

La Jetée: Unchained Melody

By Jonathan Romney

However you define Chris Marker's 1963 short *La Jetée*—philosophical fiction, genre exercise, treatise on cinematic time—one fact is unavoidable: it resembles few other films. In fact, *La Jetée* does not define itself as a film at all—its credits identify it as “*un photo-roman*.” This means literally a “photo-novel,” but usually denotes those photographed comic strips popular in magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Europe. The label “photo-roman” suggests that what we are watching ought to be a static object—a book, rather than a film (when *La Jetée* was issued in book form, by Zone Books in 1992, it bore a new subtitle proclaiming its filmic origin: “ciné-roman”). Taking the form of apocalyptic science fiction typical of the cold war era, *La Jetée* is a story told in black-and-white stills, accompanied by music, sound effects, and voice-over narration. It contains only one brief shot of filmed motion, and one moment in which the camera appears to move, pulling back from the opening still of the pier or observation deck at Paris Orly Airport (the *jetée* itself).

La Jetée's narrative—in which an unnamed hero, living in a Parisian postwar radioactive wasteland, is sent back in time by scientists to find sustenance or a source of energy—is a Möbius strip, returning paradoxically to its point of origin to swallow its own tail and engender itself once more. Because these missions follow the route of inner space, via the travelers' memories, “the man whose story we are telling” is considered an especially apt subject: he is fixated on a single memory. As a child, he witnessed an unexplained scene of violence at Orly Airport, involving a man falling and the shocked reaction of a beautiful woman.

The film's parable-like concision derives not only from the elegantly lucid text but also from the evocative precision of the images, and from the sparseness of the montage. *La Jetée* feels not only like a photo-roman but also like a photographed storyboard for a science-fiction film yet to be made (Terry Gilliam used *La Jetée* as inspiration for just such a film in 1995, the rather more frenetic *12 Monkeys*). The peculiar, indeed exceptional, formal qualities of *La Jetée* lead viewers, consciously or otherwise, to reappraise their conceptions of the nature of cinema and its relation to time and to motion. We are routinely accustomed to thinking that film simply captures motion, photographing the moving object at the rate of twenty-four frames a second. The flow of frames is reassembled by the mind—thanks to the perceptual process of “persistence of vision”—into the illusion (which we automatically tend to

perceive, rather, as a copy) of autonomous motion. However, by breaking his narrative down into a series of discontinuous stills, each held at some length, Marker reminds us that the filmic illusion of motion is always composed of a series of still images—as it were, the single atoms of cinematic flow. It is the often infinitesimal differences between these still images that make the picture appear to move.

However, as each one of *La Jetée*'s static images lasts considerably longer than 1/24 of a second, on celluloid each still in *La Jetée* actually comprises dozens of replicas of itself. In presenting us with a series of frozen images, Marker dramatizes a breakdown of time's invisible flow into a succession of visible moments that might be considered the individual atoms of time, and of our experience of time. Indeed, when the film's hero journeys into the distant future, that new world is represented as a series of microscope images.

Time moves differently in this extraordinary essay on cinematic tense, and from the start, our perceptions of past, present, and future undergo strange mutations. The tense of the narrative shifts between past and present, the latter used predominantly to narrate the hero's return to a lost past. That past is the Paris of the present in which the film was shot; the combination of photographs and commentary contrive to make the city in 1962 appear radically unfamiliar. The opening shots of Orly and its stark linear architecture offer a coldly futuristic panorama, as air travel still had a cachet of hypermodernity in the early sixties. Yet over these tableaux, the narrative describes a memory of the distant past.

In later images of 1962 Paris, futurity is replaced by a sense of the quotidian, which nevertheless is granted fantastic dimensions by the matter-of-fact commentary: in a department store, the hero is stunned by this new world and its "fabulous materials: glass, plastic, terry cloth." But 1960s Paris is also infused by antiquity: images of shattered classical statues (a figure of the film's own fragmentation and the hero's state of self) suggest a culture that has preserved its past, as the postapocalyptic world has failed to do, but that is haunted, in thrall to its own ghosts. In one sequence, the man and woman examine a section of sequoia tree, an allusion to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), in which Madeleine (Kim Novak), who identifies herself with a long-dead woman named Carlotta Valdez, shows Scotty (James Stewart) rings on the sequoia trunk, marking the points in time at which Carlotta was born and died. In *La Jetée*, the terms of reference are reversed: here it is the man from the future who shows the woman a point outside the circumference of the trunk, marking a moment yet to come at which he will one day exist. But paradoxically, this allusion to the future is already itself a repetition of the past, and a fictional

past at that: in repeating Novak's pointing gesture, which Marker's still closely echoes, the man from the future is unwittingly reenacting a moment in a film from the past (of the man's distant past, but the recent past from Marker's point of view, as *Vertigo* was made only five years before *La Jetée*). The reenactment is made explicit in *La Jetée*'s narration: Looking at the sequoia, the woman "pronounces an English name he doesn't understand"—the name is surely Hitchcock. (Significantly, in his 1983 essay film *Sans Soleil*, Marker alludes to both *Vertigo* and *La Jetée* as reference points for his exploration of time, memory, and the moving image.)

In a long sequence of *La Jetée*, the couple visits a museum of natural history in which animals are preserved in timeless suspension, stuffed and static. Yet in Marker's still shots, there is no visible distinction between the beasts and the people watching them. The happy couple interacts with zebras and tapirs that seem to regard them curiously; the images are full of life, but in themselves they offer no way of knowing whether the animals have miraculously come alive or whether the humans, rather, are frozen like them. These are arguably the most self-reflexive shots in *La Jetée*, prompting us to question whether these still images tend to evoke animation in dead beings or to reduce living creatures to deathly stasis. Yet while the animals seem morbidly frozen in a mausoleum masquerading as a zoo, the humans' visible joy suggests a utopian condition of eternal euphoria—the couple appears to inhabit a sort of pure present, a suspended state beyond time. In the department store, "they are without memories, without plans. Time builds itself painfully around them. The only landmarks are the flavor of the moment they are living and the markings on the walls."

This sounds at once like an ideal romantic state and a deathly condition, beyond desire or even consciousness. However, Jean Ravel's subtly rhythmic editing restores a fluid energy to the film's succession of frozen moments. At one point, we see the woman in bed asleep, as a series of stills gently and sensuously shift into each other, evoking her tentative stirring. Suddenly, in *La Jetée*'s single moment of animation, she opens her eyes to look directly at the camera: this becomes the true center of the film, momentarily displacing the fetishistically fixed moment of origin on the pier. But it is at the airport that stasis finally consumes the film. Having saved his world, the man returns to Orly and the woman waiting for him on the pier. As he dashes toward his love, a series of shots edited in quick succession give his desperate run the appearance of painfully, suspensefully slowed-down motion. But one of his captors is also there and shoots him: as the man falls, the voice-over explains that the scene that has always haunted him was the moment of his own death. As he dies, he freezes in midair, a human statue as lifeless as the classical relics seen earlier.

Marker shot *La Jetée* during gaps in the shooting of *Le joli mai* (1963), an anatomy of May '62 in Paris. In a 2003 interview, he said of *La Jetée*, "It was made like a piece of automatic writing . . . I photographed a story I didn't completely understand. It was in the editing that the pieces of the puzzle came together, and it wasn't me who designed the puzzle." This could be taken as a tribute to editor Jean Ravel, but also as a testament to the unconscious forces that appear to drive the story: *La Jetée* can certainly be read as an allegory of psychoanalysis, in which a supine subject searches in his unconscious for the origins of his trauma.

La Jetée is the only fiction proper in Marker's oeuvre, although he has used the stills format in other films, notably *If I Had Four Dromedaries* (1966). *La Jetée* nonetheless encapsulates many of his enduring themes: its hero could be a version of Marker, the compulsive traveler who has spent his life venturing into the world and retrieving fragments of experience to be reassembled into a newly complex picture of his age. The film also displays Marker's fascination for technology as a means of reading experience: in recent years, he has become a passionate explorer of digital and interactive media, in installations, CD-ROMs, and his video essay *Level Five* (1996). *La Jetée* also illustrates a proposition that Marker makes in his 1983 travelogue-essay *Sans Soleil*: "The great question of the twentieth [century] was the coexistence of different concepts of time."

La Jetée proposes an avenue that few chose to follow directly, yet the film has been hugely influential. Its visual transformation of the mundane into future dystopia was further pursued by Jean-Luc Godard in *Alphaville* (1965), and later by Wong Kar-wai in his multiperiod narrative *2046* (2004). The film's paradoxical time travel premise has become a science-fiction staple, most famously exploited in James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), as well as *12 Monkeys*, while the theme of time travel as an exploration of the self was also utilized in a 1968 film by Marker's sometime collaborator Alain Resnais, *Je t'aime, je t'aime*. *La Jetée* itself has affinities not only with the time play and the haunted ambience of Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961) but also with the novels of that film's writer, Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose *The Erasers* (1953) is a prime example of paradoxically looped narrative. *La Jetée* has also influenced a writerly strain of experimental cinema in which narrative, or the appearance of narrative, is generated from the match of tenuously related image and text: notably, Peter Greenaway's early shorts and the films of Patrick Keiller (*London*, *Robinson in Space*).

A recent, most curious echo of the film can be found in the Brothers Quay's experimental *The Piano*

Tuner of Earthquakes (2005), in which images of the dead are frozen in eternal reenactments of episodes from their lives: a narrative of suspended animation close to the spirit of *La Jetée*. The Quays' film borrows British composer Trevor Duncan's score from *La Jetée*, which was already a piece of library music in circulation when Marker used it. This tribute reminds us how much Duncan's music contributes to the film. Eerie, romantic, and obsessive in its repetitions, it always sounds in *La Jetée* as if heard from afar, from a distant past. The music is another of those elements that make it possible to apply to *La Jetée* an epithet that's usually lazy, if not nonsensical, but which in this case has a very specific application: *La Jetée* truly is timeless.