

Time, Memory and Time Travel in Chris Marker's 'La Jetée' **Canaan Perry**

Chris Marker's 1962 photo-roman *La Jetée* utilizes the well established science fiction narrative convention of time travel as a vehicle for exploring dimensions of the human psyche and condition. The text can thus be read as a personal and psychological journey through portrayed conceptualisations of reoccurring traumatic memory and subjective, temporally displaced imaginings. However, *La Jetée* also explores and evokes notions of cultural time and social remembering by utilising aspects of the documentary film form, in conjunction with its more experimental French New Wave techniques, to appeal to broader societal traumas and memories. In this essay I will survey some of the content and techniques employed in the film in relation to the ideas it projects regarding memory, time and time travel.

Set mainly in a 1960s derived extrapolation of Paris *La Jetée* could be described as a documentary from the post-apocalyptic future. The text is a portrayal of the journeys of a man "marked by an image of image his childhood"[1] through time, who, in experiments conducted by the scientific proprietors of the network of underground tunnels that the survivors inhabit attempts to: "call the past and future into the rescue of the present." Despite this science fiction flavoured dystopian backdrop Hagopian notes that *La Jetée* may be Marker's only fiction film however it is just barely that.[2] French also suggests that the text is "much closer to the documentary than to fiction." [3] These views can be explained in part because in the text there is a portrayal of archival still images, in a montage of dissolves, of European cities and buildings in varying states of ruin during World War Two encouraging the viewer to (re)witness and recall the now photographically frozen horrors of the civilian bombing campaigns over Europe during the war. The melancholic yet grandiose choral music that accompanies the sequence further encourages the audience's feelings of terror and dismay. The text also employs the sounds of muttered whispering in German in conjunction with the images of the scientists who perform the time experiments in an endeavour to evoke the audience's memories of the German occupation of France and the Vichy collaboration.[4] In addition, it is important to consider that Marker was working in the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis: a milieu that generated rampant ideas and anxieties with regards to the apocalyptic.[5] Thus, as Hagopian and French suggest, *La Jetée* is not only a work of (science) fiction but it is also an attempt to construct something akin to a documentary: a kind of artefact from the future. With regards to this, the text can be interpreted as a venture to induce socially contextual memories from a near past and elucidate their potential reoccurrence in the near future.

Marker's employment of the photo-roman or cine-roman filmic form[6] leads to *La Jetée* being almost entirely composed of filmed still photographs, dissolved and cut together, complemented by a voice over narrative and music; Uroskie, conveniently for my purposes here, describes it as a non-chronological, differential or irrational montage.[7] The grainy black and white photographs and the slightly shaky format of the stills projected at twenty-four frames per second[8] summons a nostalgic quality paradoxically imbuing this "documentary" with a future past tense characteristic which seems to drain "away [nearly] all spatial movement"[9] further complicating the audience's conceptualisations of memory and time. The sequence which portrays the traumatic, circular founding and ending moment of the protagonists existence: the image of a woman's face and his own death on a pier at Orly airport that he was "granted to see as a child" makes the viewer aware of the correlation between still photography and human memory in the modern, industrial world where human inventions, like the camera, have led to modified/altered ways of being. In particular, the text draws to our attention the phenomena where still photographs have come to be incorporated into and consequently interlinked with the human memory process. The text thus expounds an apparently Marxist understanding of subject and object arrangements within the confines of the modern domain where the objects of industrial productive processes have come to

demonstrate “a mastery over man,” or the subject, “instead of being controlled by him.”[10] Or as Ffrench eloquently notes, in relation to the use of the still image’s deployment in *La Jetée*: it is “as if our subjective histories were thus determined by the memory-life of the image itself, carrying and expressing history.”[11]

Within the confines of this framework *La Jetée* has a thematic concern with the concept of stillness which functions as a figurative template for further exploring perceptions of memory, time and mental ordering. The text is heavily populated with statues and stuffed animals[12] and the narration at the beginning of the film refers to the images of the protagonist’s traumatic memory as being “bound to the sight of a frozen sun.” The museums in the film function as a metaphorical construct for the subjective momentary ordering of memory, time and meaning as the protagonist’s own memory is likened to that of a museum.[13] As the narration notes: “more images pour out and mix: a Museum, perhaps the museum of his memory.” The sequence which transpires in the natural history museum corresponds with the successful mastering of the time travel experiment in the narrative as the scientists “hit the bullseye” and the protagonist may stay in the past “without trouble.” The taxonomical ordering inherent in the museum display and its deployment in this sequence signifies to the audience that the protagonist’s memory and sense of time, at this point, is organised in some sort of coherent fashion.[14] Additionally, this state of mental ordering overlaps with the relationship that he has with woman where time is described as stopping, as, the narration declares that “they have no memories, no plans [and] time builds itself painlessly around them,” and the natural history museum is described as being filled with “ageless animals.” The prevalent utilisation of stillness in the text can hence be interpreted as another means of exploring the realm of human memory. In particular, it makes the audience aware of the frozen or timeless moments of one’s own life, or what Callenbach calls the moments of “ordinary life [and] the ordinary loves of our present”[15] which like the film’s protagonist are framed by the past and the future, or more specifically, life and death.

Thus far, I have argued that the text is imbued with notions of cultural time, evokes an awareness of the modern correlation between photographs and memories and appears to show a predilection for the theme of stillness in its content and form. However, I would like to further elucidate here how the text explores ideas of human memory as a mode of exploring the existential. Consequently, I will suggest here that the trans-temporal voyages of the unnamed protagonist in *La Jetée* can be read as a purely metaphorical construction[16] for exploring the movements of a person through varying temporal dimensions of their own memory, imagination and subjectivity. The time travel technology is given no exposition in the film and the voice over narration on several occasions calls into question the material validity of the protagonist’s journeys alluding to them as if they were fantasies or dreams. The narration states that “he often wondered if he had ever seen” the woman’s face “or if he had dreamed a lovely moment” and that he was unsure “whether he...made it up or whether he [was] only dreaming.” Also, the future that the protagonist visits is an imagined abstraction represented by a cryptic map and series of faces against a dark background: a world the protagonist rejects preferring to be cast back into the realm of his memory. The text thus plays on the modern conventions of time travel narratives by displacing the object or device that would allow travel through time, such as H. G. Wells’s time machine,[17] and instead invests in the subjective human mind, with its potential network of memories and imagined abstracted futures, as the ultimate vessel for time travel. With regard to this Marker has perhaps located the original vessel of time travel narrative: the human mind per se. Although we as a modern audience may associate time travel narratives with a set of sub-generic conventions which exist within the speculative fiction super-genre (=science fiction, horror and fantasy) the idea that one could go into the past or future, I suspect, probably has its origins in the beginnings of human narrative itself. I assume this because humans have the ability to project their own present psyche, in temporally complex ways, into their own memories and their imagined futures. There is some evidence of this ability for subjective temporal displacement in language as future events can be talked about in past tense terms. [18] Thus, the cerebral movements through time, as opposed to space, which the protagonist

performs in the text, are an attempt to arouse awareness in the viewer of something that is a component of the human condition that is probably not often consciously thought of. Furthermore, *La Jetée* brings to the audience's attention the idea that time travel itself is perhaps only a modern encoded variant of this human ability to cognitively displace one's self in a temporal sense.

It has been argued here that *La Jetée* may appear to be a science fiction film however its relationship with this genre is not straight forward as the text encapsulates techniques that are more akin to a documentary than to a fiction film. It has also been stated here that the text is in part an exploration of social memory, particularly with regards to its evocation and portrayal of European, particularly French, societal traumas during World War Two. Furthermore, I have claimed that the text demonstrates a fascination with the theme of stillness or frozen time within the confines of its content and its photo-roman form. In addition, I have suggested that Marker has displaced the modern mechanical device as the means of time travel and replaced it with what I believe is the progenitor of time travel narratives: the temporal displacement ability which is inherent in the human mind.

Endnotes:

- [1] Quotation from *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil* (Sunless): Two Films by Chris Marker (Chris Marker, Nouveaux Pictures, England, 2003). All subsequent quotations are derived from this release.
- [2] Kevin Hagopian "Film Notes," Penn State University, <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/filmnote2.html> (accessed 9/08/06).
- [3] Patrick Ffrench, "The Memory of the Image in Chris Marker's *La Jetée*," *French Studies*, vol. 59, no.1 (2005), 32.
- [4] Hagopian explains that "Marker...remembered the ideological inconsistencies and bloody paradoxes of the Vichy years with special clarity. Marker was a youthful fighter with the Resistance..." Also see Ffrench, 36 who states that: "[o]ne could also ask why the proprietors of the post-apocalyptic underground tunnels, referred to as a 'camp', whisper in German. The reference to an underground network of caves beneath the Palais de Chaillot (which hid a Resistance re'seau during the Occupation), and the thematics of imprisonment, establish a resonance with the Occupation."
- [5] Noted in Ffrench, 35.
- [6] Eli Friedlander notes that: "The film...identifies itself as a cine-roman, thus as belonging to a low and popular genre." In "La Jetée: Regarding the Gaze," *Boundary 2*, vol. 28, iss. 1 (2001), 79.
- [7] Andrew V. Uroskie, "La Jetée en Spirale: Robert Smithson's Stratigraphic Cinema," *Grey Room*, iss. 19 (2005), 62.
- [8] Ffrench states in relation to conceptions of movement in the film that: "[t]he withdrawal of the images of the film from the illusion of continuous motion induced by shooting and projection at twenty-four frames a second serves to emphasize, not to deny, the dynamism inherent in cinema." See, 34.
- [9] In Uroskie, 62. Furthermore, in the film itself the voice over narrator explains that "space was off limits." For additional discussion on movement in the film, particularly regarding the movement of the women's eyes, see Chris Darke, "Eyesight," *Film Comment*, vol. 39, iss. 3 (2003), 49-50.

- [10] See Karl Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 50. This relates to Marx's theories on the fetishism of commodities, pp. 42-50, in which items of production take on mystical and transcendent qualities which seem well beyond their apparent "use-value."
- [11] Ffrench, 33.
- [12] Noted in Ffrench, 33.
- [13] Ffrench, 33.
- [14] Contrary to my understanding Uroskie argues that "in [the] vision...[is] the quintessential image of man's futile attempt to classify, order, and understand a history of the world outside his own making." See 63.
- [15] Ernest Callenbach, "Review: *La Jetée*," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1965-1966), 50.
- [16] This is adapted from Matthew Ruben's analysis of Terry Gilliam's film *12 Monkeys*; a text which is derivative of *La Jetée*. See, "12 Monkeys, Postmodernism, and the Urban: Toward a New Method," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, ed. Amy Villarejo (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 314-315.
- [17] H.G. Wells's technological mechanism in *The Time Machine* (1895) is an archetypal example. However, Wells's machine is also limited to travelling through time and not space. For an historical overview and argument about the modern development of time travel in narrative see Paul Coates "Chris Marker and the Cinema as Time Machine," *Science Fiction Studies* no. 43, vol. 14 (1987), 307-315.
- [18] Derived from a definition in Eugene E. Loos, Susan Anderson, Dwight H. Day Jr, Paul C. Jordan and J. Douglas Wingate (eds.), *Glossary of Linguistic Terms*, (2004) *LinguaLinks* <http://www.sil.org/linguistics/glossaryoflinguisticterms/WhatIsFutureInPastTense.htm> (accessed 04/09/06).

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