In a Sea of Binary Algae

Marker's *Level Five* as Non-representational Documentary

Abstract

Chris Marker's *Level Five* (1997) is a dense, self-reflexive, and fragmented film that investigates a crucial event in the final months of World War II: the battle of Okinawa. This article focuses on the relationship between two key strands in Marker's film: (1) the critical examination of images and their ability to render events; and (2) the reflection on the status of historical knowledge in the digital world. We argue that Marker's film not only queries a number of conventional epistemological foundations in documentary filmmaking, but also searches for new ways to relate to history. By elaborating on the notion and practice of montage, and reading Marker's work alongside Barad, Flusser, and Didi-Huberman, the article concludes that *Level Five* should be read as a 'non-representational historical documentary'. The film does not merely bear witness to the Battle of Okinawa, but enacts a different way of doing history.

It is not the literal past that rules us, but images of the past. —George Steiner[1]

Introduction

One of the central themes in Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) is the critique of 'representationalism'; a mode of thought which continues to dominate intellectual debates both in and outside academia. What is representationalism? Barad defines it as 'the idea that representations and the objects (subjects, events, or states of affairs) they purport to represent are independent of one another' (28). This idea is described as a metaphysical presupposition that relies on a specific ontology:

> …the idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation, is a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism. Or to put the point the other way around, representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities – representations and entities to be represented. (46)

In the world of art and culture, the multiple debates about *mimesis*, for instance, are an expression of representationalism: the world is out there, how do we represent it? In the political sphere, representationalist beliefs have manifested themselves in the liberal idea that politics is about representing the interests of autonomous individuals.

As Barad points out, throughout the 20th century, representationalism has been under pressure from different angles. In the humanities, feminists, poststructuralists, and queer theorists have criticized representationalism. Barad highlights the writings of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Foucault's work on discourse and power shows how different

[1] This quotation introduces Chris Marker's *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* (*The Last Bolshevik*, 1992).

forms of discourse shape and limit the ways in which the individual can think itself, thereby challenging representationalist beliefs in a distinction between individual and society; Butler builds from Foucault in her theory about gender performativity, where identity is not the expression of some inner truth but a performance, shaped through the repetition of specific norms (which may, in their very process of enactment, become subject to modification). Nevertheless, according to Barad, the feminist, post-structuralist, and queer challenges to representationalism have remained too timid, too anthropocentric, too tied to ideas of distinct subjects and objects, individuals and discursive structures. Furthermore, thinkers like Foucault and Butler have hesitated when coming up against issues of biology and the dynamism of matter.

A more radical challenge to the metaphysics of representationalism comes from the sciences, and not least from quantum mechanics. Barad focuses on the work of the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Although Bohr considered himself a humanist, his thinking radically undermines humanism and its representationalist schemata. A key point in his philosophy-physics was the insight that the 'apparatus' – which includes the instruments, the experimental design and the designer of the experiment (i.e. the physicist) – co-shapes the studied reality. There is no distinction between apparatus and the 'real': in Bohr's vocabulary there is only one single 'phenomenon'. In other words, reality is not out there waiting to be represented; instead, the realisation of the real takes place in the experiment. It is important to understand that this does not mean that Bohr believes reality is subjectively constituted. Bohr does not give up on objectivity. Rather, he associates objectivity with (1) reproducibility, the ability to reproduce the same experiment several times and determine the statistical likelihood of an outcome, and (2) communicability, the ability to communicate these results (see Bohr 2013: 15, and Barad 2007: 143). Barad's ambition is to draw on insights both from poststructuralist gender theory and from Bohr's quantum mechanics to develop an idea of *agential realism* that allows us to move away from a representationalism which is out of sync with current scientific knowledge and problematic for a contemporary understanding of politics and aesthetics.

Barad is just one of many thinkers today seeking to move beyond an anthropocentricism that seems increasingly problematic in our Anthropocene times (and in relation to developments in early 20th century physics). Much more could be said about these critiques, but this is not our intention here. Instead, we ask a question that lies far

from Barad's own interests: what does this critique of representationalism mean for documentary film practices and, in particular, what does it mean for the documentary films concerned with the rendering of historical events? Even if documentary films are diverse and often far from displaying any naïve belief in representation, even if 'performativity' and 're-enactment' have become increasingly central terms in documentary film studies in recent decades, debates about how documentaries represent reality remain key to the field.[2] And such debates only seem to gain in importance if we consider the genre of historical documentaries. Indeed, what is a historical documentary if not a film documenting real life events that took place, as Sorlin puts it, in 'a past considered as historical' (2000: 37)? The metaphysics of representationalism – 'the idea that representations and the objects (subjects, events, or states of affairs) they purport to represent are independent of one another' (28) – seems to lie at the very foundation of 'historical documentaries', which rely not only on strong 'here'/ 'there' distinctions, but also on 'now'/ 'then' distinctions.

Let us be clear, Barad does not write about documentary film or the discipline of history; she does not ask what it might mean to make historical documentary films outside of a representationalist metaphysics. That question is ours; it is a vast question, and this article can only begin to offer an answer. In an attempt to do so, we focus on Chris Marker's essay film *Level Five* (1997). We have chosen *Level Five* precisely because it explores the idea of documentary film as representation and more specifically, as the representation of historical events. We shall argue that Marker moves closer to Barad's non-representationalist ideas than many other filmmakers, and, through a contrastive reading with the Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser and the French art critic Georges Didi-Huberman, we will furthermore argue that this break from the representationalist metaphysics must be seen not as a renunciation of history, but rather as an attempt to revitalise historical filmmaking. To a large extent, this revitalisation depends on Marker's chief gesture, montage, which should be understood not merely as a technique among others, but as 'epistemological disturbance' (Larsson 2020: 89). In other words, we hope to demonstrate that Marker's challenges to the representationalist regime go hand-in-hand with a desire to find new ways to film history.

[2] Of course, debates about representation (and the accuracy of representation) are equally common in studies of fiction films.

From Representational to Mobilising Images

Setting aside a short prologue (to which we will return later), *Level Five* begins with Chris (Marker) telling us that a young writer and friend named Laura recently made contact with him. Her lover, also a friend of Chris, had died, and Laura was hoping that Chris could help her make sense of the project he left behind. This project was a computer game about the Battle of Okinawa in June 1945. Laura has recorded a series of video-letters to her deceased lover where she explores the game, the battle more generally, and her own state of mind; she passes this material on to Chris.[3] He is, as she says, 'the ace of montage', so if anyone can make sense of the material it must be him. Chris notes that he is at a point in his life where he is 'more interested in other people's images than my own', so he accepts the invitation, edits the material, and thereby composes the film that we watch. Like Laura, Chris adds reflections and images of his own through a characteristically dense voice-over and his use of montage. Towards the end of the film, we see Laura becoming increasingly distraught, in a last video-letter she switches herself off, and Chris brings the film to a close.

At the heart of *Level Five* stands the battle of Okinawa. This was a key incident in the final months of World War II. The Japanese military knew the Americans were planning to attack the island, and they promised to help the Okinawan general Mitsuru Ushihima resist the American invasion. However, behind the scenes, they decided to sacrifice Okinawa in a cynical move, which the Japanese director Nagisa Oshima, interviewed in the film, likens to a 'suteishe'. This term refers to a tactic in Go, where you give away a small pawn to win a larger battle. When the Americans invaded, the islanders quickly realised that the Japanese army would offer only very limited support, and they therefore fell back on what they had been encouraged to think of as 'Plan B': kamikaze attacks and seppukus. The Japanese military had speculated that the Americans would see this self-sacrificial tactic as proof of an awe-inspiring mental force that could deter them from attacking on the Japanese mainland. The plan backfired. Confronted with thousands of Okinawans killing themselves (and helping each other to die), the Americans concluded that their enemy could no longer be reached through negotiations: less than two months later, they bombed Hiroshima and

[3] As Nora Alter (2006, 111) writes, *Level Five* thereby becomes another epistolary film, like Marker's earlier *Letter* (1957) and *Sans Soleil* (1983).

Nagasaki. Viewers of Marker's film are presented with this historical narrative alongside multiple reflections on modern and less modern Japan, America, (film) history, computer games, memory, trauma, and the status of images. Let us begin with this last topic.

In her helpful analysis of *Level Five*, Maureen Turim (2000) singles out four interrelated points of gravity in Marker's vertiginous investigation of images. For our purposes, three of these images, all from battles in the Pacific, deserve to be mentioned: 'The Flag Raising at Iwo Jima', 'A Woman Throwing Herself off a Cliff in Saipan', and 'Gustave Burning'.[4] As is well known, the famous Iwo Jima photos were staged. The original flag raising was photographed, but the photograph was unimpressive, so the army decided a second take was needed. They gathered six carefully selected soldiers and reshot the scene. Marker's film explains this backstory, and shows how the manipulated image became iconic, and a key player in the American propaganda during World War II – and much later. Chris and Laura then turn their attention to Ira Hayes, one of the soldiers in the staged shot. He knew the truth about the fabrication; he found it difficult to live with the lie and pose as a hero. On the other hand, he didn't want to betray the army, so he suffered in silence, leading a life marred by mental illness and alcohol abuse, dying miserable and alone.

A second image-cluster discussed in Marker's film is a short clip from the Japanese-American battle over Mariana in 1944. Here, too, the Japanese citizens had been told to fight with pride, be ready to sacrifice their lives, and thereby demonstrate their mental strength. On grainy black and white images, we see a woman climbing a cliff, and we understand that the cameraperson tracking her is American. Marker freezes the image as the woman turns around and appears to fix the camera – next, she jumps into the abyss. Laura's voice-over speculates that perhaps the woman jumped *because* of the camera, because she did not want to become an image of cowardice. Via superimposition, Marker links this footage to a famous scene from Nicole Vedrès's *Paris 1900* (a scene Bazin examines in his analysis of the film (Bazin 1947)). Here a man, dressed in what Laura anachronistically refers to as a 'Batman-like parachute', gets ready to keep his promise and

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[4] The fourth images is 'The White Flag Surrender of the Okinawan Girl'. It shows a young girl, seemingly leading the surrender of the Okinawans. She walks towards the photographer, carrying a white piece of cloth on a stick. As Chris comments, the image became iconic, the young girl having survived the guidelines of the army to commit suicide, to now be put forward by the same army as they attempt to avoid death. Marker's analysis of this photo quickly takes him to the analysis of 'A Woman Throwing Herself off a Cliff in Saipan'.

fly away from the Eiffel Tower. Again, the man seems to look into the camera, and Laura notes that at that moment, looking down from the Eiffel Tower, he must have known that his homemade contraption would not work. Nevertheless, *because* the camera is there, he jumps to his death.

The final image-cluster deserving our attention here is the scene of 'Gustave burning'. In this war footage we see a man literally on fire as he stumbles, gets up, stumbles again. Laura notes how this scene has travelled through various wars and conflicts. The man was filmed in Borneo by Australian soldiers, but the footage has since been used to manipulate popular opinion about battles in the Philippines, in Okinawa, and, 20 years later, in Vietnam. This is not only a scene that has been weaponised to shape spectatorial responses to conflicts across the globe; it has also been redacted to fit a specific narrative. Laura reveals that the original footage does *not* end with the burning man collapsing on the ground; instead, he gets up and begins to walk away. Perhaps he did not die? However, each time the clip has been re-used this ending has been cut off. There is no space for ambiguity or a happier ending when you are trying to make a political point about the horrors of Borneo, the Philippines, Okinawa, Vietnam, etc.

Some of Chris and Laura's observations about the status of documentary images seem almost commonplace today. For instance, we know all too well that images travel between contexts, and in that process are manipulated to fit specific arguments. It is therefore easy to associate *Level Five* with a well-known poststructuralist critique of representation. We can, for instance, think of *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), where Jean Baudrillard examined how the photograph of an oil-soaked sea-bird, seemingly blinded and screaming to the sky, became the symbol of the first Gulf war – despite the fact that the photograph had been taken many thousand miles away at Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, before the beginning of the war. The three scenes described above can easily, therefore, make us reach for the vocabulary of 'simulacra' and the 'society of spectacle'; they raise issues of image-manipulation and falsification. But, as Barad points out, in fact this poststructuralist critique of representationalism relies on a representationalist metaphysics in so far as this manipulated image is still discussed in terms of falsity and faithfulness.

However, Marker's treatment of these image-clusters also allows for a different reading. The scenes all make a point about the efficiency of images, demonstrating how

they affect our lives. Looking at the Iwo Jima incident, for instance, it can be argued that the key point in Marker's analysis is less about falsification and simulacra than about the efficiency of the image. 'Taking on an iconic status, as evident by its use in US propaganda, the image functions as what the historian Jacques Juillard has termed 'une image mobilisatrice' ['a mobilising image'] (in Sorel 1980: vii), and what Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk (2017) have more recently called 'operational images'. This is true both at the political and at the more individual level. When Laura tells the tragic story of Ira Hayes, she is arguably less concerned with critiquing representation, than with the problem of how images shape our lives, and, in this particular case, how Hayes's life falls apart. The same is suggested with the images from the battle of Mariana and *Paris 1900*: precisely because the Japanese woman on Mariana did not want to become an image of Japanese weakness, because our Parisian batman did not want to become the image of cowardice, they jumped. These incidents highlight how images shape – and end – lives, they highlight the operational dimension of images. Looking at images operationally reduces the distance between reality and image, the object and its representation.

A number of critics can be associated with this second approach to the image. One of these is John Dewey. In *Art as Experience* (1934), he takes issue with the idea that art is an activity that is clearly distinct from everyday life. He thereby undercuts the Platonic tendency to think art (images and literature) as representation. Dewey's ambition is 'to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience' (2009: 2). He considers art and images as one experience among 'different aspects and phases of a continuous, though varied, interaction of self and an environment' (257). Images (whether these are literary or visual) shape our lives, contributing to our 'entanglement' in the world (to use a key term from Barad). Similar ideas can be found in works of Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Simondon, Deleuze and many contemporary thinkers such as, notably, Georges Didi-Huberman and Emanuele Coccia. In different ways they all critique representationalism and emphasise that the image is a mode of existence that is intimately tied up with other modes. Unsurprisingly, for many of these thinkers the word 'image' has a softer contour than most critics in the Platonic framework

allow: images can be artistic or not, and they may overlap with imaginations or memories.[5] Of course, these various forms of images are not identical, but they intersect in complicated ways. Crucially, they all help shape our existences, informing what Simondon calls the 'psychic individuation', our continuous and never completed processes of becoming.

We may then distinguish between two different ways of relating to images. In the representationalist regime, reality and its depiction are two separate entities; images are examined on the basis of how close they come to reality (how accurate they are). For what we may call 'the experientialists', this belief in clear boundaries between the real and the fictional (and, sometimes, between memory and imagination) is unrealistic and unrealisable; emphasis is instead shifted towards the question of what images allow us to do, what they do to us, how they operate. (It is worth repeating that this second approach to images is distinct from the poststructuralist critique of images as simulacra (which precisely remains concerned with questions of an image's accuracy)). The relationship between representationalism and experientialism is not dichotomous. The experiential approach does not do away with the question of truth value. To go back to Marker: Hayes's negotiations with the Iwo Jima photograph were obviously informed by his knowledge of this icon being a fabrication. This meant that the image (in)formed his life in a particular manner. But the experiential approach to the scene does shift the emphasis from the question of an image's 'accuracy' to the question of how the image shapes us. The experiential approach highlights the multiple ways in which we live through images (which therefore cannot be thought of in terms of distinct entities). This becomes even clearer as we now turn to Marker's investigation of the relationship between images and historical events in the digital age. In the digital world, operationality and mobilisation dominate.

[5] The opening monologue in Marker's film, a scene to which we shall return shortly, similarly refers to 'the image' in a broad sense: 'visions, thoughts and memories' (in our previous paragraph we similarly moved from images to mental images, when writing that the woman on Mariana and the Parisian Batman did not want to become images of cowardice).

In a Sea of Binary Algae

As mentioned, history is a key theme in *Level Five*; first of all in the battle of Okinawa, and then the computer game that Laura's lover designed about this battle. A central question in Marker's film is what it means to write and film history in the digital age, within a medium like the computer game. The film explicitly addresses 'the place and significance of historical memory in a media-saturated culture' (Lupton 2003: 60), the 'technological mediation of human memory' (65). For Raymond Bellour, *Level Five* is the first film 'to create an intimate relationship between memory, the creation of image and shots, and the computer' (2013: 21).

Level Five was released in 1997, but the computer technologies it displays bring us back to the seminal period in the mid-1980s. Already in the prologue, Marker references William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), shows a short clip from an interview with the author, uses an early Apple Macintosh computer (1986), and proposes his own version of the world wide web (1989), here reworked as Optional World Link (the owl is one of Marker's favourite animals). This ten-year gap between the film's technological universe (mid- to late 1980s) and the time of its release (1997) quietly draws attention to the fact that any relation between media and history is itself historically situated. Let us look closer at the opening monologue.

The film begins with circular hand movements on mousepads. A first hand belongs to Chris (we assume), a second to Laura; we then go through a computer screen, into cyberspace, where we are presented with an electronic mask. Reading from her lover's notes, Laura's voice presents cyberspace as the dream of a crazy god. This god created human beings, so that we could create cyberspace. It is logical to see the film's opening shots as a cybernetic variation on the myth of creation. Unlike in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (1512), there is no close contact between the hands shown; instead, communication goes through mousepads, and is instigated by a Cybersystem-God that uses human beings for the realisation of the cybernetic system. Next, the voice-over invites us to look at this new visual landscape with the consciousness of a Neanderthal. A Neanderthal would not be able to order these many images that land in his mind 'like birds', generated by the spectacle of the light and movement. At this point Laura references Gibson, presenting cyberspace as ungrounded. More specifically, she speaks of a Sargasso sea of binary algae –

or data.[6] In this sea, we, the Neanderthals, have begun to graft our images, our thoughts, memories, visions, and hallucinations. While Laura reads this opening monologue, Marker offers retro-technical images full of double exposures, double framings, and digital manipulations of light effects.

To better understand this opening, we can compare it to the contemporaneous writings of the Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser: *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985) and *Does Writing Have a Future?* (1987). Flusser's essays register a fundamental shift in human culture: we have stepped *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, the digital age. Much has been written about the digital since the mid-1980s, so it is important to emphasize that Flusser gives to this word a slightly unusual meaning (which brings him close to Barad). He associates the digital with the scientific revolution that took place in physics at the beginning of the 20th century – in the fields of quantum mechanics and general relativity. Prioritising the first of these areas, Flusser notes that we now know that our reality is made up by quanta. The production of images, therefore, is an activity of gathering or assembling, not of representing. We are, as *Level Five* suggested, swimming in a Sargasso sea of digital algae, and our challenge is to compose with these quarks, quanta, etc. Although digital technologies have contributed to this situation, they did not create it – rather, it is the other way around: digital media were invented so that we could respond to the quantum revolution, so that we can compose with the particles.[7]

Flusser's analysis resonates strongly with Barad's critique of representationalist metaphysics. For instance, Flusser explains that whereas traditional, representationalist images such as the cave paintings were made by pulling back from the world, observing from a distance and then forming the images, technical images 'emerge when the world around us and even our consciousness disintegrates into particles that need to be calculated and composed, which is to say, condensed into images' (2011a: 170). In order to form images from the sea of quanta, we need technical apparatuses. Flusser therefore also describes technical images as 'mosaics' (or assemblages), '[t]hey are models that give form to a world and a consciousness that has disintegrated' (170). He calls these images

[6] As readers may know, the Sargasso sea is located between Canada and Greenland. It's specificity is that it has no shoreline, the sea is demarcated only by currents. This makes of it, a particularly unruly, vortex-like sea.

[7] Here Flusser is on firm scientific ground. Our digital technologies, computers, were made possible by quantum mechanics.

‘projective’ (rather than representative), and explains how they operate in a feedback loop with their receivers: ‘people pattern their behaviour according to the images, and images pick up on their behaviour to function better and better as models’ (170). The digital is associated with the moulding of data, it is projective, generative, modelling. These images are operative – they are outside the representationalist logic described by Barad.

It should now be clear how close Marker’s prologue comes to Flusser’s writings. But the overlap between Flusser and Marker goes deeper, for Flusser too is concerned with the question of what happens to history when we leave the representationalist regime, and move into a world of technical, projective images. Painting with very broad strokes, Flusser presents a media-history in three chapters: (1) an early oral and pictorial culture which lasted until about 2000 years BC (hence his reference to cave paintings), (2) an age of writing, which lasted until the digital age, and (3) the current arrival of technical images. He then asks *Does Writing have a Future?* Will writing continue to be our dominant technology after the advent of technical images? On the basis of his analysis of the early 20th century scientific revolutions, his answer is negative – and tinged with melancholy: writing does not have a future, and for those of us who enjoy writing (Flusser writes), this is a pity. This means we now also must wave goodbye to the age of history.

Flusser’s ‘End of History’ – an expression he uses – has no direct link to Hegel, Kojève, and the writings of Fukuyama; it has to do with the era of writing coming to an end.[8] Writing is a technology that orders information in a linear way, it lends itself to a chronological organisation of information. These linear sequences are felt in the process of reading. The technology of writing meant that the age of writing became the age of history. Prior to the age of writing, we were in the age of myth, and after the quantum revolution, we will again give up on history. Flusser notes that the historicist worldview – with its narratives of progress, its teleological inclinations, and the desire to shape futures in particular ways – has been responsible for genocides and catastrophes, but it also brought along numerous advances. With the advent of the digital, and the consequent move into the universe of technical images, this world is unlikely to survive. We now compose and

[8] Fukuyama’s initial article by this name was published a few years after Flusser’s essays, in 1989.

recompose the past, assembling it to produce alternative histories, to make new realities.[9] He writes that in the future we may for instance find pleasure in assembling our images in such a way that Plato, not Columbus, 'discovered' America. This hypothesis may seem fanciful (it speaks to what Mark Poster calls Flusser's 'polemical antics' (p. xii, in Flusser 2011a)), but it clearly anticipates current debates about the production of deep fakes. Furthermore, it brings to mind Chris Marker's explorations of the online virtual world *Second Life*. In *Second Life*, Marker had fun creating a virtual gallery filled with famous artworks remediating history. For instance, Marker placed the soldier from Robert Capa's famous Spanish civil war photograph 'The Death of Republican Soldier' (1936) in front of the firing squad from Francisco Goya's 'El Tres de Mayo de 1808 en Madrid'; he let the self-immolating monk photographed in Saigon 1963 take Venus's place in Boticelli's 'The Birth of Venus' (1484-86); and in *Nude Descending History*, he showed Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase #2* walking down the Potemkin Stairs in Odessa. So clearly, Marker and Flusser are operating in similar territories: both are responding to the digital (quantum) revolution, both are challenging the idea of images as representation, and both are concerned with the possibility of doing historical work in the contemporary mediascape. But, *Level Five* must not be associated with any 'end of history'; rather, Marker seeks to reconfigure history. In the remaining part of this article, we will therefore investigate how Marker's emphasis on the experiential and operational dimension of images (as opposed to a representational approach, in which images are essentially *after* effects) goes hand in hand with a desire to make historical films beyond the strictures of chronology.

The Montage of History

One of the ways in which Marker can be said to reconfigure history is through his take on chronological order and therefore on the idea of history as linear. In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze writes that the originality of Proust's reminiscence stems from the fact that 'it proceeds from a mood, from a state of soul, and from its associative chains to a creative

[9] Speculative as some of these reflections might seem, there is no doubt that a move from books to internet does produce a different conception of history. Anecdotal evidence from Nikolaj: my teenage children probably have at least as detailed a knowledge about historical events as I had at their age, but their sense of chronology is weaker.

viewpoint' (2000: 110). This creative viewpoint produces a loss of both objectivity and unity, but also introduces a different order and a different understanding of the past. Deleuze concludes that engaging with the past means 'to reach that point where the associative chain breaks' (2000: 111). What Deleuze says of Proust, could be said of Marker's montage of historical images (documents) in *Level Five*. In this instance the breaking of the associative chain seems to point to the end of the prominence of chronology, in view of a non-linear approach to historical knowledge. The very idea that historical knowledge comes to fruition through and as a game suggests how Marker conceives of dealing with the past as a task that one can commit to only by moving beyond chronological orders. In its very nature a game eschews linear development and implies temporal gaps, leaps, displacements, abrupt endings and resuscitations, revelations, fragmentary, and episodic structures. In *Level Five*, the game's stated goal is that of 'reconstructing' the Battle of Okinawa, engaging therefore in an act that relies on the ability to imagine. By exploring history through play, Marker seems to move 'from the idea of the past as objective fact, to the past as a fact of memory, as a fact caught in a movement' (Didi-Huberman 2000: 103). Furthermore, Laura frames war as having a wilful obstinacy, and a penchant for mockery. The idea of reconstructing a battle therefore seems to require a degree of imagination and the ability to play along with war's mocking obstinacy (which can defy strategies and steal an army in the same way as a monkey, in another of Laura's monologues, can steal one sock).

Marker takes this discourse a step further, by stressing that our conception of history as essentially linear is itself a form of violence. Marker opposes to this another technique, the montage. As mentioned, in *Level Five* Laura describes Chris as the 'ace of montage', a virtuoso of non-linear time, and it is through montage that Chris structures his interventions. Montage itself might at first appear as a form of violence, in that it operates according to cuts; it splits and trims, as the language of editing has it. Marker's montage practice can be further illuminated through the work of Georges Didi-Huberman. In a number of ambitious texts, the French art historian has insisted both on the necessity to dislodge our historiographical habits from their dependency on chronologies and on the opportunity to do this starting from a different reading of images. Developing lines of thought anticipated by Benjamin and Warburg, among others, Didi-Huberman moves beyond periodization, by sketching alternative temporal modes. Of particular interest here

is that this project goes hand-in-hand with a sustained interrogation of the image and its potential to disrupt our philosophies of time and unsettle our representational regimes. Because of this, 'montage' often returns in his writing as a technique that convincingly illustrates the interplay between images and time. For Didi-Huberman, 'montage is an explosion of chronology. Montage separates things that are normally connected and connects what is normally separate' (2018: 97). Montage can be brutal, a kind of 'cleaving' (2010: 132). However, another way of thinking of montage, the one Marker seems to embrace, is that it stiches together pieces of time that are artificially separated by the linear paradigm. In this way montage becomes the technique that allows historical work to begin, beyond – or in – the margins of linear history. Montage disarticulates linear history, but nonetheless brings out something intrinsic to the image and to history. Whilst montage triggers a series of crises, in so doing, it restores to the image its power to reject the past as made of homogeneous and ordered points. Montage allows the emergence of the past as a heterogeneous and irregular set of elements, whose order is essentially impure.

It is worth adding that Marker thinks of this non-chronological approach to history according to a number of figures. In *Level Five*, for instance, Laura refers to a process of rediscovery of what we already know: 'One second before birth, we know all about everything. Plato used to say the same. But, one second later, an angel gives us a pat and erases our memory, so man has the honour of rediscovery'. This process – which Sarah Cooper correctly identifies as a form of *anamnesis* (2008: 162) – produces a repetition that nevertheless gives rise to something new.

A second figure is Marker's notion of *madeleines* briefly evoked in *Level Five*, but more fully developed in the multimedia project *Immemory*. Here Marker speaks about *madeleines*, in relation both to Vertigo and Proust. In a fragment titled *This is a Madeleine*, he writes that 'memory if deranged can be used for something quite different than remembering: it can be used to reinvent life' (1997). Elsewhere in the same work Marker claims 'for the image the humility and powers of a madeleine' (1997).

Finally, a third figure is that of the *rainbow*. Colin MacCabe describes these as responding to Marker's intention 'to compose the history not as a linear account but as a series of "rainbows."' (17). An exemplary rainbow was Brecht and Lang's 1943 film known as *Hangmen Also Die!* As MacCabe writes, 'the film was loosely based on the 1942 assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the "Hangman of Prague." The soundtrack of the film

was by Hans Eisler and the "rainbow" was that this soundtrack ended up as the national anthem of Communist East Germany' (2017: 18).

We can then return to the question of the status of the image in Marker's work. Marker confronts each image following what Didi-Huberman calls an anachronistic method. As mentioned, it can be said that three images assume particular significance in *Level Five*: 'The Flag Raising at Iwo Jima', 'A Woman Throwing Herself off a Cliff in Saipan' and 'Gustave Burning'. Marker works on each of these images as an origin. However, this does not mean that the image constitutes firm ground. There is nothing fixed, or unequivocal, in the origin. Quite the opposite, each image is a movement, an agitation, necessitating that one 'understand[s] the words origin and history in a different sense' (Didi-Huberman 2000: 82). Didi-Huberman suggests that it is Walter Benjamin who invites us to think about 'the question of history in terms of origin, and the question of origin in terms of the new' (82). Marker seems to be doing just this when he approaches the image-origins in *Level Five* through montage. The understanding of history that Marker develops and cuts together is one that does not proceed according to a self-evident linearity, but rather through 'whirlwinds, fractures, cracks in that very knowledge, whose production is its task to produce' (83).

Marker emphasises two elements from his image-origins. The first is that the image is essentially anachronistic; it contains more temporal dimensions than an immobile past, linearly behind us. In this sense the image is excessive and complex. Every image of the past is speaking of and to the present, but is also essentially open to futures. The second is that the image is therefore already a form of montage of 'heterogeneous times' (16). Didi-Huberman, in posing the question of anachronism proper to every image, describes anachronism as a property of the image itself, a result of the 'differentials of time at work in each image' (17). The image allows different times to collide: it presents itself as the exposure of a given time (only that one time) and yet it opens this given time to all other temporalities. In this sense, the image is already in itself a form of montage. In being so the image is that which presents and makes visible, but also that which immediately disseminates this visible unity and breaks it apart. Marker faces the historical images of *Level Five* as whirlwinds of time, producing a series of 'commemorative resonances' (McNeill 2011: 80). For Marker, therefore, an image is something very complex, something that does not represent the past or provide us with exacting evidence of past events. It is

rather a presencing of the past through which the past reaches a new intensity and summons us to witness and participate in a process, a becoming.

Kinjo and the Vertigo of Time

This becoming pervades *Level Five*, animating its technique and marking it as a non-representational historical documentary. The film is not merely a re-witnessing of the Battle of Okinawa, but the enactment of a different way of doing history.

However, there is a figure in *Level Five* that apparently pulls in the opposite direction to the discourse we have composed. This figure is Kinjo. As a boy, Kinjo Shigeaki from Tokashiki Island, beat his mother, younger brother, and sister to death in order to save them from the Americans, or as Chris has it, 'because an invisible camera spies on him, and he cannot disobey'. The temporal complexity of *Level Five* is haunted by Kinjo and by the trajectory he forces into the film. 'I was obsessed by that boy', says Laura at some point. The quest for Kinjo is one of the main movements of the film; it is a quest that obsesses both Laura and Chris. The attempt to find him gives the film a goal and therefore shapes the narrative as a progression towards the satisfaction (or else) of that goal. Kinjo – the boy who killed his beloved ones – is expected to have all the answers: 'What could he tell us now, Kinjo? What could we say to him?' asks the film. We learn of a trip to the Kerama Islands to find Kinjo. Once found, Kinjo provides a testimony in which he admits that – convinced the Americans would have imposed terrible suffering on their captors – 'it seemed better to suppress our loved ones, than leave them to the enemy. For them, it would be a consolation to die by the hand of a loved one. Filled with this thought, we lamented and, lamenting, interrupted our mother's life'. Marker interrupts Kinjo's testimony by cutting to a landscape shot of the Kerama islands: the camera pans to reveal the archipelago, before returning to Kinjo's face as he finishes his story. Marker then tells us that Kinjo sought a heroic death in the war, before finding Christianity and becoming a priest. At this point, Marker's voiceover offers the key message to Kinjo's testimony: 'He offers his memory to help others decipher theirs […] He wants what nations and men are least capable of: that memory be faced, and forgiveness asked'. One discovers here that Marker attributes a pedagogical significance to Kinjo's memory and to history more generally. One can, after all, learn something from a chronologically ordered narrative, if one is willing to listen attentively.

Is there a friction, then, between the historical discourse that we have attributed to Marker and this goal-oriented construction that finds in Kinjo an almost a didactic conclusion?[10] It is true that Kinjo appears to control the overload, the excess of meaning produced by the montage and by the proliferation of possibilities. One can assume from this that Marker thinks history can have a figure around which things catalyse, around which the process crystallizes.

If there is a creative friction, there is however no contradiction. For Marker, one can have both history as montage and a focal point around which things crystallize. For Marker, history can still be done, albeit in a different way. This different way points towards a practice that pursues not a homogeneous and harmonious writing of history, but rather that tunes into and accompanies the whirlwinds, fractures, and vertigos of time. The result is therefore one that runs in several directions at once, rather than producing a knowledge that tames and reduces historical processes. For Marker, as for Didi-Huberman, the focal point, the object of a quest, once found becomes not the immutable origin, but the point of maximum agitation, the whirlwind that moves everything and is itself in constant motion. Kinjo is an origin, but this origin is not that at which history stops (our history work finds bedrock), the point from which everything else can be seen, but rather a movement that attracts and generates more movement. Kinjo orients the film, precisely because his memory and his acts are disorienting, a whirlpool into which the entire tragedy of Okinawa keeps being mobilized again and again. The boy is a figure only in its whirl-winding.

Montage and the catalyst – Kinjo in this case – do not respond to two different movements and do not embody two different logics of history. They are rather part of the same way of relating to history as a movement that defies linear progression. Marker insists in the film on showing how Kinjo inhabits three different temporalities. The past where he kills his mother, sister, and younger brother to prevent them from being taken by the Americans; the present in which he is a priest offering his testimony; and a future in which his testimony will play out his acts (and the history of the Battle of Okinawa) for the benefit of others, in the hope that they'll do otherwise. Kinjo himself is a vertigo of time (echoed by the reference to Kim Novak in Hitchcock's film). At first he seems to be a figure of

[10] Although the film presents Kinjo's 'memory mission' with sympathy, Chris also claims that 'memorising the past so as to not relive it is the illusion of the 20th century'.

representationalism, the object of a quest that finally reveals the identity we always assumed was there to come. However, whilst Kinjo is the focal point of the film, he is not so as a figure that brings the chronological fracturing of montage to a closure, but rather as the renewing of all the possibilities triggered by this approach to doing history. Kinjo crystallises the past, but his image also explodes it and scatters its traces so that they can be combined and revaluated. As Didi-Huberman writes, commenting on Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal*, 'if the totality is lacerated it is so that the space between things can appear, their common background, the inadvertent relation that in spite of everything, unites them, a relationship that might be one of distance, inversion, cruelty, non-sense' (2018: 97). Invention and creation become therefore essential methods for doing history.

The logic we have attributed to the relationship between montage and the image, the fact that montage brings out something already intrinsic to the image, which is in itself a form of montage, culminates here. Kinjo is the figure that collects and presents the non-linear approach to history, but also that which immediately disseminates this unity and scatters it again. Kinjo reorders and exhibits what Marker has previously broken up, but doesn't reorder these fragments back into their alleged originary unity. It reorders and shows their collisions and conflicts. Unlike Flusser, Marker thinks history can still be done. History is done at the intersection of a scattering that breaks up chronology (and its representational equivalents) and a gathering of the differences that this first gesture has made visible. We need Kinjo precisely to show us how far we have come from both a linear chronology and from representationalism.

Conclusion

We have described *Level Five* as 'a non-representational documentary'; to conclude, let us unpack this notion. First, we presented KarenBarad's criticism of representationalism. Drawing on the quantum mechanics of Niels Bohr, Barad opposes a metaphysics that separates representations from the events and beings they supposedly refer to. Instead, she highlights the entanglement of observer and observed in Bohr's 'phenomenon' – to such an extent that a more dialectical vocabulary (observer and observed, for instance) is misleading. We then saw that Marker's film similarly problematises representationalism, instead showing images as processes that perform operations modulating their participants

(whether these participants are characters in the image, like Hayes was, or people studying the images, such as Laura (and Marker's spectators)). As *Level Five*'s opening monologue suggests, this operational quality reaches new heights in the digital world. We therefore introduced Vilém Flusser's work both for its similarities with Marker's film: today images have become digital assemblages that we live by; these assemblages are no longer governed by linearity and chronology and this poses particular challenges for our engagement with history and memory; and for its differences: Flusser argues for an End of History, whereas Marker explores whether there can be other – nonlinear – ways of organising historical material and producing historical knowledge. This led us to consider two of the main structural principles of Marker's film: his belief in the ability of montage to produce historical knowledge, and the emergence of the figure of Kinjo in the weblike material of the film. We argued that these two characteristics functioned in a productive tension. On the one hand, montage allows Marker to escape the strictures of chronology (the violence of this particular order), on the other, Kinjo becomes a dynamic, mutating nexus around whom images circulate. This expression – 'Kinjo as nexus' – must then be understood in two senses. It points to the idea of Kinjo as a point of gravity. Marker's film arguably has several such points (Chris, Laura, Okinawa), but the film crystallises around Kinjo. Marker's interest therefore partly lies with the problem of how history and its images (in both the literal sense of this word, and the less literal sense of memories, imaginations, etc.) are gathered in individuals. But the idea of Kinjo as nexus must also be taken in a second sense, which precisely explodes the notion of the individual. Kinjo is a web – one that forms and reforms as we work our way through the images, getting caught up in these image-webs ourselves. Not only a gravitational point, that attracts images, Kinjo is also an experience of falling, a vertiginous experience that Marker connects to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Preminger's *Laura*, and Proust's *Recherche*. Marker therefore does not give up on history – 'Ce qui me passionne, c'est l'Histoire, et la politique ne m'intéresse seulement dans la mesure où elle est la coupe de l'Histoire dans le présent' ['My passion is History, and politics only interest me to the extent that it is the way in which History cuts into the present'] (Jacques 2018: 5) – but instead explores what can be achieved when the communication of history is liberated from chronology, and when images are no longer bound by representationalist duties. These

explorations continued in works such as the CD-Rom project *Immemory*[11], and the already mentioned second life gallery, which all testify to a belief in the ability of images to engage in history as long as we remember that images, history, and subjectivities are all vertiginous processes.

[11] In his beautiful *Remembering Chris Marker,* Colin MacCabe presents *Immemory* in these terms: '[Marker] programmed his own computers in the early eighties and then used the CD-ROM technology of the nineties to make one of his masterpieces, perhaps the first masterpiece of the digital age, *Immemory*. For Chris the computer had freed him from the linearity of film that he had always felt as a constraint – now, in an audio-visual *Finnegans Wake,* you could enter the work at any point and take your own path through it' (15-16). And he later describes *Immemory* as 'The history of the world and the self in the form of a video game' (32).

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