The Art of Sorting Out: Chris Marker's *Immemory*

by Guillaume Ollendorff

Review of Chris Marker, *Immemory*. CD-ROM, CP7102. France.

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1.

A strange image, a collage. Passing your mouse over some of its elements, words appear: Museum, Cinema, Photography, War, Travel, Poetry, Memory. All are starting points for thematic trips. Your ride must be done slowly (Marker forbids zapping), trying to take advantage of all the strange bifurcations from one "region" or zone to another. Like with a newspaper or any (good) multimedia work, no two people would take the same path. Over several sessions with *Immemory* I encountered only a few redundant elements, and always discovered something new. Consulting the alphabetical index made me realize how much of this huge *terra incognita* I still have to explore.

Immemory is a finite work - because limited to the size of a CD-ROM - but its boundaries are blurred due to Marker's use of a deliberately anarchic and subjective classification system. Of course, every zone is "physically" interconnected via links, bifurcations and different types of crossover. But on a deeper level, every image, text or piece of music could be classified in several places at once. *Immemory* raises numerous questions about memory and the use of digital formats. We humans, like androids, both work and depend on our "memory space". But we don't apply the same processes to our data. Is digital memory, computer disk space, able to help us better grasp our own memories?

2.

La Jetée (1962) was a film, a "cinematograph", without a single movement (or almost). Marker used neither the time-image nor the movement-image; a cinema without movement was better able to apprehend time - and, more importantly, our perception of time. Or, in a word, memory. The overrated *Level 5* (1997) dared go into weighty topics like war and death (our relations with the deceased, our souvenirs, the traces which the dead leave on the living) via the unlikely device of a video game. How can such an ephemeral, disreputable object become a ground for memory? There's a huge contrast, here, between the subject and the way it is treated. *Immemory* raises quite similar issues, but pushes them much further. The simple fact that such an object exists - one that you buy and bring home like an ordinary book or CD - is in itself intriguing.

3.

The choice of self-production is, of course, political. Marker does not approach multimedia merely as a new promotional tool, or a way of archiving his artistic work. He uses multimedia, firstly, because it enables him, at a very low cost, without need of any structure, team or company, in complete independence, to produce a complete work. He remains in control of production at every single

stage - only the file-transference mechanism and some technical expertise from a multimedia company were needed.

There is no art more compromised by industry than cinema. So this object, *Immemory*, is a message in itself. DIY cinema, a kind of "house cinema" (as opposed to "home cinema") is on its way. (So watch out, Lars von Trier Dogmatists, watch out *Blair Witch Project* !). The artwork can now exist without any compromise, without the need for huge resources in terms of money and teams. This is one of the most beautiful axioms of the techno revolution: Be yourself and to be yourself do it yourself. A happy message.

4.

Marker chose a simple, efficient software, Hyperstudio (far below the current technical possibilities of Director or Lingo). He decided to completely ignore its typical "filmmaker" functions. He threw out the camera, and limited his photographic task solely to classification. In doing so, he made room for the *auteur-marker*. He writes emphatically but unpretentiously: offering simple suggestions in the role of genial tour guide through his cultural and geographical continents.

Given that multimedia is so new, there are no codes to fall back on, no genre to either respect or destroy. Until now, multimedia merely served other artworks, and rarely became an artwork in itself (that was at least the case in 1996, when this CD-ROM was created; much has changed since the explosion of computer art). "Multimedia" is really just a generic word indicating an aggregate collection of materials, a fusion of different kinds of data. Think of all those museum CD-ROMs, all those simple "calling cards" used by so many artists. Multimedia remains, mostly, just a way of archiving and then distributing those archives.

Curiously, we might have expected Marker to alter this convention. But that is not what he decided to do, not really. *Immemory* gives a new life and identity to the archive, integrates it within an artistic perspective. So don't expect a revolutionary use of the technology. Marker doesn't experiment with it; he uses it to serve his artistic design. The execution of this CD-ROM is hardly remarkable; it's even rather tacky in many respects. Marker decided to concentrate mainly on the archival possibilities, and the kinds of commentary enabled by such *travail de mémoire* (memory-work).

Having collected so many documents, how to assemble them, how to fashion a singular artwork out of all these wildly different objects? The answer is clear: by clustering, reducing, shaping, cutting. This is a homage, perhaps inadvertently, to that emerging electronic culture in which "ctrl c + ctrl v" reigns supreme. Marker decided that the accumulation of contents is in itself an act of creation. Which is scarcely a new proposition; but the act of working on digital objects forces you to face its implications.

5.

The CD-ROM format does not have the universality of cinema or photography - and probably never will. It is just a data system. DVD is simply a means for archiving more data, more images and films. The life-span of computer formats is of course mindboggling - on the one hand they are characterised by multiplication and infinite reproduction, but on the other hand they are ephemeral, transitory. Paradoxically, all these storage objects, these transversal data formats tend to be so short-lived that they can potentially lead us to a loss

of memory.

Historians, understandably, grumble at current "all-digital" storage policies - because the area is subject to the will of an exponentially growing industry that, again paradoxically, is never in charge of the conservation and preservation of documents. Any data format undergoes enormous change and evolution - will even this document, this Markerian chronicle you are now reading, be readable 20 years hence? Only, of course, if you print and archive it... We still use a lot of paper, having decided that the destruction of some innocent trees is still better than trusting a few square centimeters of silicon to hold our personal, administrative and economical data. (It's unfortunately true that computer data-systems have no history. Who can show me Mosaic, the very first version of Netscape browser? Did the company even think about this, the history/memory of such an important "object"?).

The computer's main function is to archive, to store, allowing multiple cross-referencing of data. (An *ordinateur*, the French word for computer, is a classifying/ordering/ranking machine.) It is a way to use and exploit the huge amount of data produced by human activity. In *Immemory*, Marker wagers that we can use this storing, cross-referencing machine to reveal - to ourselves and to others - how our secret gardens are built, drawn, shaped. How they unfold, how they spread out in space rather than along a linear time scale. To place computer memory at the service of the exploration of human memory is a fine challenge. By using computer memory - in itself static, dead - *Immemory* plunges us deeply into the boiling, gaseous, always mobile, active particularity of the human memory system.

While computer memory works by the simple principle of data accumulation, human memory is a constant process of selection and reduction. Why do we remember one thing and not another? Why is information with the same "weight" - events in our life that have equal consequence or significance - sometimes transformed into memory, and sometimes not? Humans do record everything. Contrary to machines, however, there is no actual recording-action - only a permanent, ever-evolving process of selection, according to criteria for "sorting out" that are equally volatile. These ever-changing criteria create the possibility that, at any moment, a seemingly "forgotten" fact can resurge into our consciousness. What we call forgetfulness is essentially an alteration in the sorting-out criteria that exclude an event from our perception of the past - a change in the size of our "filter". A new event modifies these sorting criteria, and the forgotten fact reappears - because we have made the connection with other recorded events, at least one of which is linked with that forgotten fact. It is this permanent work of sorting out or selecting that Marker draws, outlines, for us.

6.

Marker reminds us that these "immemories" are interchangeable with anyone's memories and souvenirs, their own geography. *Immemory* is not really about the landscape on display, but rather the course, the itinerary, the paths that each person chooses to explore this landscape. Marker's mission is to offer a geography complete with maps, passages, territories, reliefs and even flat lands. What really matters to him, ultimately, is how we visit, how we explore this geography.

What a strange and much-needed re-appropriation of the computer! Is digitalisation, in its infinite reproductive capacity, able to produce anything other than an enormous information-noise, an indigestion of images and data? It is up to Chris Marker (and his cat) to answer these questions.

In its best moments, or rather its best spaces, *Immemory* offers us the invaluable sensation of being a child in the attic, exploring grandpa's old chestbox. Photographs, ancient theatre tickets, recipes, letters: all kinds of collector items. There is an immense nostalgia that descends while listening to the old, Cuban music, or meeting Jules Verne mixed up with souvenirs that no one else can really share. These are the most beautiful "pages" of the work, where the artist gives up the stage for the traveller, the kid, the observer - a simple Chris Marker. It is a gesture of universality.

One should not look upon this CD-ROM as merely a collection of Marker's work unavailable elsewhere; it is much more than that. It is a collection of utterly different things, apparently unrelated. Art is like life, made from production and absorption. So *Immemory* asks us questions pertinent to both art and memory. How do we appropriate for ourselves what comes from outside? How does the artwork of an other, his image or her song, become mine? How does it become an element, a memory file, a part of oneself?

The key is in the "mix" that characterises any such information-base. Refusing any hierarchy of sources, Marker mixes everything: his work and the work of others. The only creations specifically made for this CD-ROM are a few collages, some poetic remakes/remodellings of classic paintings. These are pure acts of absorption, in which the work of an other, this "outside", goes inside, becoming a new kind of creation. All of *Immemory* is about this dialectic. It's hard to distinguish Marker's contribution (even in the written texts) from anybody else's, because there are no typical, graphical tools enabling us to instinctively or implicitly grasp the origin of the information.

Marker deliberately manufactures confusion - he directly connects his own work to that of his "masters", quite simply because his "inside" is a product of his "outside". He has integrated the lot; there is no longer truly a border between outside and inside. That's what memory is, an ever-changing border between what we receive and what we "are" - and we are mainly what we get. The conventional differences between the work of others and one's own work, or even the events of one's own life, are becoming increasingly blurred. All this material has the same status: constitutive elements, stones, bricks, strata of the memory-fields that we visit.

What is fascinating about *Immemory* is that its collection of multiple productions and absorptions (see the beautiful homage to Hitchcock via Proust, or maybe vice versa) takes place over more than half a century. This offers a vast amount of material from which to build a personal album - particularly so when it belongs to an artist whose vocation is precisely to preserve special moments of his life and thoughts, in one form or another. And, of course, as always when perusing someone else's private album, one experiences both passionate moments and stages of irritation or boredom.

7.

Marker charmed me with his photographs of Cuba and Korea. He made me understand the double fold in the act of photographic looking. I saw (and shared) his admiration for a Cuban girl's naked back; I also felt the mix of sadness and great excitement one morning in North Korea. Meanwhile, his reflections on the relationship of cinema and TV just did not interest me at all. Maybe it's a simple generational difference, but I fail to see the point of this eternal film-TV debate.

At any rate, as long as you accept the rules of the game, it's not Marker's work that is really the focus of interest, but rather this trip into someone else's memory, with its mix of particularity and universalism. Sorry, Mr Marker, but I

zapped a lot, as fast as I could: from the flat lands to every single thing that looked like a secret garden. That's why the graphical part, the multimedia realization, is so cheap and amateur (the choice of fonts is frankly off-putting), because all the interest of *Immemory* resides elsewhere: firstly, in the fact it has been done alone (hence, no interference, not even technological, between the will and the result); secondly, in the accumulation of content and the non-hierarchisation of information.

For example? The cat that pops up to ask whether he can decide what to show you next, taking you somewhere else; those clickable, superimposed, surprise texts; the alphabetical index; the hard choice you are constantly forced to make between two sub-categories, both of which will lead you far from where you are, thus making you lose whichever thread you were already on. These are all ways of ensuring that you never take the same path twice.

One realizes, experiencing these zones and their cross-links, how one gives the same weight to so many different things in life - and how the only criteria for ranking such events are necessarily subjective. Here war, cinema and travel are always present as formative experiences. You will meet the ghost of communism that seems to haunt Marker's entire life. You'll meet Hitchcock, Saigon and Jules Verne - as I have done in my own life-path.

It's your turn to find your way now, and to answer all these questions for yourself. Plus one more: will you treat *Immemory* as a simple cultural object, an artwork that you bought, to be put on a shelf or in a drawer with all the others? Or will you use it, rather, as a tool box, a method for exploring your own memories - or even, perhaps, for presenting them? Once again, it's up to you.

Translated from French by the author and Adrian Martin

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