

Hunting Eran Barak's "*Hunting Time*"

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The fact that *Hunting Time* is an inevitable dialogue with Chris Marker's masterpiece *La Jetée* (1962) is both concealed and obvious. And no less, Eran Barak's work is subversive to such an extent that it negates the spirit of the Name-of-the-Father - the one who made possible a dialogue with him.

First I should clarify that metaphor of visual opposition which I began with. As noted, the film is a "concealed" dialogue with Marker's film in the sense that it does not cite his allusions in an obvious, verbal way. It makes no clear and explicit reference to its being a painful-yearning-wallowing-admiring echo, nurtured by one of the most influential, cited, and mythic works in the history of film. From the other side of the metaphor, it is an obvious form of allusion and dialogue, in the sense that everyone who watches *La Jetée* is hurled unwillingly into the "Markerian universe" which, as they watch, springs to life from the previous century's abyss of forgetting, as a meta-temporal filmic index. In this sense, understanding Marker is vital for a cerebral, rich and informed reading of *Hunting Time*, so critically that I am forced to argue that the great risk which the film takes is its self-positioning as a booby-trap, apparently innocent but actually lethal. Unsuspecting and untrained spectators could easily react to the film with contempt, and never grasp its inner brilliance.

But more than a booby-trap, the film has an embedded sociopolitical message. It hints that even nowadays - when "reality shows" are all-pervading, and the concepts "reality" and "an individual" have degenerated to Roman gladiators in a hippodrome, though without the genuine pathos of heroism - documentary film can and must persist with its historical and classical poetic function. It must provide a space for demanding and challenging cognitive experience, not just making do with its existence as a site of dehumanized, objectifying entertainment.

In other words, if future scholars describe our generation something like this: "as their existential misery grew, they tried to amuse themselves at all costs", films like *Hunting Time* will probably be stored on a remote shelf, with a torn sticker reading "(however) they (also) never stopped trying to truly understand their existential self-despair, within the space of time".

Despair is also the fate of those debating the experience of watching a film that lends itself to what Charles Sanders Peirce termed "semiosis" - an infinite space of (apparently) open interpretive probabilities. Why "apparently" and why in parentheses? Because a craftsman's hand has thoroughly concealed the "apparently" of *Hunting Time's* semiosis, with its consistent rhetoric of a series of clues, codes, and ciphers; and as appropriate for a work intended to hold a dialogue with one of the twentieth-century's greatest poets, it does not disclose its core with fashionable immediacy.

And so, that winding path with which I launched my reading, and that the film itself takes us along, encourages an associative reading that guides the spectator to continue plunging down into the film's seductive depths. My reading thus relies on the reconstruction of four impressions that I consciously hunted down - in a viewing that was meant to be unconscious.

First impression. Observing for observation's sake

It's impossible to disregard the subtle controlled tone of the narrator's warm, low, and measured voice, as he proposes the ontological existence of "eternal-existential-doubt". In his filmic material, the text's creator - the auteur-documentarian Eran Barak, whose voice we hear - embodies that position within the "world of the film" (diegesis) by repeatedly and obsessively using *erotesis* - rhetorical questions that become the film's leitmotif. Each question is lovelier and deeper than the previous one. Can it be otherwise? At one point in the film, in a voice hinting at his seductive intention, Barak asks: "Will they (the pictures) attest to something about his life?". With that question, he transfers to us the duty of participation, puts into play the conative function, and brings us face-to-face with the endless openness of the "no reply," of the ethical responsibility

to ask - because of our human condition as "askers of questions" as well as the indissoluble affinity with the fact that that condition arouses craving for answers. Here, Barak defines our very commitment, as spectators, to become the film's epistemological backbone. In one breath, he imbues the genetic code of the film's semantics with duality: situated between existential doubt - reflected in the very need to ask unanswerable questions - and unshakable confidence in rhetorical questions' power to stimulate viewers to acknowledge the existence of a higher truth, somewhere beyond the text. Another outcome of that duality is that Barak exempts himself from the need to offer concrete answers, and positions his own voice as omnipotent - the "all-powerful asker".

At this point, I'd like to inquire whether the very existence of such a position requires us to investigate what it aims to conceal - that is, what it aims to show us only indirectly, in a future twist of the plot? Perhaps only after we've watched the film? Or maybe the answer to the questions lie elsewhere in the text, in the film's opening? Indeed, as the film begins, the "time" of *Hunting Time* is defined as "Markerian", "Borgesian", and "Marquegian" - all thinkers who owe an immense debt to Kafka. No special effort is needed to notice that time in *Hunting Time* stretches the internal grammar and intuitive logic of our immediate grasp of time. Linguistically and symbolically, time is thrown beyond "chronological time", and defines itself as the object of pure consciousness. "*For years I tried to ignore the fact that I have very few childhood memories*" says the voice. Time, as Barak presents it to us, doesn't stop there but continues to classify the film's "origin of all things" (*arche*) as structured on anti-Aristotelian tension; that is, tension grounded on inaction. By this I mean that while at the film's beginning the protagonist performs actions in the world (he comes, goes, sleeps, studies...), at the same time, beneath the layers of those actions the film projects a frequency that defines the film's reality neither as an *action* nor a *reaction*, but instead as a restricted yet intrusive space of the actual exploration of human observation for its own sake. And as the film progresses, that enigmatic field of observation slowly grows clearer. It becomes a narratological instrument of the redemption of the protagonist's consciousness from its barren isolation of the very action of "observation for its own sake" that transpires to be an action detached from real life. Or if you prefer, an action producing artificial memories for itself (by virtue of being a cinematic element) for spectators lacking their

own natural memories. The sentence with which the author embarks on his journey: "*For years I tried to ignore the fact that I have very few childhood memories*", defines *Hunting Time* as a coming-of-age film. It promises the tortured young man that he will successfully overcome the test of maturity entailed in observing the world inquisitively. And his prize will be a different, rewarding life - of the kind unfolding "beyond the frame," that frame from which the film's final shot departs.

To understand the role of observation for its own sake, I'll return to the Pre-Sophist Greeks, to Thales, the father of philosophy, who maintained that "all matter is one". It seems that Eran Barak agrees with him, though for him that matter is time, while Atlas held that water is the principle of all things. For Barak, time is the only primary material on which the world's ontology is grounded. And just as the Milesian school (of Thales) laid down the foundations of contemporary scientific thought, so does *Hunting Time's* outlook reflect modern scientific belief that carved out a substantial place in the field of modern art in general, and more particularly in documentary art, through the Realist philosophy and aesthetic. The argument of modernism, represented by and suffused with those values, is that analytical (though still random) observations - that are consecutive, consistent, stubborn, individual, lean, monastic, and stringent - of the contingency of visible reality, will disclose to observers the meaning that life must find within itself. And so that analytic observation will necessarily elicit the truth; and if not The Truth, then at least a truth - of the kind for which Alain Badiou, drawing on the Platonic stream, claims absolute moral power. This is the working assumption of *Hunting Time*, and everything that happens consecutively must necessarily lead the protagonist to a junction where he must choose one of the three paths before him: one leading to reconciliation with his past; another that takes him towards revolt and existential crisis which implies oblivion; and the third, the phantasmic path promising metaphysical redemption. Whichever he chooses, all three rely on the action of observing for observation's sake.

Second impression. Who's hunting who?

A one-off spontaneous outburst by Barak, the auteur-documentarian, is captured in his meeting with Tuvia Friedman, the Nazi-hunter. The outburst is responsible for the decision to leave in the diegesis the single unmonitored word of surprise in the film. At the entrance to a building, an unknown old man asks him: "*Do you know who you're talking to?*" and without waiting for a reply, informs him: "*I am Tuvia Friedman*". Perhaps with an unintended slip of the tongue, the recording protagonist replies, "*Really?!*", with the ingenuous wonder of a child suddenly given a wonderful toy. It's just a small moment in the film, but a special one, in which the filmmaker's voice expresses pure and utter surprise; it's unique because this is a private case that differs substantively from the rest, attesting to what Deleuze termed an *encounter* - a moment that is unpredictable by definition, that bursts into a higher sphere than the reality seems to encompass, in terms of its visibility and the extent of its immediate giving. Deleuze maintains that people rarely, if ever, experience moments of that kind.

In Christian Frei's film *War Photographer* (2001) the renowned war photographer, James Nachtwey, comments in a Levinasian spirit that he photographs "the Other" to the extent that the Other is capable of accepting him. Tuvia Friedman, whose function in the plot of *Hunting Time* is a dramaturgical engine ensuring the eternal movement of the questions of memory raised in the film, defines his acceptance for the film's protagonist in a contradictory manner. He wants, invites - even demands - the filmmaker to recognize him, and to film him in his own home. His stated grounds for this are phrased in terms of material values and utility. "*Come along, it's worth your while, you'll have something to film*". He knows he can "deliver the goods", while the cinematographer of *Hunting Time* - "the Markerian hero" who's exploring human memory, obtains - in an unconditional parallel with the object of his filming - definitive validation with the objective purpose of documenting the structured forgetting of time.

Another touching moment in the film derives from that encounter (which, according to the film's internal logic, was already imprinted in time before its actual realization); it is

the moment when Tuvia displays his photographs to the documenter/time-hunter. What is affecting in this shot is the intolerable divide between the symbolic weight that Tuvia ascribes to the formal significance of displaying the photos, and the unrealistic ineffective continuation, where they are left exposed to the camera and the audience. For a few seconds - not enough to absorb the information and certainly not its implications - we see a huge sheet, crammed with photos. Friedman quickly shows the next sheet, frantic to display more and more of them... with a Nazi-hunter's single-mindedness, he directs the director whose role is to direct him. He takes Barak from room to room, ensuring that all the images which encapsulate his very existence and can be remembered after his death are being captured in the time of the film being shot here and now (*ici et maintenant*). And yet we, the spectators, see nothing of what Friedman wanted to show, or thought vital for us to see. Instead we see what the cinematic time-hunter (the auteur-documentarian) wanted to show - how the Nazi-hunter is being hunted in the time of his film.

Third Impression. The Redeeming Woman

The idea of the redeeming woman is at the heart of *Hunting Time's* dialogue with Marker the maestro. It leads to the point where it becomes clear that the same dialogue also results in the negation of the (hinted) symbiosis with the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father. It is worth recalling that, as a child, the protagonist of *La Jetée* was branded by an image. Seconds before his violent death, he finally realizes that his first childhood recollection - a woman standing on an airport observation platform - was a prophetic image of the moment of his own death. And so the first image in the "child-man's" memory becomes the final image of life that the "man-child" sees, though no less than this - the first image of his own death, and no less than this - of the eternal life of cinematic images in the artist's creation (as his alter ego). In decoding that moment, the sight of the woman has a pivotal role and is deeply significant. She is both the memory itself, and also the image of that memory (reminding us of Godard's splendid epigram "It's not an image, it's an image of an image"). She is the "witness" for the fatalistic fulfillment of death that is part of the human consciousness, as a substantive element in

time which Marker maintains to be circular and preordained. In a system of that kind, it is the individual who generates the concept of death and the meaning of acknowledging it. Yet at the same time, he is the one whose entire life was overshadowed by inevitable anxiety over it - the outcome of that unavoidable self-awareness. In such a deterministic world, the woman provides the only anchor, in which the consciousness of the Markerian protagonist, wavering between life and forgetful anticipation of predestined death, clings to and finds significance in palpable life.

The Markerian protagonist is condemned to be punished for his memory's powerful endurance, its refusal to completely die away - a quality that is the absolute antithesis of the protagonist-auteur's inability (declared and conscious) to remember. And so he is dispatched, like a laboratory rat, to participate in a cruel experiment of painful recollections within a space of time that no longer exists. In the post-apocalyptic era, Marker's protagonist is the only human whose memories are intact. He clings to the fragile phantasms of the woman's image - which for Marker is not only the sole image that lives and breathes (the picture of the woman opening her eyes is the only moving one in the film). It is also the image of an ultimate testimony to inevitable death, represented by all the other images in the film. In that unavoidable sense, the woman symbolizes life and death in the same breath. Contrastingly, in *Hunting Time*, the woman functions as a symbolic source of redemption. She is the promise waiting beyond the frame of the image (lacking significance in itself) that Barak investigates single-mindedly throughout the entire film. Day and night, summer and winter, with religious obsessiveness, in a room resembling Gaudi's monastic cell in Barcelona (a bed, a small chest of drawers, bare walls) he glues, peels, arranges, tears, screens, enlarges, and reduces characters, attempting to decipher them (in scenes recalling Antonioni's *Blow Up*). Ultimately, though, Eran Barak's documentary-consciousness experiment is painted with more purposeful and utilitarian colors. In an astonishing moment in the film, the bereaved father says, "A *real man*" is one "*who can live with memory*" (a poetic moment that chills the spectator by its interface between "in time" and "beyond time"). Indeed, Barak takes refuge from the labyrinth of the photographs' infinite pointlessness, in the form of the promise (romantic and idealist in itself) inherent in the image of the woman standing, like Marker's woman, on the *jetée* (a jetty, pier), just to

take her lost man towards a future in which they both know only one thing: that the woman clearly signifies "another life," unfolding beyond the documented frame. At the film's end, the "man-child" says that yearning for redemption is proof of existing in time: "*But most of all you want to see the face of that woman [...] she's calling to you*".

Here I should make it clear: negating the fatalist condition embodied in the image of the woman and death - which initially I linked to the idea that *Hunting Time* rejects the Name-of-the-Father/Chris Marker - is not inherent in rejecting the image of the woman as witnessing and heralding death; that is, of the cinematic moment of the man who is taken to the scene of his predetermined death. Nor is it embodied in the man in *Hunting Time* who is taken by the promise of the woman's image to "another life" that is not part of *La Jetée*'s world. Instead, I suggest another option - the question of the *vox humana* that rises to the surface in *Hunting Time* - the voice aroused in every human utterance, that contains for the implied listener (without taking into consideration the utterance's specific content) the ulterior question: "Who are you who speaks to me? In whose name? And what are you saying?" The question of that *voice* is what defines the Archimedean point where filmmaker Eran Barak defines, to the best of my knowledge, his separation from Chris Marker - the Father figure.

Final impression. The voice

Everyone familiar with Marker's oeuvre knows that his "cosmonaut" heroes always speak, are written to, and addressed in the second and third person; they are always spoken to or about, but are never reduced into a simple subjective uniformity with the historical ego of Marker, the creator of their texts. Nor are they ever fashioned into subjective uniformity with the real existence of people in the world. This is the secret charm of Marker's screen images: they exist as matter on the interface between the factual and the imaginary: not as opposites, but as strong metaphysical uniformity. In *Hunting Time*, Eran Barak indeed talks with Marker, using his language, drawing on the same setting that Marker charted in cinematic and visual thought fifty years ago. But he does so using an essentially different *voice*, with inverse rhetorical, narrative, and

epistemic positions. While I can summarize Marker's voice into a symbolic epigram - *I will never discuss myself via a visible selfhood* - in order to define *Hunting Time's* voice I need a new set of concepts. I must note that, at the center of its conflict, the film positions the existential tension between the individual-creator and the identity of the auteur-documentarian, a tension that he places in the centre of the visibility and essence of a film investigating the "unseen visibility of his own world's time". In this way he transposes investigation for its own sake into a different material: the assumption of a personal voice, not a meta-historical one as in Marker's case. Marker's meta-historical voice is the inevitable outcome of the breeding-ground of the great utopias - modernism, socialism - together with their unavoidable dissolution. The starting-point of *Hunting Time* is the era of the death of the great truths, certainly of the great Israeli narratives. That is why *Hunting Time* can only search for the author's private historical redemption in his own world. If Marker observes the human and historical world from the perspective of a universal monitor and critic, then Eran Barak observes with his personal voice (through the Markerian prism) the private history of the first-person of his own time. By "his" I do not mean in the narrow sense: "All that I know is to tell my own story" - not at all. On the contrary, what I mean is "his" in the sense that that voice bears both an unseen history and a spiritual fatigue - of the kind constantly unfolding everywhere in his country, his city, among his fellow countrymen, at every intersection, in every home, and most of all within the tortured soul of the artist seeking his interpretation for an alchemical sense of his life and death - eternally destined to be the object of a filmic hunter - a hunter for the sake of hunting, even if there is no reality behind him that can be hunted.