

Guest Editorial

## LA JETÉE: ACADEMY ONE

by J. G. BALLARD



THIS STRANGE AND poetic film, a fusion of science fiction, psychological fable and photo-montage, creates in its unique way a series of bizarre images of the inner landscapes of time. Apart from a brief three-second sequence—a young woman's hesitant smile, a moment of extraordinary poignancy, like a fragment of a child's dream—the thirty-minute film is composed entirely of still photographs. Yet this succession of disconnected images is a perfect means of projecting the quantified memories and movements through time that are the film's subject matter.

The jetty of the title is the main observation platform at Orly Airport. The long pier reaches out across the concrete no-man's land, the departure-point for other worlds. Giant jets rest on the apron beside the pier, metallic ciphers whose streamlining is a code for their passage through time. The light is powdery. The spectators on the observation platform have the appearance of mannequins. The hero is a small boy, visiting the airport with his parents. Suddenly there is a fragmented glimpse of a man falling. An accident has occurred, but while everyone is running to the dead man the small boy is looking instead at the face of a young woman by the rail. Something about this face, its expression of anxiety, regret and relief, and above all the obvious but unstated involvement of the young woman with the dead man, creates an image of extraordinary power in the boy's mind.

Years later, World War III breaks out. Paris is almost obliterated by an immense holocaust. A few survivors live on in the circular galleries below the Palais de Chaillot, like rats in some sort of abandoned test-maze warped out of

its normal time. The victors, distinguished by the strange eye-pieces they wear, begin to conduct a series of experiments on the survivors, among them the hero, now a man of about thirty. Faced with a destroyed world, the experimenters are hoping to send a man through time. They select the young man because of the powerful memory he carries of the pier at Orly. With luck he will home on to this. Other volunteers have gone insane, but the extraordinary strength of his memory carries him back to pre-war Paris. The sequence of images here is the most remarkable in the film, the subject lying in a hammock in the underground corridor as if waiting for some inward sun to rise, a bizarre surgical mask over his eyes—in my experience, the only convincing act of time travel in the whole of science fiction.

Arriving in Paris, he wanders among the strange crowds, unable to make contact with anyone until he meets the young woman he had seen as a child at Orly Airport. They fall in love, but their relationship is marred by his sense of isolation in time, his awareness that he has committed some kind of psychological crime in pursuing this memory. As if trying to place himself in time, he takes the young woman to museums of palaeontology, and they spend days among the fossil plants and animals. They visit Orly Airport, where he decides that he will not go back to the experimenters at Chaillot. At this moment three strange figures appear. Agents from an even more distant future, they are policing the time-ways, and have come to force him back. Rather than leave the young woman, he throws himself from the pier. The falling body is the one he glimpsed as a child.

This familiar theme is treated with remarkable finesse and imagination, its symbols and perspectives continually reinforcing the subject matter. Not once does it make use of the time-honoured conventions of traditional science fiction. Creating its own conventions from scratch, it triumphantly succeeds where science fiction invariably fails.

(Next month John Brunner reviews Godard's *Alphaville*)