dialogue will end. Brothers will no longer know that their dead sister is watching over them. When filming this ceremony I knew I was present at the end of something. Magical cultures that disappear leave traces to those who succeed them. This one will leave none; the break in history has been too violent.

I touched that break at the summit of the hill, as I had touched it at the edge of the ditch where two hundred girls had used grenades to commit suicide in 1945 rather than fall alive into the hands of the Americans. People have their pictures taken in front of the ditch. Across from it souvenir lighters are sold shaped like grenades.

On Hayao's machine war resembles letters being burned, shredded in a frame of fire. The code name for Pearl Harbor was Tora, Tora, Tora, the name of the cat the couple in Gotokuji was praying for. So all of this will have begun with the name of a cat pronounced three times.

Off Okinawa kamikaze dived on the American fleet; they would become a legend. They were likelier material for it obviously than the special units who exposed their prisoners to the bitter frost of Manchuria and then to hot water so as to see how fast flesh separates from the bone.

One would have to read their last letters to learn that the kamikaze weren't all volunteers, nor were they all swashbuckling samurai. Before drinking his last cup of saké Ryoji Uebara had written: "I have always thought that Japan must live free in order to live eternally. It may seem idiotic to say that today, under a totalitarian regime. We kamikaze pilots are machines, we have nothing to say, except to beg our compatriots to make Japan the great country of our dreams. In the plane I am a machine, a bit of magnetized metal that will plaster itself against an aircraft carrier. But once on the ground I am a human being with feelings and passions. Please excuse these disorganized thoughts. I'm leaving you a rather melancholy picture, but in the depths of my heart I am happy. I have spoken frankly, forgive me."

Every time he came from Africa he stopped at the island of Sal, which is in fact a salt rock in the middle of the Atlantic. At the end of the island, beyond the village of Santa Maria and its cemetery with the painted tombs, it suffices to walk straight ahead to meet the desert.

He wrote me: I've understood the visions. Suddenly you're in the desert the way you are in the night; whatever is not desert no longer exists. You don't want to believe the images that crop up.

Did I write you that there are emus in the Ile de France? This name—Island of France—sounds strangely on the island of Sal. My memory superimposes two towers: the one at the ruined castle of Montpilloy 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.

A lighthouse in the Sahel looks like a collage until you see the ocean at the edge of the sand and salt. Crews of transcontinental planes are rotated on Sal. Their club brings to this frontier of nothingness a small touch of the seaside resort which makes the rest still more unreal. They feed the stray dogs that live on the beach.

I found my dogs pretty nervous tonight; they were playing with the sea as I had never seen them before. Listening to Radio Hong Kong later on I understood: today was the first day of the lunar new year, and for the first time in sixty years the sign of the dog met the sign of water.

Out there, eleven thousand miles away, a single shadow remains immobile in the midst of the long moving shadows that the January light throws over the ground of Tokyo: the shadow of the Asakusa bonze.

For also in Japan the year of the dog is beginning. Temples are filled with visitors who come to toss down their coins and to pray—Japanese style—a prayer which slips into life without interrupting it.

Brooding at the end of the world on my island of Sal in the company of my prancing dogs I remember that month of January in Tokyo, or rather I remember the images I filmed of the month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory. I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. How has mankind managed to remember? I know: it wrote the Bible. The new Bible will be an eternal magnetic tape of a time that will have to reread itself constantly just to know it existed.

As we await the year four thousand and one and its total recall, that's what the oracles we take out of their long hexagonal boxes at new year may offer us: a little more power over that memory that runs from camp to

camp—like Joan of Arc. That a short wave announcement from Hong Kong radio picked up on a Cape Verde island projects to Tokyo, and that the memory of a precise color in the street bounces back on another country, another distance, another music, endlessly.

At the end of memory's path, the ideograms of the Island of France are no less enigmatic than the kanji of Tokyo in the miraculous light of the new year. It's Indian winter, as if the air were the first element to emerge purified from the countless ceremonies by which the Japanese wash off one year to enter the next one. A full month is just enough for them to fulfill all the duties that courtesy owes to time, the most interesting unquestionably being the acquisition at the temple of Tenjin of the usobird, who according to one tradition eats all your lies of the year to come, and according to another turns them into truths.

But what gives the street its color in January, what makes it suddenly different is the appearance of kimono. In the street, in stores, in offices, even at the stock exchange on opening day, the girls take out their fur collared winter kimono. At that moment of the year other Japanese may well invent extra flat TV sets, commit suicide with a chain saw, or capture two thirds of the world market for semiconductors. Good for them; all you see are the girls.

The fifteenth of January is coming of age day: an obligatory celebration in the life of a young Japanese woman. The city governments distribute small bags filled with gifts, datebooks, advice: how to be a good citizen, a good mother, a good wife. On that day every twenty-year-old girl can phone her family for free, no matter where in Japan. Flag, home, and country: this is the anteroom of adulthood. The world of the takenoko and of rock singers speeds away like a rocket. Speakers explain what society expects of them. How long will it take to forget the secret?

And when all the celebrations are over it remains only to pick up all the ornaments—all the accessories of the celebration—and by burning them, make a celebration.

This is dondo-yaki, a Shinto blessing of the debris that have a right to immortality—like the dolls at Ueno. The last state—before their disappearance—of the poignancy of things. Daruma—the one eyed spirit—reigns supreme at the summit of the bonfire. Abandonment must be a feast; laceration must be a feast. And the farewell to all that one has lost, broken, used, must be ennobled by a ceremony. It's Japan that could fulfill the wish of that French writer who wanted divorce to be made a sacrament.

The only baffling part of this ritual was the circle of children striking the ground with their long poles. I only got one explanation, a singular one—although for me it might take the form of a small intimate service—it was to chase away the moles.

And that's where my three children of Iceland came and grafted themselves in. I picked up the whole shot again, adding the somewhat hazy end, the frame trembling under the force of the wind beating us down on the cliff: everything I had cut in order to tidy up, and that said better than all the rest what I saw in that moment, why I held it at arms length, at zooms length, until its last twenty-fourth of a second, the city of Heimaey spread out below us. And when five years later my friend Haroun Tazieff sent me the film he had just shot in the same place I lacked only the name to learn that nature performs its own dondo-yaki; the island's volcano had awakened. I looked at those pictures, and it was as if the entire year '65 had just been covered with ashes.

So, it sufficed to wait and the planet itself staged the working of time. I saw what had been my window again. I saw emerge familiar roofs and balconies, the landmarks of the walks I took through town every day, down to the cliff where I had met the children. The cat with white socks that Haroun had been considerate enough to film for me naturally found its place. And I thought, of all the prayers to time that had studded this trip the kindest was the one spoken by the woman of Gotokuji, who said simply to her cat Tora, “Cat, wherever you are, peace be with you.”

And then in its turn the journey entered the 'zone,' and Hayao showed me my images already affected by the moss of time, freed of the lie that had prolonged the existence of those moments swallowed by the spiral.

When spring came, when every crow announced its arrival by raising his cry half a tone, I took the green train of the Yamanote line and got off at Tokyo station, near the central post office. Even if the street was empty I waited at the red light—Japanese style—so as to leave space for the spirits of the broken cars. Even if I was expecting no letter I stopped at the general delivery window, for one must honor the spirits of torn up letters, and at the airmail counter to salute the spirits of unmailed letters.

I took the measure of the unbearable vanity of the West, that has never ceased to privilege being over non-being, what is spoken to what is left unsaid. I walked alongside the little stalls of clothing dealers. I heard in the distance Mr. Akao's voice reverberating from the loudspeakers... a half tone higher.

Then I went down into the basement where my friend—the maniac—busies himself with his electronic graffiti. Finally his language touches me, because he talks to that part of us which insists on drawing profiles on prison walls. A piece of chalk to follow the contours of what is not, or is no longer, or is not yet; the handwriting each one of us will use to compose his own list of 'things that quicken the heart,' to offer, or to erase. In that moment poetry will be made by everyone, and there will be emus in the 'zone.'

He writes me from Japan. He writes me from Africa. He writes that he can now summon up the look on the face of the market lady of Praia that had lasted only the length of a film frame.

Will there be a last letter?