In a sea of binary algae: Marker's *Level Five* as non-representational documentary

NIKOLAJ LÜBECKER AND DANIELE RUGO

Setting aside the short prologue, to which we return later, Chris Marker's *Level Five* (1997) begins with the character Chris (voiced by Marker) telling us that a young writer and friend named Laura (Catherine Belkhodja) has recently made contact with him. Her lover, who was also Chris's friend, has died, and Laura is hoping that Chris can help her to make sense of the project he left behind. This project is a computer game about the Battle of Okinawa in June 1945. Laura has recorded a series of video-letters to her deceased lover in which she explores the game, the battle more generally, and her own state of mind; she passes this material on to Chris. He is, as she says, 'the ace of montage', so if anyone can make sense of the material it must be him. As Nora Alter writes, *Level Five* thereby becomes another epistolary film, like Marker's earlier *Letter from Siberia* (1957) and *Sans Soleil* (1983).[1] 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, a key incident in the final months of World War II. Through testimonies and voice-over commentary, the film invites us to make the following reconstruction of

1   Nora Alter, *Chris Marker* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 111.

Fig. 1. A face, possibly that of a Korean woman, appears as Laura browses the Level Five game. All images from *Level Five* (Chris Marker, 1997).

events. The Japanese military hierarchy knew the Americans were planning to attack the island, and they promised to help the Okinawan general Mitsuru Ushijima resist the US invasion. Behind the scenes, however, they decided to sacrifice Okinawa in a cynical move that the director Nagisa Oshima, interviewed in the film, likens to a 'suteishi'. This term refers to a tactic in the game Go, where you give away a small pawn (more accurately a 'stone') to win a larger battle. When the Americans invaded, the islanders quickly realized 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 seppuku suicides. The Japanese military hoped the high-prize sacrifice of the island would deter the Americans from attacking the Japanese mainland. The plan backfired. Confronted with thousands of Okinawans killing themselves, and helping each other to die, the Americans concluded that the Japanese could no longer be reached through negotiation. Less than two months later they bombed Hiroshima and 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. In this essay we examine how these events are communicated in Marker's film. We suggest that *Level Five* can be understood as a 'non-representational historical documentary'. To explain this term – before suggesting which role a move away from representation might play in the wider field of documentary film – we briefly leave film studies and turn instead to the writings of Karen Barad.

One of the central themes in Barad's book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* is the critique of 'representationalism', a mode of thought that

continues to dominate intellectual debates both in and outside academia. Barad defines representationalism as 'the idea that representations and the objects (subjects, events, or states of affairs) they purport to represent are independent of one another'.[2] 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.[3]

As Barad points out, throughout the 20th century, representationalism has been under pressure from different angles. Feminists, poststructuralists and queer theorists in the humanities have all criticized representationalism; Barad highlights the writings of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Foucault's work on discourse and power shows how different 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 of gender performativity, where identity is not the expression of some inner truth (what Barad called 'inherent attributes') 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, poststructuralist and queer challenges to representationalism need to be pushed even further, in order that they become less anthropocentric and move beyond ideas of distinct subjects and objects, individuals and discursive structures. Furthermore, Barad points out that thinkers like Foucault and Butler have hesitated when coming up against issues of biology and the dynamism of matter.[4]

A more radical challenge to representationalism comes from quantum mechanics, where Barad focuses on the work of the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Although Bohr considered himself a humanist, his philosophy-physics undermines humanism and its representationalist schemata. A key point in his work was the insight that the 'apparatus' – which includes the instruments, the experimental design and the designer of the experiment (the physicist) – co-shapes the studied reality. There is no object out there, waiting to be discovered by a subject-scientist who is distinct from this object. Instead we have what Bohr referred to as the 'observer problem': the interrogated object is (to borrow Isabelle Stengers's verb) 'actualized' in the act of observation.[5] Whether carried

6   Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 115.

7   Key to this (*performative*) worldview is the famous two-slit experiment, which demonstrated that we can examine light in such a way that it exhibits wavelike behaviour, and we can also examine it so that it manifests particle behaviour.

8   See Niels Bohr, *Filosofiske Skrifter, Bind III* (Århus: Philosophia, 2013), p.15; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 143.

9   Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

10 Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary. A Critical Introduction*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

11 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 48.

12 Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p. 5.

13 Pierre Sorlin, 'How to look at an "historical" film', in Marcia Landy (ed.), *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 37.

out by an instrument or a human being, this act of observation produces a 'cut',[6] which Bohr calls the 'phenomenon'.[7]

Although we cannot pursue this point in detail here, it is important to clarify that Bohr did not argue that reality is subjectively constituted. He still operates with a notion of objectivity, just not the kind of objectivity that depends on the illusion of a scientist magically stepping outside of reality. Instead he rethinks objectivity by insisting on statistical likelihood and communicability.[8] 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* – one that allows us to move away from a representationalism that 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 anthropocentrism 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 that 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 studies, and in particular what does it mean for the documentary films concerned with the rendering of historical events?

Documentary films are obviously diverse, and they often testify to an extremely nuanced understanding of the ambiguities of representation. In recent decades, 'performativity' and 're-enactment' have become increasingly central terms in documentary film studies, with, for instance, Bill Nichols adding a 'performative mode' to his taxonomy of documentary practices.[9] Partly responding to Nichols, Stella Bruzzi's influential work later gave a more central role to performativity, building from Butler to insist that 'documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity'.[10] In these debates, however, 'performativity' is still not understood in the very strong sense that Barad gives the term. With Barad's reading of Bohr we might say that *reality* is performative; on the other hand, documentary film scholars have tended to see performativity as a mode of representing an otherwise stable reality. Offering an instance of what Barad calls 'representationalist thinking',[11] Bruzzi can therefore also write that 'sometimes it becomes necessary to remind ourselves that reality does exist and that it can be represented without such a representation either invalidating or having to be synonymous with the reality that preceded it'.[12] It is precisely this idea of a reality that *precedes representation* that is challenged by Barad's writings.

Debates about how documentaries *represent* reality therefore remain key to the field, and such debates seem only to gain in importance if we consider the genre of historical documentaries. Pierre Sorlin, for instance, conceptualizes these as films documenting real life events that took place in 'a past considered as historical'.[13] 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'[14] – seems to lie at the very foundation of 'historical documentaries', which rely not only on strong 'here'/'there' distinctions but also on 'now'/'then' ones.

What might it mean to make historical documentary films outside of a 'representationalist thinking'? This is a vast question, and one that this essay can only begin to answer.[15] We have chosen to focus on *Level Five* because it offers an example of how documentary film interrogates representation, particularly in relation to the form's ability to communicate historical events. We argue first that Marker moves close to Barad's non-representationalist ideas; and furthermore, through a contrastive reading with the Brazilian Czech-born media theorist Vilém Flusser and a comparison with the writings of the French art critic Georges Didi-Huberman, that this break with representationalist thinking must be seen not as a renunciation of history but as an attempt to revitalize historical filmmaking. To a large extent this revitalization depends on Marker's chief gesture, montage, which should be understood not merely as one technique among others but as 'epistemological disturbance'.[16] 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.

In her analysis of *Level Five*, Maureen Turim singles out four interrelated points of gravity in Marker's vertiginous investigation of images.[17] 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'.[18] As is well known, the famous Iwo Jima photos were staged. The original flag-raising was photographed but the results were unimpressive, so the army gathered together six carefully selected soldiers and reshot the scene. Marker's film explains this back-story, and shows how the iconic image became a key player in US 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, and found it difficult to live with the lie and to pose as a hero. On the other hand he did not want to betray the army, so 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 film relates that the Japanese citizens had been told to fight with pride, to be ready to sacrifice their lives and thereby demonstrate their mental strength. In grainy black-and-white images we see a woman climbing a cliff, and we understand the cameraperson tracking her to be American. Marker freezes the image as the woman turns around and appears to fix her gaze on the camera – then she jumps into the abyss. Laura's voice-over speculates that perhaps the woman jumped *because* of the camera,

14 Ibid., p. 28.

15 For a complementary take on what Barad's philosophy-physics might mean for the study of documentary images, see Jim Aulich and Mary Ikoniadou, 'Ghost stories for grown-ups: pictorial matters in times of war and conflict', *Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2020).

16 Chari Larsson, *Didi-Huberman and the Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 89.

17 Maureen Turim, 'Virtual discourses of history: collage, narrative or documents in Chris Marker's *Level 5*', *Sites: The Journal of Twentieth Century Contemporary French Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2000), pp. 367–83.

18 The fourth image is 'The white flag surrender of the Okinawan girl', which shows a young girl, seemingly leading the surrender of the Okinawans. Marker's analysis of this photo quickly takes him to the analysis of 'A woman throwing herself off a cliff in Saipan'.

19 André Bazin examines this scene in his analysis of *Paris 1900*, 'A la recherche du temps perdu: Paris 1900', *Écran Français*, no. 118 (1947), p. 6.

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*,[19] in which a man, dressed in what Laura anachronistically refers to as a 'Batman-like parachute', prepares to fulfil his promise to fly away from the Eiffel Tower. Here, too, the man seems to look into the camera, and Laura comments 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, then stumbles again. Laura notes how this scene has travelled through various wars and conflicts. The man was filmed on Borneo by Australian soldiers, but the footage has since been used to manipulate popular opinion about battles in the Philippines, on Okinawa, and 20 years later in Vietnam. This scene has been used not only 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? Yet 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.

Some of Chris and Laura's observations about the status of documentary images seem almost commonplace today: it is now widely accepted, for instance, 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 only need think of *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*,[20] in which Jean Baudrillard examined how the photograph of an oil-soaked seabird, 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 the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, before the war began.

20 Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

The three scenes described above could therefore be analysed using concepts such as the 'simulacrum' and the 'society of spectacle', but such an analysis would continue to rely on representationalism in so far as the image is still discussed in terms of faithfulness, manipulation and falsification. However, Marker's treatment of these image-clusters also allows for a different reading. 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 evidenced by its use in US propaganda, the image functions as what the historian Jacques Juillard has termed 'une image mobilisatrice' (a mobilizing image);[21] it can be considered an example of what Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk have more recently

21 Cited in Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, Preface by Jacques Juillard (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), p. vii.

22 Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk (eds), *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017). Eder and Klonk explain that these operations are 'not only operations *on* images, *with* images and *through* images, but also operations *by* images [...], it is theoretically productive to think of images as agents, as having a life of their own' (p. 13).

23 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934) (New York, NY: Perigree Books, 2009), p. 2.

24 Ibid., p. 257.

25 See, for example, Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1988); Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'Eye and mind', in Galen Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 121–60; Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination and Invention* (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Press, 2023); Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London: Continuum, 2003). See also many contemporary thinkers, particularly Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Emanuele Coccia, *Sensible Life: A Micro-Ontology of the Image* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016).

26 The opening monologue in Marker's film similarly refers to 'images' in the extended sense of 'thoughts, memories, visions'.

called an 'image operation'.[22] This is true both at the political and at the more individual levels. When Laura tells the tragic story of Ira Hayes, she is arguably less concerned with critiquing representation than with the problem of how images impact people's 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 from *Paris 1900*: precisely because the Japanese woman on Mariana did not want to become an image of Japanese weakness, because the Parisian Batman did not want to become the image of cowardice, they jumped. These incidents point to the mobilizing and operational dimension of images: how they can shape lives, and end them.

A number of critics have been associated with this second approach to the image. One of these is John Dewey. In *Art as Experience* he takes issue with the idea of art as an activity that is clearly distinct from everyday life. He thereby undercuts the 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'.[23] He considers art and images as one experience among 'different aspects and phases of a continuous, though varied, interaction of self and an environment'.[24] 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 arguments have been made by a number of different theorists who, in different ways, all critique representationalism and emphasize that the image is a mode of existence that is intimately tied up with other modes.[25] Unsurprisingly, for many of these thinkers the word 'image' has a softer contour than most critics in the representationalist framework would allow: images can be artistic or not, and they may overlap with imaginations or memories.[26] Of course these various forms of images are not identical, but they intersect in complicated ways. Crucially, they all help to shape our existences, informing what Gilbert 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 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 unrealizable; emphasis is instead shifted towards the question of what images allow us to do and what they do to us. 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 that this icon was 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 indexicality to that of how images shape events. 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 turn to Marker's investigation of images and historical events in the digital world, in which operationality and mobilization dominate.

A central question in Marker's film is of what happens to 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',[27] the 'technological mediation of human memory'.[28] 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'.[29] According to Johoon Kim, the documentary – together with *Sans Soleil* and *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* – develops Marker's dialectical approach to the archive,[30] but the deliberate reliance on digital media deepens this relation substantially.

Level Five was released in 1997, but the computer technologies it displays bring us back to the seminal period in the mid 1980s. Lupton acknowledges this and describes some of the film's solution as 'willfully archaic', with echoes of 'a late Seventies music video reinforced by a brashly pounding soundtrack'.[31] In the course of the prologue alone, 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 being 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.

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 Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (1512), though, *Level Five* offers no close contact between the hands shown; instead communication goes through mousepads, instigated by a Cybersystem-God that uses human beings for the realization 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

27 Catherine Lupton, 'Terminal replay: Resnais revisited in Chris Marker's *Level Five*', *Screen*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2003), p. 60.

28 Ibid., p. 65.

29 Raymond Bellour, '"Cinema, alone"/multiple "cinemas"', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 5 (2013), p. 21.

30 Johoon Kim, 'The archive with a virtual museum: the (im)possibility of the digital archive in Chris Marker's *Ouvroir*', *Memory Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2020), p. 93.

31 Catherine Lupton, 'Shock of the old: how the "gentleman amateur" of the digital era uses not-so-new media to map the workings of human memory', *Film Comment*, May/June 2003, p. 42.

32 The Sargasso Sea, located in the Atlantic Ocean, is unique in that it has no shoreline but is demarcated only by currents.

33 Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* and *Does Writing Have a Future?*, both Intro. Mark Poster, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2011).

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

35 Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, p. 170.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

Sea full of binary algae' – or data.[32] 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 manipulation of light effects.

To better understand this opening, we can compare it to the writings of the media theorist Vilém Flusser: 1985's *Into the Universe of Technical Images* and *Does Writing Have a Future?* from 1987.[33] 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 (bringing 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 general relativity and quantum mechanics. Prioritizing the second of these areas, Flusser notes that we now know that our reality is made up of quanta. The production of images is an activity of gathering or assembling, not of representing. We are, as *Level Five* suggests, swimming in a Sargasso Sea full of binary algae, and our challenge is to compose with these quarks, quanta, and so on. Although digital technologies have contributed to this situation they did not create it. It is in fact 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.[34]

Flusser's analysis resonates strongly with Barad's critique of representationalist thinking. He explains, for instance, that whereas traditional, representationalist images such as 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'.[35] In order to form images from the sea of quanta, we need technical apparatuses. Flusser therefore also describes technical images as 'mosaics': 'They are models that give form to a world and a consciousness that has disintegrated'.[36] He calls these images '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'.[37] The digital is associated with the moulding of data, it is projective, generative, modelling. These images are operative – they are outside the representationalist logic criticized 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: first, an early oral and

pictorial culture that lasted until about 2000 years BC (hence his reference to cave paintings); second, an age of writing that lasted until the digital age; third, the current arrival of technical images. This leads him to his questions: 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, like him, enjoy writing, this is a pity. It means we must also now wave goodbye to the age of history.

Flusser's 'End of History'[38] has no direct link to the writings of G. W. F. Hegel, Alexandre Kojève or Francis Fukuyama; it is concerned with the era of writing coming to an end.[39] Writing is a technology that orders information in a linear way; it lends itself to a chronological organization 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 its 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 recompose the past, assembling it to produce alternative histories, to make new realities. He speculates 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'),[40] but it brings to mind Marker's explorations of the online virtual world, *Second Life*, in which he created a virtual gallery filled with famous artworks remediating history.[41] Marker placed the soldier from Robert Capa's 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 Botticelli'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, as they appear in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). 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 unlike Flusser, *Level Five* must not be associated with any 'end of history'. In the remainder of this essay, we therefore investigate how Marker's emphasis on the experiential dimension of images (as opposed to a representational approach, in which images are essentially *after*

38 Ibid., p. 138.

39 Fukuyama's initial article was published a few years after Flusser's essays. See Francis Fukuyama, 'The end of history?', *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989), pp. 3–18.

40 Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, p. xii.

41 See Marker's CD-ROM, *Immemory* (1997).

effects) goes hand in hand with a desire to make historical films outside the strictures of chronology by cutting, trimming, splicing and splitting.

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*, Gilles Deleuze writes that the originality of Marcel 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 viewpoint'.[42] 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'.[43] What Deleuze writes of Proust could equally 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 that Marker conceives of dealing with the past as a task one can commit to only by moving beyond chronological orders. In its 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'.[44] 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.

Marker takes this discourse a step further, by stressing that our conception of history as essentially linear is itself a form of violence. He opposes this with 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. Marker's montage practice can be further illuminated through the work of 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 Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg, among others, Didi-Huberman moves beyond periodization by sketching alternative temporal modes. Of particular interest here is that this project is accompanied by a sustained interrogation of the image and its potential to disrupt our

42 Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 110.

43 Ibid., p. 111.

44 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000), p. 103.
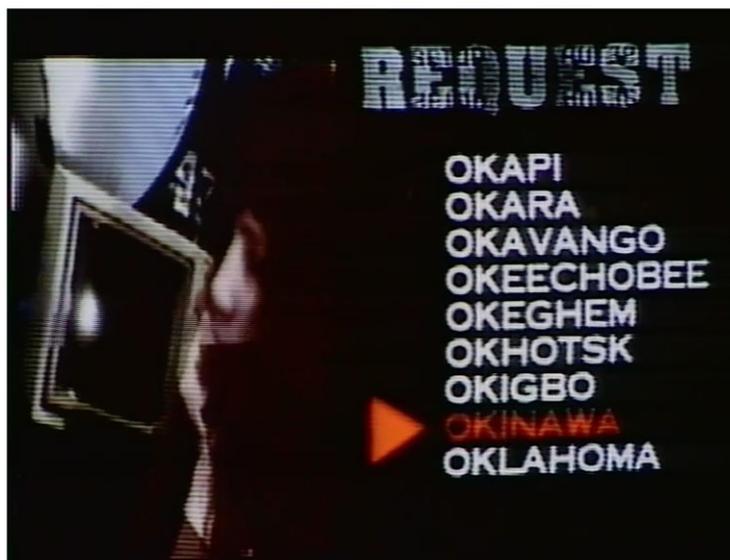
Fig. 2. The interface of the Level
Five game.

45 Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 97.

46 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Œil de l'Histoire, Tome 2: Remontages du temps subi* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2010), p. 132.

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.'[45] Montage can be brutal, a kind of 'cleaving',[46] but another
way of considering montage, the one Marker seems to embrace, is that it
stitches 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 being 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.

Marker conceptualizes 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*[47] – produces a repetition that
nevertheless gives rise to something new.

47 Sarah Cooper, *Chris Marker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 162.

A second figure is Marker's notion of *madeleines*, briefly evoked in
Level Five but more fully developed in the 1997 multimedia project
Immemory. Here Marker speaks about *madeleines*, in relation to both

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'. Elsewhere in the same work, Marker claims 'for the image the humility and powers of a madeleine'. Finally, a third figure is that of the *rainbow*: Colin MacCabe describes Marker's intention 'to compose the history not as a linear account but as a series of "rainbows"'.[48] An exemplary rainbow was Bertolt Brecht and Fritz 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.[49]

We now return to the question of the status of the image in Marker's work. Marker confronts each image by 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, but 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'.[50] Didi-Huberman suggests that it is 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'.[51] Marker seems to be doing just this when he approaches the image-origins in *Level Five* through montage. Marker develops and cuts together a version of history that proceeds through 'whirlwinds, fractures, cracks in that very knowledge, whose production is its task to produce',[52] and consequently opposes any version of history that unfolds according to a self-evident linearity.

Marker emphasizes 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'.[53] 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'.[54] 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. Thus 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

48 Colin MacCabe, *Studio: Remembering Chris Marker* (New York, NY: OR Books, 2017), p. 17.

49 Ibid., p.18.

50 Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, p. 82.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p. 83.

53 Ibid., p. 16.

54 Ibid., p. 17.

55 Isabelle McNeill, *Memory and the Moving Image. French Film in the Digital Era* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 80.

time, producing a series of 'commemorative resonances'.[55] For Marker 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.

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. 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 loved ones – is expected to have all the answers: 'What could he tell us now, Kinjo?', asks the film. We learn of a trip to the Kerama Islands to find Kinjo. Once found, Kinjo provides a testimony in which, convinced the Americans would have imposed terrible suffering on their captors, he admits that

> 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 between the historical discourse that we have attributed to Marker and this goal-oriented construction that finds in Kinjo an almost didactic conclusion?[56] Kinjo appears to embody the overload, the excess of meaning produced by the montage and by the proliferation of possibilities (a fact reflected in the reference to Kim Novak in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*). One can assume from this that

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

Fig. 3. The adult Kinjo, during his interview.
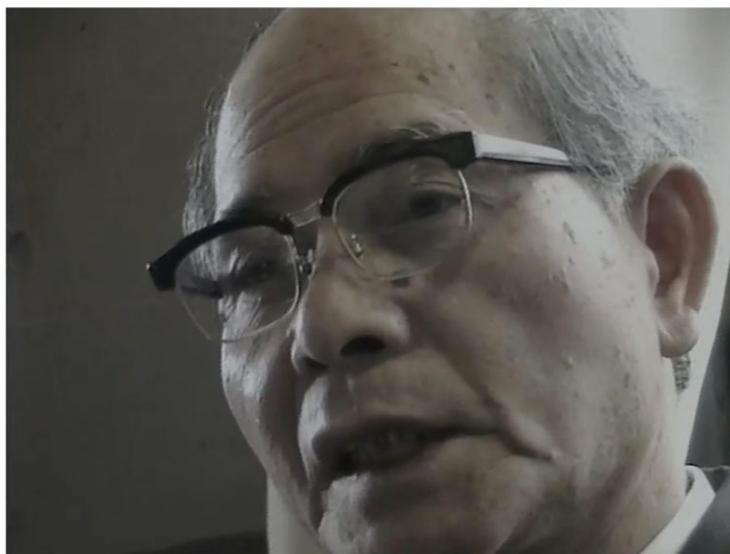
Marker thinks history can have a figure around which its movements crystallize.

If there is a creative friction, there is, however, no contradiction. For Marker, one can have history both as montage and as 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 one that tunes into and accompanies the whirlwinds, fractures and vertigos of time. The result, therefore, 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 is mobilized again and again. The only figure appropriate to the boy is precisely that of the whirlpool.

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 relate to history in the same way 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 will do otherwise. Kinjo himself is a vertigo of time: at first he seems to be a figure of representationalism, the object of a quest that finally reveals the identity we always assumed was there. Whilst Kinjo is the focal point of the film, however, he is not a figure that brings the chronological fracturing of montage to closure, but one that renews all the possibilities triggered by this approach. Kinjo crystallizes the past, but his image also explodes it and scatters its traces so that they can be combined and re-evaluated. As Didi-Huberman writes, commenting on Bertolt 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'.[57] Invention and creation become essential methods for doing history.

57 Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History*, p. 97.

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 reorders and exhibits what Marker has previously broken up, but his reordering does not return these fragments back to their alleged originary unity, instead it 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.

We began this essay with Barad's critique of representationalism. Drawing on the quantum mechanics of Bohr, Barad opposes a metaphysics that separates representations from the events and beings they supposedly refer to. We showed how Marker's film similarly problematizes representationalism, instead considering images as processes that perform operations modulating their participants – whether these participants are characters in the image, like Hayes, 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 Flusser's writings both for their similarities with Marker's film – images today have become digital mosaics that we live by – and for their differences – Flusser argues for an End of History, whereas Marker explores whether there can be other, nonlinear, ways of organizing historical material and producing historical knowledge. This led us to consider the productive tension between 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 web-like material of the film. 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 interest therefore lies partly 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, and so on) are gathered in individuals.[58] 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, becoming 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*, Otto Preminger's *Laura*, and Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* . Marker therefore does not give up on history – 'My passion is History, and politics only interest me to the extent that it is the way in which History cuts the present'[59] – 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*[60] and the *Second Life* gallery, which 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.

Following this analysis, it is possible to argue more broadly for the significance of a non-representational approach to documentary filmmaking and documentary film scholarship. As discussed, by taking film only as representation we reproduce the idea that there is a gulf between the actual stuff of the world and its representations. This thought influences a specific understanding of film that places it in a position of verisimilitude at best, or outright seduction and falsification at worst. This approach is also one that tends to inform the documentary image with duties of evidence and objectivity, what Nichols calls 'the credibility of the representation'.[61] In response to this, a non-representational approach to documentary film emphasizes the significance of form beyond its expository dimension, without this having to embrace a poststructuralist critique of the truthfulness of the image. Although images can be more or less deliberately manipulative, a non-representational approach begins from the idea that *all images are real*, they do work on our subjectivities, partake in individual and collective processes of individuation. A non-representational approach cannot, of course, simply be directed at images. This rethinking of images is inseparable from a shift in the way in which we think of reality. For Barad, reality is not given but 'performative': she advocates for a 'performative metaphysics' (and builds from Bohr because his 'framework offers a proto-performative account of the production of bodies').[62] To state that reality is performative here does not amount to any form of subjectivism – as Brian Massumi writes, 'saying that the

[58] These 'individuals' do not have to be human beings; the island of Okinawa is another such point of gravity.

[59] 'La politique ne m'intéresse seulement dans la mesure où elle est la coupe de l'Histoire dans le présent'. Vincent Jacques, *Chris Marker, Les Médias et le XXe siècle : Le Revers de l'histoire contemporaine* (Grâne: Éditions Créaphis, 2018), p. 5.

[60] MacCabe presents *Immemory* as 'The history of the world and the self in the form of a video game', in *Studio*, p. 32. He argues that *Immemory* demonstrates how 'the computer had freed him [Chris] from the linearity of film that he had always felt as a constraint' (pp. 15–16).

[61] Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 114.

[62] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 129.

63 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual, Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 38.

quantum level is transformed by our perception is not the same as saying that it is only *in* our perception'[63] – on the contrary, it implies that one pays attention to the ways in which various entities shape each other. There is no one substance that can be singled out as original. There are only performative relations and ongoing 'intra-actions' (as Barad puts it to avoid the idea of intervening from an outside): intra-actions without reference to any original.

Rather than considering images as (imperfect and subjective) representations of real events, and rather than understanding performativity as a mode of representation, a non-representational approach considers the ways in which images work and the kind of work they do, and therefore requires a lexical shift. Instead of talking about documentary as 'representing' (history, in the case of Marker), one could say that it 'presents', 'figures', 'performs'. As Barad writes, 'the move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/ doings/ action'.[64] A corpus of films already exists that in diverse and at times irreconcilable ways articulates non-representational filmmaking practices. Beyond Marker, one could mention for instance the work of Rithy Panh and Raed Andoni, the landscape documentaries of Éric Baudelaire, Jonathan Perel and Ognjen Glavonić, the films of Kazuo Hara, Chantal Akerman and Jocelyne Saab. These directors all move away from a distinction between real and representation – which will always lead to images being at best the imperfect testimony of an event that preceded them – and instead consider how images themselves are events, part of the reality they present, and are therefore capable of disclosing truths.

64 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 135.