

Chris Marker. *The Hollow Men*. Dazibao, Montréal. November 16 – December 14, 2006

Niki Lambros

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Chris Marker

The Hollow Men

Dazibao, Montréal

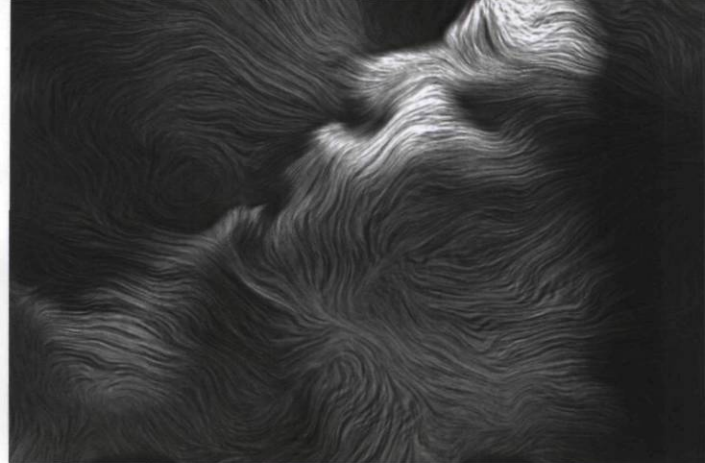
November 16 – December 14, 2006

What becomes history most? A credible witness. Even if the observer stands on the opposite shore, across an ocean of time, it is still possible to see into ruins and bear witness to a probable course of events for those who have long since become dust. Mnemosyne, Memory, gave birth to Clio, the muse of historical memory, and she has given Chris Marker a lifetime of work. Witnessing history has situated Marker's filmography in a permanent vault in the palace of cinematic memory; in Russia (*The Last Bolshevik*), in Japan (*Sans soleil*) – even projecting himself into the future (*La Jetée*) – Marker's camera has engraved a personal vision on the official record. Now, the eighty-three-year-old Marker presents us with a reflective vision closely associated with T. S. Eliot's post-First World War poem *The Wasteland*. And, strangely, it feels appropriated.

Sarah Robayo Sheridan, the exhibition's curator, tells us that *The Hollow Men* is "the prelude to Marker's inspired plan to collect a multi-segment history of the 20th century under the title, *Owls at Noon*." But as I sat watching the images projected on the horizon line of eight small black-and-white screens set up in front of me in the gallery, I couldn't help but wonder what could be witnessed by an owl at noon. The "found" photographic images that Marker has amassed are the testimony of others who had witnessed: the hospitals full of hollow men, the wounded, the murdered, the slain. While the subjects of the pictures remain nameless, the fact of their existence was documented, and in Marker's work they are not forgotten. But because time has kept us at a distance, we are made owls at noon, unable to see for ourselves, relying on the previous testimony of those who were there, and this is how most of us "witness" history that is not personal.

Sassoon, Owen, Graves – the other poets whom Marker references here – were owls flying above the battlefields of the Somme by night, seeing keenly how every mouse fell victim to the shadowless bullets flying around them, and were among those made hollow by the soul-sucking disillusionments that the First World War inflicted on their generation. Eliot himself did not fight, but chronicled from England the spiritual malaise of a generation who found that they could no longer believe in anything, and *The Wasteland* became the epic of that war. In Marker's installation, that text, together with the images, and the dire and portentous music, with its deep chords and strange scratchings, does indeed give an impression, a mood – but the anachronism of the format is too glib, too slick, to do anything but "capsulize" the chaotic horror of that war, which made hollow generations for decades. The process of distillation takes time, and so the fleeting rhythm of Marker's montage feels as though it moves too quickly over the landscape. One feels that a proper memorial lingers longer at the place where the catastrophe occurred before it moves on, back to the living.

The presentation is shown on a horizon line of eight black-and-white monitors, running two sets of four images simulcast on alternating screens. Text from the poem appears, both as "captions" and abstracted as large letters moving slowly across the screen amidst the nineteen-



The Hollow Men

two stills from a video installation presented on eight screens
dimensions variable, 2005

minute montage of First World War images interspersed with other, less recognizable images overlaid with various painterly effects. Though the images run on a loop, rather than providing a restart button, it seems to begin and end like the poem, with the "hollow men, the stuffed men," and the world ending "not with a bang but a whimper." As for the large, slow-moving groups of two or three large letters, I could not discern their contribution to the overall experience of the piece, except to distract one from the force of everything else; they fragmented the flow of the loop by insisting on long moments of departure from the rest of the context and content of the photo images and text.

The installation has the feel of an illustrated bibliographic entry, and perhaps this is just what Marker was looking to create for his "multi-segment history of the 20th century"; however, while there is much going on in this compilation of sound, image, movement, and time, the central unifying theme of Eliot's poem imposes an order, or an aura, on the whole piece that somehow makes Marker's vision feel eclipsed and redundant. It is Eliot's wise owl who, along with Dante, marvels at the vast numbers of the slain; when "Siegfried" is quoted with off-handedness and informality, one wonders if the full picture is not simply too big to be expressed in Marker's little dotted line of screens. It feels like an anthology – selected quotations of the First World War; the owl at noon is an anomaly, an evil omen, but without the weight or fear that superstition would convey.

Of course, Marker is not an owl at noon. The owls at noon are those for whom the text and images are not already written into personal memories, for an audience to whom DVD is not only the medium but the only way to receive messages. His work is not so much a time capsule as an exposure to the generation who will wonder who "Siegfried" is, who cannot begin to penetrate the mystery of the "multifoliate rose." And I believe that at this grandfatherly time in the artist's life, it is perfectly natural to look toward those younger memories that need exposure to both Eliot's and Marker's perspectives. It is here that the value of *The Hollow Men*, and the future, larger work will be calculated. For those of us familiar, perhaps overly familiar, with that generation, and the result of that war on the twentieth century, Eliot's poem is more illustrated than interpreted by this medium. Within our own witnessing of history, as opposed to a look backward in time, are images from the century's future, those "painterly" images, and the many contextless images of women and the feminine, enigmatic except within the art itself. Assembling images, text, and sound in a presentation is a provocative way to present history; juxtapositions conjure strange conclusions for those unfamiliar with the presumed-upon meta-narrative of Eliot's poem; like Marker's art, it makes one wish either for a greater level of abstraction, or for none at all. **Niki Lambros**

Niki Lambros is a theologian and writer of philosophical and literary criticism who recently returned to North America from twenty years abroad, mainly in Europe and Asia.