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## FILMS BEGET DIGITAL MEDIA

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Two major documentary strands, the compilation and the autobiographical, have been taking hold in digital environments. The affinities are strong enough to suggest that these two forms anticipate narrative capacities of new media formats in significant ways. We will look at Chris Marker's CD-ROM *Immemory* and the installation *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River* created by Péter Forgács and The Labyrinth Project, in order to explore the linkages from both sides of the seeming divide between old and new forms, the tendencies already present which have flowered in the two works, and what they suggest about further possibilities for digital media.

Those media artists who incorporate lost, amateur, personal, and/or decaying materials into their work are clearly implying an alternative—disappearance and forgetting. Such artists are already in league with the archives, libraries, and museums which are also often the sites for the presentation of their work. They are natural allies—institutions that collect and present pieces of the past become the source and also the exhibition space for artists who are essentially doing the same thing. While they may not always share common viewpoints on what constitutes suitable source material (i.e., what is worth preserving), the desire to reclaim histories, whether personal or national, and to recontextualize those materials within new frameworks is a strong common bond.

Marker and Forgács have both been best known as filmmakers, but they have also ventured into digital media and works created especially for museum exhibition. As they create in these realms, not only do they incorporate film extensively, they have been exploring what it means to take moving images and sounds, memories and historical

records, from one period to another, from one place to another, from one medium to another. Both, I would say, have been hugely optimistic about the role their digital media works can play in keeping film alive, and through film, the personal histories they seek to tell. They also have a strong interest in extending narrative possibilities through the flexibility digital media can provide, but what's important in both cases is that those same tendencies were already evident in their work, so this is a natural expression rather than a gimmicky updating. Marker has reveled in the time shift, the fragment, and the unexpected juxtaposition. This is likely why he has moved so willingly into digital forms. Forgács was already making beautiful, tragic collages out of found home movies (Nichols, "The Memory of Loss"). Allowing now for viewers of his work to select the order in which they view segments serves his goal of establishing affinities across unlikely barriers—to find unexpected correspondences that a more linear presentation might never allow.

At the heart of their work is a tension which in digital environments demands fresh attention—what does it mean to preserve and remember? With film it is the tragedy of physical decay, of the medium itself decomposing and disappearing, which seems the overriding concern. While the digital brings a promise of permanence, it also surely contains its own significant risks of loss and neglect. The vagaries of technology, the lack of stable (and long-lasting) standards and platforms, and the ephemeral nature of applications all contribute to digital media's precarious role as a preservation medium. Marker would seem to enjoy the notion that CD-ROMs may someday, in future societies, have to be deciphered and reclaimed. Such reclaiming, for Marker, requires active engagement anyway, even under the best of digital circumstances, so the additional barriers which time will create are already within his world view. For Forgács, that amateur home movies can recover a story and be projected onto large multiple screens to contemporary audiences is a celebration in itself, especially so in a public museum context.

While we know that digital media have converted the analog and the chemical into discrete bits of numerical information, the jury is still out on the consequences of this shift as it relates to display and presentation. Computer workstations incorporated into a museum exhibition (as in the two side displays of *The Danube Exodus*, for instance) seems a compromise solution—one doesn't have to sit at a computer in a museum. But simply creating websites doesn't seem the answer either—these lack the urgency of public performance as well as the sense of shared experience.

In Marker's case, because of his essayist tendencies and his personal tone, the CD-ROM may suit him more, and can suggest that the multimedia art object is best appreciated in an interactive and leisurely way unaided by a public display. (Even his films, such as *Le Joli Mai* and *Sans Soleil*, look better on video than in theaters for these same reasons.) In fact, the emerging form of the hybrid DVD, which can incorporate both good-quality video in large quantities as well as programmable interfaces, will suit him even more. The limited capacity of CD-ROMs to fully utilize video is a temporary stage we're

quickly leaving behind, and Marker will surely be among the first to explore the differences in significant ways.

Another uneasy area of exploration in digital media has been the nature of display itself, so clearly a given in film but now up for grabs again. One issue is screen format and size, where the Labyrinth Group with Forgács have convincingly demonstrated that control over multiscreen displays is indeed a format worth exploring. It has been too easily assumed that digital media means the monitor-sized computer display, whereas one happy consequence of the digital might be that screen images can be reconstituted in a variety of formats. When one sees what were once amateur home movies displayed across wide screens from a DVD in *The Danube Exodus*, the reconfigurability which is now possible becomes very much evident. The majesty provided to these films by large-screen display more than justifies the museum setting.

It may just be another temporary stage we're passing through that digital media seem to lack established presentation standards, especially in public spaces. Much interesting experimentation of the past fifteen years has centered around this question (even longer if we include video wall displays), perhaps not always with the strength of content that Marker and Forgács bring to the table. Neither is playing with digital toys for their own sake, and the formats under discussion here may not be generalizable. But that very flexibility may itself be one of the attractions of digital media. What for Mike Figgis in *Timecode* may lead him to a screen divided into quadrants would not suit Forgács and his panoramic wide screens. What does matter, though, are these shifting alternatives, which allow for rethinking how the screen is divided, what can be multiplied across several or stretched and enlarged. What can look like a drawback (this lack of standards) may be a pronounced characteristic and distinct advantage.

What we can see here perhaps are some benefits of both the small and the large. The home computer screen offers the focus and the one-to-one connection which the individual viewer/user can control. The museum space and large multisectioned screens can, of course, magnify the personal and take advantage of the possibilities which showing before a live audience can bring. *Immemory* and *The Danube Exodus*, among their many reasons to be worthy of our attention, offer enlightening alternatives for how digital media can be presented and experienced.

## IMMEMORY

Both of these projects have filmmakers engaging in a hands-on way with new media, and they incorporate a good deal of their preexisting work. Marker especially has made *Immemory* a repository of past material. *Immemory* isn't an adaptation or translation. It's a larger container which foregrounds the role of appropriation and incorporation. Marker is taking his artistic life (already inseparable from his history because of his relentless recording of his personal views and travels) and reformulating it. As Raymond Bellour most aptly states, "Perhaps he started *Immemory* at the moment he chose to write and to

film,” in other words, at the beginning of his creative life (Roth and Bellour, 10). So *Immemory* seems a natural consequence of his mode of expression and suggests, along Bellour’s line, that he was working in this manner from the start.

And what manner is this? It is tempting to see the mode of *La Jetée* as most suggestive of Marker’s narrative impulses—time returning to itself as a story unfolds on multiple temporal levels, sustained through a series of images and a narration which reveal gaps as much as continuities. The opportunities to branch, to juxtapose, to skip, allow us to compose a Marker world—*Sans Soleil* and so much of his work was already constructed this way—its digressions and turns never a departure from the journey. The multilinearity of Marker’s previous work makes *Immemory* a natural extension, not a shift.

Along the lines of Lev Manovich’s discussion of Dziga Vertov (*Language* xiv–xxxvi), we can readily recognize Marker as a database-oriented media artist (a subject also discussed well by Marsha Kinder in an essay about Luis Buñuel; Kinder, “Hot Spots” 2–15). His collection of material is especially varied, composed of multiple media. Even beyond his own photographs and films, he is an essayist-diarist-tourist-collector, and he gathers together his materials to construct his past, his critical sensibility, his dreams, his imagined occurrences. *Immemory* is brilliantly titled—it could as well be called “Memory” were Marker not simultaneously stressing the impossibility of his enterprise. By its very nature, *Immemory* must be labeled such.

For all the evanescence of both photography and film, the feeling of their impermanence as a physical medium, they come to look as solid as the book or the painting in comparison to digital media. One moving aspect of *Immemory* (and of *The Danube Exodus* too) is its being resolutely preservationist with regard to aging technologies. They record digitally the traces of past media works: the old family photographs, the home movies, film snippets, and scraps of paper. In digital form, these previous media are both found and lost. They can be retrieved, reconfigured, and renarrativized, but in doing so, the newest technology becomes a strongly nostalgic medium—mourning the loss of what can’t be retrieved and can’t be restored to its original form. A digital photo or a Quicktime movie is an extra step from the real, a large extra step, in that it refers back not only to the events depicted, but to the stage which is now only intermediary to the passage to the digital. *Immemory* tries to preserve not just old photographs and films and the rest, it also attempts to preserve the idea that these decaying media matter in themselves, and that new media will someday be old media, existing as similar traces in forms yet to come.

Film ushered in an important shift in how media could be received. Even with photography, which requires technology to be produced, it was still possible to experience the result without additional equipment. Our modern media world starts with the film projector and extends to television monitors, VCRs, computers, and CD-ROMs. To archive now can mean to shift platforms—conversions from celluloid or videotape or paper to whatever constitutes a current standard, itself on its way to certain and sometimes rapid obsolescence.

When *La Jetée* was brilliantly created from still photographs and one brief piece of moving film, Marker was already signaling this longing for earlier media forms. The pastness of the past can be represented through capturing media—the sense of their origins still much in evidence. *Immemory* ups these stakes. Every piece of media is made to be not just a fragment of history, but a fragment of a media history. The now archaic look of previous media becomes a means to express the passage of time. *Immemory*, while new and up-to-date, already looks like an artifact, as if we are discovering it at some point well into the future.

*Immemory* is a veritable catalog of forms of longing for old media, nearly sentimental in its reverence for the dreams and memories captured in fragments of silent cinema. And as in his museum pieces, Marker makes *Immemory* look almost charmingly clunky—the interface is clearly the work of an individual and not a design team—the singular creation of an artisan. It's fuzzy in ways you don't expect of digital media, almost resolutely amateurish in a good sense, idiosyncratic in its organization and unfolding (and of course full of Marker's signature cats and owls). This functions as both a representation of (im) memory as not being perfectly ordered, but also as a model of digital media—a space with a lot of stuff lying around rather than fully categorized into neat bundles. His collection is more like a back storage room of a museum than a public display, more the database before it's fully structured, more like dream and memory than a catalog.

*Immemory* is surely the *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941) of digital media. While numerous writers about new media arts have opined that we are so early in their development as to have not yet seen a *Birth of a Nation* (dir. D. W. Griffith, 1915), Marker has leapfrogged the early phase and created a full-fledged mature work. We shouldn't forget that *Kane* too was a collage of media forms, and a work of memory and history. While Marker establishes explicit (and brilliant) links between his own work and Hitchcock's, especially *Vertigo*, his affinities to Welles are equally strong (Bolter and Grusin). (*F for Fake* might even be too close to a Marker essay for either Marker or Welles to have acknowledged, with the great difference being Welles's significant on-screen presence.) *Immemory* is Marker's equivalent to the warehouse of Xanadu, "the junk as well as the art" as Welles described *Kane*'s holdings.

Compilation film is a form of archiving, and also a database construction. While previous footage may be recontextualized, even contradicted or discredited, it is still preserved and collected, ready even for subsequent reuse. In compilation documentaries, reinterpretation is part and parcel of the process. However, when film uses film, it is consuming itself in a manner that can be difficult to extricate into component parts. Also, films such as those by Ken Burns seek to make "cinematic" the materials being consumed: a photograph will be panned and annotated, music and narration added, to make the result film-like. The narrative impact of the "past coming alive" in such works comes often from this adroit manipulation of historical materials.

Marker, by contrast, is a compilation media artist who not only doesn't make "digital" his predigital material, but seeks to underscore their pastness by keeping visible their

origins and intrinsic media qualities. Photos will look photographic—presented in albums, looking as if printed on paper, or differing in visual quality from the backgrounds that frame them. Movie excerpts will be similarly bracketed—instead of being massaged to integrate smoothly and invisibly into a digital environment, they are surviving media remnants of another age and way of seeing, less compiled than existing as a memory fragment barely rising above a tenuous surface of decay and loss. (His museum installation *Silent Movie*, which presented selected early film clips on a series of television monitors, also contained this serial bracketing—in that case, of film within television within installation—maintaining this interplay.) *Immemory* is a testament to the fragility of such media forms and seems to depend as much on his prior museum work as on his films.

Marker has always been among the most personal of filmmakers, but at the same time mysterious and distant. His works are autobiographical not just in content, but in style—he has frequently been openly first-person, a diarist, and a reporter of personal experience. But just as he famously avoids being photographed and rarely shows himself in his own work, the first-person-ness of *Immemory* and the strongly autobiographical nature of its presentation may itself be something of a sham. It is first-person in the manner of Robert Montgomery's film of *Lady in the Lake*: when we see through the eyes of a narrator, we don't know through whose eyes we see, except indirectly. *Immemory* puts us in the head of someone else who obviously we can never fully become, whose memory is never our own—another level of the “falseness” of the work. Exposing the inner workings of his sensibilities, Marker remains hidden, a quality he has perhaps always possessed, as suggested by Laurent Roth when he speaks of the difficulties of remembering Marker's films sometime later, saying that they “are not inscribed in me, as they always are in the case of *real* cinema” (Roth and Bellour, 57). Marker's elusiveness, perhaps a lack of fixedness, becomes even more difficult to pin down digitally, when the viewer-reader must actively participate in traversing possible narrative paths.

Of course, the consequences of interactive choice are one of the biggest issues with digital works, whether in a museum environment or on a computer. To trace these, we should look back briefly to compilation and autobiographical documentaries. Reconciling narrative structure and a database-like collection of material is generally accomplished in these films by some combination of temporal and thematic interplay. Perhaps typical are Burns's *Baseball* or *Jazz*: the structures of these multipart documentaries are not derived simply from ordering oldest to newest, even though, in a general sense, the viewer feels a movement in that direction, however arrested it might be at times. The function of an ambitious work of compilation such as this is to establish causality and borders—to say that all that is here needs to be viewed, and in the order presented. Although much longer than conventional documentaries, they still expect to be viewed in order and in their totality. The museum equivalent would be to walk in a straight line down a corridor on a moving sidewalk at fixed speed. This structure suits these works in that their choices of material and their ordering constitute their argument. Segments

should not be viewed out of sequence or at random, because to do so would destroy the coherence of a steadily building argument and a sequentially revealed historical coherence, as much as deleting parts and scrambling the remainder of most movies would cause similar problems. Linearity is an essential component of these documentary forms, a basis for their existence.

Marker's films were already (and obviously) interested in other temporal and structural arrangements, but his digital work doesn't just present an environment more suited to his experiments; they suggest that the resulting shift to interactivity brings out what was already present. *Sans Soleil* and *La Jetée* could themselves be transposed to the digital in ways that Burns's work would never invite. Marker's 1990 San Francisco Museum of Art installation *Passages de l'image* made this clear. This project also had the strong feel of re-autobiography—it playfully presented Marker's world as a collection of media stuff open to any ordering. This now looks very much like a rehearsal for *Immemory*, but again, as Bellour has said, perhaps all his work is.

A surprising aspect of *Immemory*, given the increased interactivity afforded by the technology, is that Marker still encourages a certain degree of order and, in introductory instructions, suggests a relaxed pace through the work. Within sections, contents are meant to be viewed sequentially, so *Immemory* is a set of multimedia mini-essays, its individual units relatively cohesive. As with Marker's installations, there is an equality to the options. Although sections can be viewed in any order, there is no significant difference between alternative narrative paths.

Where *Immemory* gets challenging is in layering, and in its juxtaposition of sections. Marker has had fun with Photoshop, and is so pleased by visual congruencies that they often pop up, as in facial overlaps of "Jeanne d'Arc et Dracula, les héros de mon enfance." In a similar vein is a redone Sistine Chapel, with God pointing his outstretched finger to Mickey Mouse's thumb. He also plays with the varied character of his interests, establishing no hierarchy from the significant to the trivial, or between the historical, the filmed, or the imagined. *Immemory* approximates a mental construct in its putting all his concerns together, and laying them out as if in a dream, a database, or a museum.

## THE DANUBE EXODUS

*The Danube Exodus* first existed as a 1998 film by the Hungarian Péter Forgács. The film is composed of home movies from 1939 and 1940 of two journeys on the same ship in opposite directions along the Danube River. The first was by a group of Jews from Bratislava and Vienna, fleeing the Nazis to immigrate to Palestine. The footage was originally shot by the captain of one of the ships, Nándor Andrásovits. In the following year, he made a trip from Bessarabia to carry ethnic Germans forced to repatriate to Poland. The symmetry of the two journeys provides numerous opportunities for comparison; the film sets up juxtapositions and then allows viewers to determine what to make of them. Rather than assert obvious differences between the two groups and the



reasons for their journeys, the film tends to invite a sense of similarity between the two journeys and their sets of common events.

A good deal of the fascination the film offers derives from the extensive record being reclaimed from home movies. Not an official history, nor even much of an account of the circumstances of the journeys, the film offers intimate glimpses of life at sea under cramped and difficult conditions. The overwhelming feeling is of life somehow going on, in each direction. It is difficult to know whether the many unanswered questions are so because the found footage doesn't address them, or whether they would continue to be unanswered even if events on the journeys had been shot and assembled in a more conventional manner. A particular uncertainty, in that he shot the footage, is the captain himself. We can only speculate about his multiple motives for undertaking the journeys, just as we don't know whether he had particular sympathies for either group of passengers. *The Danube Exodus* has as enigmatic and elusive a center as a Marker film. Forgács certainly poeticizes his material, but he isn't particularly intrusive or commentative. Captain Andrásovits, the original filmmaker, is a fringe figure in his own work. He appears in these narratives but can't be easily read.

As a museum installation first shown at the Getty Center in Los Angeles in 2001, *The Danube Exodus* became a lustrous multiscreen presentation, with multimedia computer applications in adjoining rooms as well as an introductory room presenting wall displays with information about the journeys. The collaborative process of conversion has been

described in detail by Marsha Kinder (Kinder, “Reorchestrating History” 235–255). The original footage was projected from multiple DVDs, and the journeys are now divided into eighteen sections of material. Viewers could select which parts would play for the audience from a touchscreen monitor.

In its museum incarnation, the films are now projected on five screens. Often the same image is projected on the center three, or occasionally even on all five. The effect of this, together with the beautiful musical score by Tibor Szemző, is to make an epic, like those of Abel Gance or David Lean, out of the modest original amateur footage. At other points, footage would be reversed on opposite sides, to create mirror images equally panoramic in scope.

Taking advantage of this unusual five-screen palette, Forgács dramatizes certain pieces of footage by multiplying them out sequentially, with slight delays across several screens. An especially striking moment is the placing of a wedding ring, which gets repeated four times from left to right. Inevitably, perhaps, there is a moment when Wehrmacht soldiers multiply across three screens as if in a line, while Jewish refugees are visible on the far left screen, and Bessarabian Germans dance on the screen at far right. Freezing individual segments on faces is a device used in the original film, but with greater effect when it repeats across a series of screens.

Like Marker, Forgács exults in the cinematicness of his original materials. Two particular means to accomplish this are repetition of the same footage deliberately out of synch, like old projectors gone awry, and, very effectively, the magnification of shots with visible sprocket holes, appearing in succession along the three center screens. This process doesn’t just poeticize the footage itself—it also celebrates the reclamation of personal stories from an amateur medium. It is as if home recordings of simple tunes have been transcribed for a symphony orchestra.

The narrative segments are divided into three sets of six, and it is interesting to observe how audience members make selections. While watching this room for the better part of an afternoon, I saw that many visitors were choosing a fairly linear sequence, selecting segments in order around a circle of options on the touch-screen monitor. Correctly, I would say, the images frustrated this apparent desire for conventional presentation. Selections from the two principal sets of journey footage would often make for effective juxtapositions, even if it wasn’t always easy to keep track of which group one was watching. This is surely one of the main points of the entire work—the differences between the two groups are overridden by the leveling circumstances of their refugee status.

The arguments of the main display are refined by the computers in the adjoining rooms, which present extensive individual tales, focusing on four of the survivors, two from each journey. While the material is presented in fairly conventional digital media fashion, the viewer’s desire to absorb all this additional footage is certainly heightened by having been witness to the visual splendor and impact fashioned from the home movies in the multiscreen central room. Perhaps each makes the other

possible—poetry is given the center, surrounded by information and the remembrances of survivors.

## CONCLUSION

What *Immemory* and *The Danube Exodus* have in common is a sense of reclaiming history through media artifacts, rescuing lost moments in a manner that still stresses their distance from us. While digital media seem to offer the illusion of encyclopedic mountains of multimedia material at our immediate beck and call, these artists properly bring forth a feeling of simultaneously treasuring what their works reclaim while suggesting that this reclamation will always only be partial, as much a loss as an act of archival salvation. These dual pulls, of retrieval and the inability to retrieve, are heightened by the added element of narrative interactivity. Selecting a segment to view gives more detail and information than a film would likely have offered, but the simultaneous sense is of fragmentation and loss—both for what can never be retrieved and for what our selection may lead us never to see.

Works based on historical compilation and autobiography are ideally placed here, especially now that, as mentioned earlier, DVDs can offer both interactivity and excellent image quality, together with high capacity. The immediate advantage is likely to be works that can function somewhere between compiled collections and deeply personal artistic endeavors. There need not be a conflict between the two, especially when the new medium itself becomes an arena for narrative experimentation. The biggest narrative challenge in creating works such as these is to develop structures which are themselves compelling, by drawing upon interactive capabilities to construct ways of exploring that are themselves worthy of attention. While they highlight media objects from the past, the need to go beyond simply being a container for that work is clear. Digital environments need not be looked at as just new storage or presentation opportunities, as these works convincingly show. Interfaces which invite further discovery, create unanticipated juxtapositions, and are themselves artfully constructed are clearly a significant advance, full of unexpected nuance and possibilities for surprise. Looking like a virtual museum, a newly discovered room of lost artifacts, or the inside of an artist's head, the new media work demands appreciation for far more than its ability to remediate.

These two artists together suggest that there is a certain correspondence between museum display, works designed for the computer, and their earlier films. In each case structured around the reclamation of lost film and other historical fragments (photos, texts), we can see across media the desire to provide contexts which are loose enough not to force strict meanings. Museum display is especially appropriate in that it invites a combination of spectacle and reverence, but still a chance to explore. Whether in a CD-ROM-constructed space or the physical space of a museum, the work of these artists suggests that the digital is an unexpectedly fertile arena for collecting, recovering, and making the past personal, allowing us to travel in time and experience it ourselves for a while, to live briefly again inside these lost worlds.

## AFTERTHOUGHTS

The theoretical links between cinema and digital media continue to be a rich vein to mine, so I am happy to have explored the work of two great artists who made the leap. Chris Marker has died, but his towering achievements continue to merit close examination. At this point in time, *Immemory* looks more than ever like the *Citizen Kane* of digital media, and hopefully it will continue to have a life even as CD-ROMs go the way of the floppy disk.

The title of this essay is a tribute to Jay Leyda's pioneering study of compilation films, *Films Beget Films*.

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