

The New York Times

‘The Owl’s Legacy’ Explores the Glory That Was Greece

By J. Hoberman

Nov. 23, 2018



The actress Catherine Belkhodja in “Music or Inner Space,” Episode 8 of Chris Marker’s “The Owl’s Legacy.” Credit Icarus Films

Chris Marker’s 1989 television series, “The Owl’s Legacy,” is something for the ages. This 13-episode examination of ancient Greece’s contribution to the modern world ([streaming on VHX](#)) is at once illuminating and confounding, heady but playful.

It is also seldom less than entertaining. A French media artist who was the pre-eminent film essayist of his generation, [Marker](#) (1921-2012) orchestrated a medley of voices for this wide-ranging inquiry. “The Owl’s Legacy,” written with Jean-Claude Carrière, is populated by a lively group of artists and intellectuals — most of them Greek or French — holding forth and often disputing the enduring influence of Greek antiquity on contemporary civilization.

Would that freshman introductory courses were this enjoyable. The mood is affably garrulous, the narration deadpan and droll. Marker's model is the symposium, which, in ancient Greece, was a banquet in which wine was served to ease the flow of ideas. The series intercuts footage from four staged symposiums — in Athens; Paris; Berkeley, Calif.; and Tbilisi, Georgia — where the tables are heaped with fruits, as if food for thought, and the discourse is typically dominated by a single loquacious speaker.

"The Owl's Legacy," which was telecast in Britain in 1991, was not seen again until 2007, when it was shown for the first time in Greece as an art installation, with the entire series presented simultaneously on 13 monitors. Even on one, it can be dizzying. Ideas whiz past and rebound like balls on a squash court. The talk is punctuated by film clips — including excerpts from Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia," Norman McLaren's number animation "Rhythmic" and Elia Kazan's "America, America" — as well as images of ancient statuary and documentary footage of contemporary Greece.

The most expansive of the participants is the Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis; the most provocative is the French-American literary critic George Steiner, who, among other things, wonders whether the death of Jesus Christ or of Socrates was more meaningful. (It was Steiner's impolitic assertion that ancient Greece had little to do with contemporary Greece that got "The Owl's Legacy" banned in that country for nearly two decades.)

Each half-hour episode is given a title that consists of a Greek-derived word followed by an often provocative phrase: "Symposium or Accepted Ideas" is followed by "Olympics or Imaginary Greece," "Democracy or the City of Dreams," "Nostalgia or the Impossible Return," "Amnesia or History on the March," "Mathematics or the Empire Counts Back," "Logomachy or the Dialect of the Tribe," "Music or Inner Space," "Cosmogony or the Ways of the World," "Mythology or Lies Like Truth," "Misogyny or the Snares of Desire," "Tragedy or the Illusion of Death," and, finally, "Philosophy or the Triumph of the Owl."

Language in "The Owl's Legacy" feels elusive yet concrete. At one point, Marker's narrator compares Greek words to the angels in Wim Wenders's "Wings of Desire": benign, invisible, ubiquitous presences. It's impossible, while watching, not to note other Greek words in everyday usage — technology, dialogue, analysis, to name a few. The singer and composer Angélique Ionatos, born in Athens and living in Paris, remarks how proud she feels to hear Greek words in French.

One of Marker's recurring themes is the continuing presence of ancient Greece in contemporary Greece, through the use of classical names, the appreciation of "The Odyssey" as a national epic and the spectacle of men arguing in the street. Another theme is the appropriation of Greek antiquity by younger nations, most significantly Nazi Germany, as discussed in the episode "[Olympia](#)." Looking for more contemporary equivalents, Marker touches down in Cape Verde and Japan, countries that figured in his best-known film essay, "[Sans Soleil](#)." The Japanese material, which includes a Kabuki staging of "Medea" and a quick tour of a Tokyo department store with mannequins inspired by Greek statues, is the more persuasive.

“The Owl’s Legacy” makes a credible case that the Western idea of history was derived from the Greeks. Politics, too. What the series calls “imaginary Greece” has been used to fuel totalitarianism as well as democracy (literally, “people power”). Castoriadis and the Italian scholar Guilia Sissa connect Greek tragedy to democracy, concerned as tragedy is with the clash of contradictory individual rights. More fanciful is the questionable notion, derived from Greek mythology, that Athens invented music. And although Marker enlists the glamorous movie actress Arielle Dombasle to credit Pythagoras with the discovery of mathematics, he backs off a bit to suggest that Greek math developed in a dialectical relationship to that of Egypt and Babylon.

Philosophy is indisputably Greek. Plato first used the word, and the Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili declares that “all philosophy is Greek philosophy.” It seems evident that psychoanalysis is Greek, too. As the Greeks had neither sacred books nor prophets but, as the British classicist Manuela Smith points out, invented the injunction to “know thyself,” we might consider Freud Socrates’ belated heir. (Ego and psyche are Greek words. Therapy, too.)

Toward the end, in the episode “Misogyny,” which deals partly with [Greek eroticism](#), Marker addresses an issue that has been troubling throughout the series — namely, patriarchy, which, Ionatos remarks, persists in contemporary Greece. And despite her presence and that of several other female commentators, “The Owl’s Legacy” amply illustrates the patriarchal, yet another Greek term.

Its most annoying manifestation is the inclusion of invariably silent, winsome young women for the sole purpose of bestowing wide-eyed attention on the pronouncements of some middle-aged male blowhard. It may be that Marker intends you to wonder, after a while, what these women are actually thinking.

The final episode, “Philosophy,” turns this on its head. It begins with a discussion of the owl, the goddess Athena’s sacred bird, the symbol of wisdom and the inspiration for the series’s title. One after another, the regulars instinctively refer to the owl as “her.”

In its final minutes, “The Owl’s Legacy” pivots from the Cartesian proposition “I think, therefore I am” to Castoriadis’s more self-reflexive question: “What *should* I think?” Others express the view that philosophy may have become exhausted. “The Owl’s Legacy” was first shown the year the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War ended, a moment, some thought, that signaled the end of the 20th century as well. It might not have been Marker’s intention, but the series has the feel of a glorious, collective epitaph.

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 25, 2018, on Page AR15 of the New York edition with the headline: *Looking Into the Past*.