8 *La Jetée* and the shape of time[1]

In the cinema... things are always seen from somewhere.

Roland Barthes 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', *Image, Music, Text*, p76.

It is... characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life - and this is the stuff that stories are made of - first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.

Walter Benjamin 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations* London: Fontana 1993 (1973), pp83-107, p93.

1. Peter Brooks *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press 1984, p21. In a discussion of the relationship between narrative, reading and the representation of time, Brooks quotes Proust's narrator in *À la recherche du temps perdu* who, nearing his death, resolves to create a novel which will have "the shape of time".

If the film still for Barthes is able to point to that aspect of cinema which distinguishes it from other media it also reminds us of the photographic history of film, the causal relationship of the image to its referent at a specific point in time. The photograph is a means of representation which is steeped in the past tense. It asserts that this-has-been but also that the photograph's defining (or rather decisive) moment - the click of the shutter - inevitably occurred at some point in the past. Film's re-presentation of movement in a sense re-animates its referent. It leaves behind its photographic roots in the past tense and shifts to the present as soon as it is projected, with the beguiling implication for the viewer being that they are witnessing the unfolding of time itself.

The tension, or 'madness' as Barthes puts it, inherent in this notion of photographic and filmic 'tense' lies at the heart of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (The Pier, 1962; released in 1964), a 29 minute film which is constructed from a sequence of (almost entirely) still images together with voice-over narration and musical score. This chapter differs from the others in that it is largely a narrative account of Marker's film through which I will consider the relationship between representation and time. *La Jetée* is centred around "the story of a man marked by an image of his childhood" who travels back in time in an attempt to discover the source of this recurring memory.[2] The voice of a narrator, external to the action portrayed, relates this story in a third person narrative which is superimposed along with other sounds and a musical score (these also play a crucial role in setting the film's emotional and dramatic tone) over the images. The film progresses methodically in the steady rhythm reminiscent of a slide show with the omnipresent voice of the invisible narrator providing a measured counterpoint to the visual track. The narrator does not appear to play a part in the on-screen action but his 'objective' account provides the frame, the *syuzhet*, through which we construct the story or *fabula*. Indeed, the off-screen narration is our primary means of accessing the story as it directly inflects our reading of the relentless sequence of still images. This 'layering' establishes

2. Chris Marker *La Jetée* France: Argos Films 1962 (released 1964). All subsequent quotations are from the film's narrative except where indicated.

a system where meaning arises from the dialogue between different orders of representation.[3] As the film progresses, variations in the correspondence between aural/textual and visual elements create gaps from which the viewer infers meaning. Whilst the narration often corresponds closely to what we see in that it may describe what is happening, there are times where we rely solely on the images themselves or on the images in relation to the musical score. Moreover, there is no direct speech as such, no clue as to the location in time of the events save for the central chasm effected by a Third World War which divides the story into two distinct time zones, so providing the narrative pivot on which the plot balances. The central character, who remains nameless but whom I will refer to as X, is so transfixed by a memory, a mental image from his childhood, that he is used as a guinea pig in an experiment in time travel by a shadowy group of German-speaking scientists, the so-called victors of the war who have settled along with their prisoners in a series of underground galleries - "a kingdom of rats" - beneath the Palais de Chaillot.[4]

The film begins by setting the scene, the central motif of which is the *jetée* of the title, a stage-like concourse on the main pier at Orly airport, Paris, before the outbreak of the war (figures 40a-i). X remembers being taken there as a child to watch the aeroplanes and it is here that he remembers seeing a woman whose face indelibly impresses itself on his imagination. As the narrator maintains, X is not certain that he actually remembers the woman's face or whether he has dreamt "a beautiful moment to make up for the madness that followed": a shot, the fall of a man's body, the shock on the woman's face and on the faces of the passers-by. It is only later, apparently, that he realizes he has witnessed a man's death. As indicated earlier, *La Jetée* is predominantly constructed from still images and this first sequence, as well as setting the context for the story - "a frozen sun, a stage setting at the end of the pier" - introduces one of the central concerns of the film, namely, the relationship between memory, our experience of time and our experience of images. As Marker has remarked elsewhere: "I film therefore I am. Rather, I remember the images I filmed. They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory. I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. How has mankind managed to remember?"[5] But *La Jetée* is not merely a collection of photographs strung together in sequence but is structured using the rules and conventions as any film. As Gilles Jacob puts it, "Marker has edited his work as a film of which he has kept only one twenty-fourth of each second, but with that fragment of time prolonged for as long as he needs."[6] The first sequence begins with a long shot of the airport establishing the central location; this is followed by close up shots of various characters relating to the narrative, a small

3. D.N. Rodowick cites *La Jetée* as an example of Deleuze's cinema of the 'time-image' where the interruption of chronology through the juxtaposition of unpredictable elements enables the film to represent time *directly* (rather than indirectly through movement). That is, represented time corresponds to viewing time. See D.N. Rodowick *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* Durham & London: Duke University Press 1997, pp3-17.

4. Bruce Kawin points out that Chaillot was the home of Langlois' original Cinémateque. See his 'Time and Stasis in *La Jetée*', *Film Quarterly* 36/1, Fall 1982, pp15-20, p18.

5. Chris Marker *Sans Soleil* France: Argos Films 1983; also quoted in Chris Petit 'Insane Memory', *Sight &Sound* July 1994, p13.

6. Gilles Jacob 'Chris Marker and the Mutants', *Sight & Sound* 35/4, 1966, pp164-168, p167.

child, the face of the woman who will become the key to the plot. The camera lingers on this face or rather, on a still image of her face, for the longest period of any throughout the film as if to impress its importance on the viewer. Of course the narration colours our interpretation of the images and simultaneous with the shot of the woman we hear that: "Nothing tells memories from ordinary moments. Only later do they claim remembrance on account of their scars." Following this shot, the camera pulls back, so to speak, to frame the woman in an attitude of shock as she watches a man - arrested by the camera - fall to the ground. Successive shots show onlookers peering out of frame as if craning their necks to find out what has happened. The final shot (figure 40h) shows a blurred image of one of the aeroplanes on the tarmac which gradually dissolves into a blank, black screen. Just as the narrator informs us that the child only later realizes he has seen a man die, so this final shot can be seen as a representation of the falling man's point-of-view as he sees his last image of the world.

This cutting and dissolving between viewpoints/images is familiar to anyone with even a cursory interest in or experience of cinema. Yet by removing the illusion of movement and constructing the plot in terms of stills (although it is uncertain as to whether these images are actually photographs recorded by a conventional camera or stills removed from a sequence of specially filmed footage or, indeed, a mixture of the two), Marker has effectively removed our sense of a present tense. We are constantly looking at *records* of events rather than the illusion of those events as they unfold over time. As Terrence Rafferty has suggested: "By eliminating movement, the illusion of immediacy, Marker makes a film in which the present seems not to exist. The power of *La Jetée* is that he makes us feel the full poignancy of its absence."[7] Using the same combination of still, dissolve and voice-over narration, the film proceeds to a time after a Third World War in which the world above ground has been reduced to a desert of radio-activity. The claustrophobic nature of the underground camp inhabited by the survivors is created through the opposition of dark, shadowy masses with islands of light and the eschewal of deep spatial illusions. There is no horizon to this space which readily evokes the environment of a submarine or prison (figures 41a-i). Lacking any visible means of escape, the survivors have turned to the possibilities of time travel in order to find salvation: access to food, water and power. Those in charge conduct experiments on their unfortunate prisoners, attempting to send these 'emissaries' back into the past via the strength of their imaginations and through the administering of mysterious injections. To date, these have resulted in madness or death for the experimentees until the arrival of X whose memory of the pier and the woman's face is seen as a particularly vital and powerful link to the past. The film alternates between shots

7. Terrence Rafferty 'Marker Changes Trains', *Sight & Sound* 53/4, 1984, pp284-288, p288.


40a


40b


40c


40d


40e


40f


40g


40h


40i


41a


41b


41c


41d


41e


41f


41g


41h


41i

42a

42b

42c

42d

42e

43a

43b

43c

43d

43e

44a

44b

44c

establishing the general location, images of dark, subterranean passages acting perhaps as a spatial metaphor for the operations of memory or the unconscious, and the space of the experiment itself, with the camera constructing an impression of this space from various viewpoints and alternating between close-ups of the experimenters and their victim X, "the man whose story we are now telling". With a few details, a mask wired with electrodes, X's restless, tortured expressions - at one point, a series of shots picture him biting in pain the hammock on which he is lying - Marker deftly weaves an horrific image of incarceration, a subject utterly at the mercy of a ruthless, totalitarian regime (figures 42a-e).

As the experiment proceeds, mental images "begin to ooze like confessions"; we see pictures of a sunlit field, a bedroom, a child's face, birds arrested in flight, gravestones and finally, the now familiar pier of the film's title (figures 43a-e). An inspection of the latter image reveals two shadows projecting into the bottom of the frame, perhaps the shadows of the film's cameraman or director, as if to remind us of the space and process of filming itself, the 'outside' of the film. What is striking about these first instances of the past revisited is that they appear precisely as *photographs* in the context of the film which is after all, constructed from stills. There is no spatial coherence, in the sense discussed earlier in relation to Kuleshov and Heath, between these images which follow one another as if slides projected in a slide show. They depict moments frozen in time by the click of a shutter, scenes from a life stored, as Marker suggested earlier, in terms of external images which act almost as *aide-memoires*. Just as X begins his journey into his past, the film introduces a discrepancy between the relative spaces it presents. Having already projected ourselves into the narrative space of the camp and experiment (theatrical as it may be), we experience these first images as pictures, as photographic records of a previous existence and, following Barthes, as evidence of the character's former life. They establish the peculiar notion of not only his existence prior to the present tense of the 'story', which is both narrator's and viewer's space, but also of the film itself as an image of time *compressed*. Bruce Kawin in his discussion of *La Jetée* draws the analogy of the film reel as an image of time condensed, stored and subsequently unravelled through projection.[8]

8. Kawin, op.cit. p16.

We find an apt visual metaphor for the film's predominant theme in Marker's recurring use of images of time stilled as not only the subjects of X's memory, or more precisely, his first perceptions as a time traveller, but also as the scenarios in which much of the action takes place. Following the initial memory-pictures which evoke a sense of open space in stark contrast to the insistent confinement of the camp, and in a sequence which relies heavily on Kuleshov's notion of montage

as a primary means of creating cinematic meaning, we see fragments of classical sculptures from a museum, "perhaps the museum of his memory". Incomplete and scarred images of the (usually) female figure sequentially dissolve into each subsequent image, repeatedly destroying their coherence. The final shot in this sequence slowly dissolves an image of a sculpted head, scarred and disembodied over time, into a shot of X's tortured face as if to underline his fragmented condition (figures 44a-c). Eventually, X encounters the woman from the past/his memory and they begin a relationship extending across time which is predominantly expressed in the countless walks they take together (Susan Sontag has remarked elsewhere about the writer Robert Walser that walking is a means of turning time into space and space into time).[9] Significant reminders of the fragility and ephemerality of this relationship are evoked in Marker's use of images of graffiti or of the cross section of a sequoia tree, its rings marked with important historical dates: in the only instance of anything like a first person statement in the entire film (which is still reported by the narrator), X gestures to a point beyond the tree's edge and states "This is where I come from" - a reference to *Vertigo*, itself a film about a man haunted by an image from his past and to which *La Jetée* is undoubtedly indebted (figures 45g-h).

9. Susan Sontag 'Walser's Voice', preface to a collection of writings by Robert Walser *The Walk* London: Serpent's Tail 1982, p viii.

Corresponding to the narrator's position outside the *fabula* or as Kawin suggests regarding the relationship of the film's 'event' space to its manifestation in still images as "an aspect of the story-teller's vantage point outside the diegesis",[10] the camera acts predominantly as witness to the couple and on occasion, adopts their viewpoint as in typical look/point-of-view shots (see figures 45b-e) where a first shot shows either or both characters looking out of frame and follows this with a view of what that look encounters: a wall with the scribbled word 'cherie' accompanied by a love heart and later, as if to insinuate the omnipresence of the death depicted in the opening sequence, the caricature of a skull. In a crucial sequence (figures 46a-d) the reverse occurs: the camera firstly represents what we can interpret as X's perspective - or perhaps the experimenters' perspective through his eyes - on the sleeping woman as he moves around her, gazing at her almost as if he cannot believe that she is there in front of him or rather that he is here, in front of her; the camera then pulls back, establishing their relationship in space and framing the couple, she still asleep and he still puzzling. At this point the narrator tells us that X realizes that in the time where he has come from "she is already dead." They walk through gardens and "he remembers there were gardens", so establishing the fact that this is not a memory relived but an event occurring in a previous time to which he has been transported. He senses a barrier to his freedom in this "strange world full of wonders" and confronts the camera, looking directly into its lens and by

-10. Kawin, op.cit. p15.


45a


45b


45c


45d


45e


45f


45g


45h


46a


46b


46c


46d


47a


47b


47c

47d

47e

47f

47g

47h

47i

48a

48b

48c

48d

48e

49a

49b

49c

49d

49e

extension, directly at the viewer (figure 47a). The subsequent shot again adopts his point-of-view which becomes the viewer's and shows the starkly lit face of the head experimenter lifting the mask from X's eyes, again looking directly into the camera as if to return X's gaze; this is indeed a shot/reverse shot sequence which extends across not only space but *time* (figures 47a-b).

Further images of the woman alternate with images of the masked X until we are presented with a sequence of her sleeping seen as if from X's viewpoint. The texture of the image itself differs in this sequence from the rest of the film, the film stock being more grainy than before, lending it an intimacy which almost becomes voyeuristic. The dissolves between shots become gradually more subtle and the discrepancies in the woman's position relative to each new frame become less apparent. The images begin to slide into one another until they reach the decisive point at which we see the woman *move*: looking at the camera (at the viewer), the implication being that she is looking at X, she wakes up and blinks her eyes (figure 47g). In the context of the film to date, this comes as a shock. We experience the infamous 'illusion of life': he dreams, and both she and the film wake up, the latter thereby insinuating itself in the present tense or rather, the film eschews its tone of indirect speech, as if momentarily privileging the viewer with a first-person view. In the next shot, X's image of her is replaced by a still image - the impassive visage of the head experimenter, again starkly lit against a black ground - and the film reverts to the past tense and to its, by now familiar, indirectness.[11] At the very moment of this epiphany, the representation of actual movement and X's realisation of his *being there with her*, Marker reverts to the familiar routine, implying (in the context of this film at least) that the movement belongs more to the realm of dreams than to a reality so strenuously desired. In the words of the narrator just prior to this sequence: "he never knows whether he moves towards her, whether he is driven, whether he has made it up or whether he is only dreaming."

11. Kawin, op.cit. p18.

The film not only reverts to the insistent montage of stilled images but locates the subsequent (and final) meeting in a museum of natural history filled with a bizarre range of stuffed animals. In what is, perhaps, *La Jetée's* most lyrical sequence - there is no narration during this scene with the musical score effectively setting the tone - the two characters wander in a limbo, almost indistinguishable from the exhibits amongst which they walk, frozen by the camera as if in a state of suspended animation (figures 48a-e). It is at this moment that the experiment finally succeeds. Having pinpointed the exact spot and time, X is literally thrown (*jeter* - 'to throw'), into this past and is able to move around freely. It is the moment, though obviously not an aim of the experiment, in which

he finally seems to achieve the object of his longing: "the girl seems also to be tamed". It is also their final encounter. Figure 48d in particular seems to presage this imminent rift as their shadowy silhouettes dissolve into the brightness of the background just as the sequence itself dissolves into the blank, black screen which so often punctuates the film. The experimenters realize they have succeeded in effectively transporting a man through time and proceed to the real purpose of their work, to transport X into the future in order to find assistance to aid the survival of the human race. "After many painful tests", X catches a glimpse of the world to come and contacts the men and women of the future saying that "mankind cannot deny to his own past the means of his own survival". He is given a 'power plant' strong enough to put human industry back in motion and then "the gates of the future are closed." Back in the camp, X realizes he is of no further use to his captors and awaits imminent execution. But the people of the future also travel in time and "in the depths of his limbo", come to assist him, giving him the opportunity to join them in a 'pacified' future. He prefers, instead, to be returned to that time before the war, to the time of his childhood and to that woman, "who perhaps was waiting for him."

The camera cuts to the airport with X appearing on the pier. In a sequence reminiscent of the woman's awakening, the pivotal movement which locates the film briefly in the present tense, he runs towards her. But whereas the images of her sleeping were dissolved gradually into one another, here the movements are rapidly sequenced using straight cuts. The discrepancies between each frame are too great to create a sense of effortless motion, and the implied movement becomes frantically staccato in quality; X seems to be trying to break into the kind of movement he (and we) witnessed at the woman's bedside, into the present tense of the film, into the third dimension even, but without success. At this point we perceive the final twist in the plot, the loop which connects the very first sequence in the film, on the pier, with its last (figures 49a-e). Inevitably, he has been followed by one of the camp guards and as he runs towards the woman, he realizes that the moment he witnessed as a small boy and which so fascinated him ever since, was in fact the moment of his own death. The penultimate shot mirrors the first: we similarly see the woman's face and her expression which appeared mysterious at the start, now betrays her anguish. The camera pulls back to reveal the dead body, prostrate on the ground and the screen then dissolves to black for the last time.

"If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it."[12]

12. Brooks, op.cit. p23.

The loop in time which is the hero's predicament also spans the film's duration. In a sense, it *is* the film itself. Caught in a narrative which implants within him "the memory of a twice-lived fragment of time", escape becomes impossible. He is catapulted on a trajectory which not only re-invents the past but which by doing so enables the film to occur. He dies and the film ends: the narrative mechanism which drives the plot is revealed by the structure of the film as a formal mechanism. As we have seen, cinema is ordered around a mobile camera which traverses the film scenario, registering perspectives which are accumulated over time to enable the spectator to construct a space and simultaneously, a *fabula* - the story that is represented - which is inextricably linked to the narrative organisation of these viewpoints. In *La Jetée*, the *syuzhet* - the manner in which that fabula or story is represented - is closely linked with the film's stylistic devices, its use of stilled images and an invisible narrator. We never directly perceive the fabula which is ostensibly the story of a man's journey into his past which results in his death; this story is only revealed at the end of the film. Despite the lack of actual movement typical of conventional cinema, *La Jetée* is steeped in the notion of time.[13] The experience of fictional time over the course of actual time, of "time in the representing", serves as an analogue of "time represented" as Peter Brooks has noted concerning the serialization of the nineteenth-century novel.[14] Whilst it oscillates back and forth in this fictional time-scale, *La Jetée* refers its viewer to the very time in which they experience it. It occupies the spectator for a given period of time which precisely coincides with the hero's journey and the realisation of his fate. Indeed, the syuzhet throughout the film postpones that final moment of realisation by holding back the vital piece of information - X's realisation that the moment he was so fascinated by as a child was the moment of his own death - until the final frames. Discussing Walter Benjamin's *The Storyteller* and the relationship between narrative and death, Brooks states that "only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality", that the end is what shapes the beginning and middle and that plot (syuzhet) is simply or ultimately "the internal logic of the discourse of mortality."[15] With the end of *La Jetée* comes, therefore, the representation of that event, the hero's death, which proves to be the organising principle behind the film and, as Brooks would seem to imply, the knowledge of which motivates the reader or viewer's involvement in the construction of the story.

13. see note 3 above.

14. Brooks, op.cit. p21.

15. Ibid. p22.

Space unfolds in, and is constructed via the viewer's interpretation of this story. *La Jetée* utilizes the same shooting and cutting techniques as conventional cinema but in its use of the stilled image extended over time, it postpones the

present indefinitely. Its power lies in the tension it creates between the tools of film making (framing, movement, sequence, montage or juxtaposition) and the photographic image's uneasy relationship to its referent where it figures as a *memento mori*. The story of a man's harrowing and ultimately tragic journey into a past (which could be that of his imagination) is enmeshed in the process used to tell it. It hinges on a reading of the photographic image as both a fragment or reminder of time elapsed, evidence of an existence prior to its manipulation as an image, and as an image of potential movement. If the process of viewing, the temporal duration of the here and now, locates the film image in the present, the viewer acts as the hinge between two tenses, between the past tense of the pictorial or photographic image and the present tense of moving pictures.[16]

16. In a discussion of subjective viewpoint and experience, Bertrand Russell notes that: "Not only is man private from other people, but he is also private from his past and future selves." See his 'Egocentric Particulars', *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* London: Routledge 1992 (1948), p105.