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FILM CLASSICS

La Jetée



CHRIS DARKE

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La Jetée

Chris Darke



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1 *La Jetée* ... Still

I don't remember when I first saw *La Jetée* (1963) or where. It might have been in a repertory fleapit or a university seminar room. Or did I discover it, this mysterious jewel of a film, dumped on a VHS tape among half-recorded TV shows and out-of-date ads? Imagine: tumbling on fast-forward through colourful junk when, suddenly, *this*. Press play. Monochrome images – cool, spare, static – which seem to unfold out of each other. Whispering. Sudden heart-swelling gusts of music. Then – did that just happen? How? Rewind. Watch again. Wait for *that* moment when the film itself looks straight back at you.

The 'where' and 'when' don't really matter now. The film has been a part of my life for so long that it seems always to have been there and over the years it has acquired the status of a work apart, and not only for me. When asked to contribute to the decennial *Sight & Sound* poll of the 'Greatest Films of All Time' in 2012, I had no trouble deciding which title would occupy prime position in my list and, in its first appearance, *La Jetée* came in at number fifty out of a hundred films, tying with Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatori* (1953) – curiously, another film about ghosts and wartime – but was kept from the top slot by Hitchcock's 'pre-make', *Vertigo* (1958). If such polls amount to anything, then *La Jetée* can no longer be considered merely a 'cult classic', as it has often been called, and should now be recognised as a bona fide master-work, a classic fully fledged and with no need of qualification.

Not that there isn't something eminently cult-like about the admiration it inspires, the best expression of which must be the tiny one-room bar named in its honour in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo, where people come to drink beneath images from the film and which

Marker stated was worth more to him than ‘any number of Oscars’.¹ Other tributes are better known: from Terry Gilliam’s 1995 Hollywood ‘remake’ *Twelve Monkeys* and Mark Romanek’s video for David Bowie’s 1993 single *Jump They Say*, to the many science-fiction films that have drawn on *La Jetée*’s spiralling time-travel narrative, among them the *Back to the Future* series (1985–90), the *Terminator* films (1984–) and more recently *Primer* (2004) and *Looper* (2012), not to mention the 2014 US television series *12 Monkeys* (which, if we accept Marker’s claim that *La Jetée* was itself a remake of *Vertigo*, makes the TV series a remake of a remake of a ...).

In a well-known essay on cult films, Umberto Eco distinguishes between ‘unhinged’ and ‘perfect’ works. The ‘unhinged’ film is easily reduced to quotable fragments ripe for semiotic recycling and cult appreciation. The ‘perfect’ film, on the other hand, resists such intertextual overhauling because it remains in our minds as a whole, ‘in the form of a central idea or emotion’.² But what about films that are both ‘unhinged’ and ‘perfect’, emotionally and intellectually complete as well as seemingly easy to disassemble? *La Jetée* is just such a work. ‘Unhinged’ in its highly unconventional and already fragmented form, it is also peculiarly ‘perfect’ for the same reason. I’d go further. *La Jetée* is perfect enough in its unhinged-ness to be exhibited in a gallery.

It is one thing to write a book about *La Jetée*, quite another to dedicate a room to it (and not a bar this time). The room in question was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London where an exhibition of Marker’s work was on show and I found myself returning to it repeatedly between April and June 2014. The challenge of how best to fit a black box into a white cube, of reconciling the viewing conditions of cinema with those of a gallery, found an answer in the room’s layout. Rows of benches facing a screen approximated the experience of being at the movies. The lighting levels, dimmed but not quite dark, and the space left for people to circulate around one side of the seating, allowed gallery-goers to pause, watch for a moment and then move on. I realised



I could do something in that room I'd never done before, something that wouldn't normally be possible among the darkened rows of a cinema or the brightly lit distractions of home viewing. I could watch people watching *La Jetée*.

Whether I was standing at the entrance or sitting on the benches alongside other viewers, my attention invariably shifted away from the film to the audience. And while there was something slightly recursive to the act of watching people watch a film about a man who watches the mental images projected in his mind's eye, what did I see in those faces? Rapt attention, no doubt, and the signs of moment-by-moment immersion in the unique experience that the film offers. If my avid observation of the audience sounds a bit odd, I should explain that, as one of the curators of the show, I was bound to be intrigued by the way people reacted. Walking through the other two rooms, among the photographs and multimedia installations, books and collages, I was impressed by the absorbed

looks of the visitors. Each room also included a looped projection of a film shown in its entirety: in the first, Marker's early collaboration with Alain Resnais, *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*, 1953), and in the third, a restored print of *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* (*A Grin Without a Cat*, 1977), Marker's three-and-a-half-hour documentary fresco about the leftist movements of the 1960s.

But it was in the room between the other two where I did most of my audience-watching. Though the smallest by far, it provided a focus to the show, being the only room dedicated solely to a single film. A little under thirty minutes long, shot in black and white, made up almost entirely of still images and with an evocative combination of voiceover narration, sound effects and music, *La Jetée* is cinematically hard to classify; something alluded to in the title credits where it is described as 'un photo-roman', or 'a photo-novel'. With haunting economy, it tells the story of a soldier (Davos Hanich), who is held captive in an underground prison camp in post-apocalypse Paris and used as a guinea pig in time-travel experiments. He retains a mental image from his childhood of the face of a woman (Hélène Chatelain) and the death of a man witnessed on the observation pier ('la jetée') of Orly airport in Paris. His captors exploit the strength of this image, first to send him back to the past, where he meets the woman again, then into the future to secure the fate of humanity's survivors. His mission accomplished, the time traveller flees back in time to Orly, where he hopes to be reunited with the woman, but he has been pursued by a guard from the camp who executes him in front of her. The time traveller's final realisation is that his childhood image was of his own death.

Even though it was made over fifty years ago, *La Jetée* seems to have escaped the ravages of time, which explains something of its enduring fascination. Film-makers have played extensive variations on its story; artists have lingered over its exploration of the photographic image; and critics have analysed it as a meditation on loss, memory and the nature of cinema. However, in curating the Whitechapel show we found proof that *La Jetée* did not, in fact, fall

fully formed from the sky as an inimitable cinematic masterpiece, but that it had its phases of production, its first drafts and rough sketches and even, as we discovered, its ‘twin’. To unearth such material was significant for two reasons. First, because Marker was deeply averse to giving interviews and rarely spoke about his work, next to nothing is known about the film’s origins or the ideas behind it. Such reticence adds greatly to its enduring mystique as a work that speaks for itself and as a seeming anomaly, the only fiction film in Marker’s extensive cinematic oeuvre. Second, because there is almost nothing in Marker’s own words, the material we assembled afforded a rare insight into the work that went into shaping the film.

I had read in an essay by the film scholar Philippe Dubois that the Royal Belgian Film Archive holds a trove of material relating to *La Jetée*, including a copy of a different version of the film, an exercise book containing an editing plan and a collection of correspondence between Marker and Jacques Ledoux, the former director of the Film Archive. Ledoux had assisted Marker with his research for *La Jetée* by arranging screenings of science-fiction films for him, and Marker had in turn donated materials to the Archive,



Jacques Ledoux as Chief Experimenter

as well as giving his friend an enigmatic credit on the film for the so-called ‘Ledoux Process’ (‘Procédé Ledoux’) and casting him in the role of the Chief Experimenter. So, in April 2013 I travelled to Brussels where, in the Archive’s gabled library, I examined these items with a sense of anticipation that was only heightened by the discovery that the Marker–Ledoux correspondence had mysteriously gone missing. (Dubois treats his readers to some extracts. Marker to Ledoux in early 1962: ‘a role as experimental-doctor-in-a-World-War-Three-underground-concentration-camp awaits you, which will fit you like a glove’).³ The copy of the film held by the Archive – *La Jetée*’s ‘twin’ – was distinguished from its definitive sibling by only the slightest difference in appearance; but when it comes to stillness and movement a difference, however small, can be decisive. What was striking was how and where Marker had chosen *not* to tell the story in still images. In this version, the opening pre-credits sequence set on the main pier at Orly airport is filmed in motion. The camera pans from left to right in a high-angle shot following the time traveller as he runs towards the woman, the image of whose face haunts him, and so towards the death which, through some quirk of time, he will have seen – and foreseen – as a child. This moving shot lasts only ten seconds but it alters the balance of the film completely.

If this version of the film raised questions about the beginning (and beginnings) of *La Jetée*, the other archival item I had to examine took me even further back in time to its prehistory. Slipping on a pair of white gloves, I opened a large manila envelope and extracted a spiral-bound A4 exercise book with a blue cover and the word ‘Sciences’ embossed in gold. Turning to the inside front page, I saw the film’s title scrawled in thick strokes. The handwriting was familiar. Marker had made his mark with the pen he took his penname from. Over the following twenty-eight pages the structure of the film is arranged in a series of fourteen sequences listed alphabetically from A to Q. Each sequence is laid out across facing pages, with the left-hand page containing images and the right handwritten (though not by Marker) editing instructions. (The exceptions being sequences B, J and



K, which are missing from the document but acknowledged in the overall alphabetical sequence.) The images had been cut from contact sheets, pasted vertically onto the page, and each one numbered, their order relating to an early version of the film's narrative sequence. This 'workbook', as we curators came to call it, was like a secret manual of the film, a unique and fragile assembly (some images falling unglued from its pages) of the elements that make up the completed

work. Particularly interesting is the comparative exchange it sets up with the film, for there are things in the workbook not in the film and things in the film not in the workbook.

These two archival treasures, *La Jetée's* 'twin' and the workbook, were the principal displays in the Whitechapel room dedicated to the film. The Archive's print was only available in the French-language version, with Jean Négroni's narration translated in English subtitles, and it happened to be the most luminous copy of the film I'd ever seen. Probably because it had rarely, if ever, been projected as a celluloid print, the high-definition digital transfer was pristine, with monochrome tones that glowed like silk. From the workbook, we had facsimiles made of the title page and six sequences (A, M, N, O, P and Q) selected to illustrate either how close they are to the final version of the film or how they differ from it. In an adjoining vitrine, two other printed versions of the film's images and text were shown, one published in 1964 by the French magazine *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma*, the other being the 1992 hardback 'ciné-roman' designed by Bruce Mau.



The workbook: vitrine display (installation view of Chris Marker: *A Grin Without a Cat*, exhibition held at Whitechapel Gallery, 16 April–22 June 2014. Courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, Whitechapel Gallery Archive); layout for Sequence A

One day, as we arranged the pages with our white gloves, preparing them for their vitrines, I said to a colleague, 'We're going to be accused of being fetishists.' (Fetishism: the act of sanctifying fragments. See Eco's definition of 'cult'.) And with good reason. Two good reasons, in fact, the first being strictly curatorial. These different paper versions of the film – workbook, magazine layout and 'ciné-roman' – together proposed a way of taking seriously its description as a 'photo-roman', but they also represented an aspect of the way Marker worked. He described himself as a '*bricoleur*', or a 'tinkerer', extracting material from diverse sources to recombine it anew in a different medium, whether as a book, film, cd-rom or some subsequent digital iteration, often reconfiguring that medium in the process. With Marker we move constantly from word to image, page to screen, book to film and back again, sometimes even in the same work. Images are rarely without their accompanying text or spoken commentary. The screen has the attributes of a page, and the page those of a screen. A book's a film and a film's a book. If an attention to detail bordering on the fetishistic is needed to even begin to un-braid the dense weave of media, materials and elements that makes up Marker's work, then so be it.

La Jetée

Chris Marker's *La Jetée* is 28 minutes long and almost entirely made up of black-and-white still images. Since its release in 1964, this legendary French film – which Marker described as a ‘photo-novel’ – has haunted generations of viewers and inspired writers, artists and film-makers. Its spiralling time-travel narrative has also influenced many other films, including the *Terminator* series and Terry Gilliam's Hollywood ‘remake’ *Twelve Monkeys* (1995).

But as Marker rarely gave interviews, little is really known about the origins of *La Jetée* or the ideas behind it. In this groundbreaking study, Chris Darke draws on rare archival material, including previously unpublished correspondence and production documents, to examine the making of the film. He explores how Marker's only fiction film was influenced both by his early work as a writer and by Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), and considers how *La Jetée*'s images can be seen to ‘echo’ throughout Marker's extraordinarily diverse oeuvre.

CHRIS DARKE is a Senior Lecturer in Film at the University of Roehampton, UK, as well as a writer and film critic whose work has appeared in many magazines, including *Sight & Sound*, *Film Comment* and *Cahiers du cinéma*. He is also the author of several books, including *Light Readings: Film Criticism and Screen Arts* (2000), and the co-curator of the major exhibition, *Chris Marker: A Grin Without a Cat*, at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2014.

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