

BOOK REVIEW

La Jetée, by Chris Darke, London, Palgrave on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2016, 94 pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1844576425

This is the story of a film, a mercurial cine-poet who died the day he was born (29 July 1921–29 July 2012), and a text by an author, Chris Darke, whose recent works proffer privileged personal access into Chris Marker's world. I never met Marker. When I was in Paris on 29 July 2013, I could not find Marker's tomb. I wrote my friend, Daniel Potter, 'keeper of the flame at the indispensable chrismarker.org site,' as Darke fittingly notes (6), who immediately provided directions to the spot where Marker's ashes remain. I placed a sunflower next to the Maneki Neko urn. But Marker, as Darke, Potter and all know, does not rest. His ashes – images and words – continually assume new life, as Darke's recent text affirms.

'Wait for *that* moment when the film itself looks straight back at you,' writes Darke in *La Jetée*, his intensive, penetrative BFI book devoted to Chris Marker's 1962 French film, its creation and after-effects (9). Akin to the film's descent into the galleries of the Palais de Chaillot, Darke's description of his own venture into the gabled library of the Royal Belgian Film Archive in 2013 seems also clandestine. The Archive, Darke relates, homes two treasures: the film's twin – an alternative version of *La Jetée* – and a workbook 'containing an editing plan and a collection of correspondence between Marker and Jacques Ledoux, the former director of the Film Archive' (13), both of which served as principal displays in *Chris Marker: A Grin Without a Cat*, the Whitechapel Gallery installation that Darke co-curated in London with Christine van Assche and Magnus Af Petersens between 16 April and 22 June 2014, and the beautifully commemorative catalogue that includes Darke's 'At the Sign of the Black Cat' (Darke 2014). While the workbook 'was a like a secret manual of the film, a unique and fragile assembly . . . of the elements that make up the completed work' (15), so too is this slim volume, lovingly penned by Darke. Revelatory of the deeply personal and impersonal associations that *La Jetée* sensually invites, Darke's book exposes both Marker's and his own private connections to the film, the post-cinematic momentum of Marker's multimedia works, and the enigmatic Marker himself – while the book gradually opens, from its start and middle, to even fuller engagements with the film's cine-philosophical questionings. By its sixth and final chapter, 'The Life and Death of Images,' Darke's book returns, as does the film, to where it began, so that the structure of the book mirrors the film's (and Marker's?) own life.

At 'nineteen minutes (and forty-five seconds, precisely) into the film, we watch [actress Hélène] Chatelain waking. Her head on a pillow, her hand lying across her chest, she opens her eyes, blinks and smiles softly – straight at us' (80). As captured via Darke's luminous insight into the film, the impact of this magical filmic moment – 'a moment of great tenderness imbued with a knowing eroticism' (80) – conveys a sense of life and wonder, as conjured also by Marker's and Darke's sensitive 'contemplation of the tiniest things,' including those that 'quicken the heart,' to borrow a famed phrase or two from Marker's *Sans soleil/Sunless* (France, 1983). Any journey within Marker's *œuvre* elicits a confrontation with one's self and time that leads to other encounters of life and death, future and past, breath and stasis, presence and absence, materiality and ephemerality. With childlike openness and sophisticated playfulness, Marker's works replay concepts of memory, identity and representation as they perform a delicate balance between extremes of survival that affect

and effect the personal and impersonal, or intimate and universal. Of these ironies and paradoxes, layers and doublings inherent to Marker and his multifarious works, and especially *La Jetée*, Darke captures all.

A comprehensive addendum for those who could not attend the Whitechapel Gallery installation, this book recounts the initial trajectory of *La Jetée*'s production, reception and distribution. Unsurprisingly, '[i]t took two authors of speculative fiction [J. G. Ballard and Ernest Callenbach],' Darke observes, 'to capture why the film would have a lasting impact' (52). The liminal crack between life and death that surfaces through *La Jetée*, what Darke terms a 'paper-thin . . . frontier between life and death' (31), is an edge between the lived and living that I elsewhere, via Marker and Alain Resnais, refer to as an 'incorporeal crack' that risks full actualisation in a fragile body, including the affective body of a film (Boljkovac 2015, 51). By way of early reference to the significance of time, movement and '[s]tatues [that] are also part of a cluster of imagery, including museums and ruins, which acts as a "mnemotechnic means" of connecting different temporalities' (33), Darke identifies in the book's second chapter relations of history and memory that *La Jetée* and other postwar films foreground, including works by Roberto Rossellini, Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard.

Through incisive intertextual readings of Marker's historical and political cine-philosophical writings and films, Darke suggests that life's persistence, as it emanates through Marker, remains despite death's prevalence across his works. Such life can be found also in works by Marker's long-time friend and collaborator Resnais, including *Hiroshima mon amour* (France/Japan, 1959). *Hiroshima*'s refrain – 'History tells, I'm not making it up, on the second day certain species of animals rose again from the depths of the earth and from the ashes' – gives rise, alongside *La Jetée*, to thoughts of disinterred ashes and insistent echoes (22). Darke discerns and enters these echoes within, between and beyond the film as his close analyses touch on various works by Marker, his contemporaries and influences to reveal how love, mortality and all of these works inhabit one another, and us. 'By its evocation of a love that is "itself inseparable from an experience of mortality"' (Christopher Fynsk, quoted in Boljkovac 2015, 100), *La Jetée* marks us. Darke's novel discoveries, against an increasing international body of secondary responses to the film and Marker, are essential to his book's singular charm.

To repeat one of Darke's many significant assertions, *La Jetée* is an animation (73). (Paradoxically, and evocatively, at the sign of life at its most intense, that climactic moment of sudden animation during those six seconds of Chatelain's awakening as accompanied by lively birdsong, the film's audible quickening heartbeat seems to hold its breath.) Darke's crucial argument pertaining to the film's animation commences with his fascinating find of a single-frame 'word-flicker' play that occurs less than thirty seconds into the film. During the opening credits, for a micro-instant resonant with the smart humour of another of Marker's long-time friends, Agnès Varda, the film replaces the word 'Recherche' (searching) in 'Avec la participation du Service de la Recherche de la RTF,' with 'Trouvaille' (finding) (27). Darke contends that this witty flash-movement affords a 'subliminal signal of the "truquage" [special effect] to come' (27), namely the moment of the awakening, while this replacement also signals to works by André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and others that discover art in the aleatory and quotidian. Repeatedly, Darke terms Marker a *bricoleur* 'whose films incorporate all manner of material,' and whose *La Jetée* serves as an "'echo-chamber" for the *trouvailles* Marker found' (29).

It is the woman's direct, animated gaze that stops the heart. As a flash of pure intensity, the 'impact of the moment,' writes Darke, 'is out of all proportion to its screen time because it manages to impress us with something of the wonder that the first audiences must have experienced at the birth of the cinema. That the smallest of physical movements – a blink,

a smile – should have such an effect is because – suddenly, astonishingly – they embody life itself’ (80). Through Johanne Villeneuve, Darke finally pronounces that the ‘face in Marker’s work is “a matrix”’ (84). Moreover, Darke contends that it is ‘a matrix of looks: that of the subject, of Marker’s lens and of our own, and it is in the crisscrossing of these looks that the image “lives and dies”’ (84). Of course Marker’s inclination to capture a woman’s face and gaze extends across his *œuvre*. Yet, the power of such dynamic moments and women lies not in the camera’s look alone – *Marker* – but also in its becomings and doublings as effected by women, which always also recall the doubling stares of *La Jetée*, *Sans soleil*, *Chats Perchés/The Case of the Grinning Cat* (France, 2004), the women of the ‘Staring Back Series’ (1952–2006), and indeed all women across Marker’s works, as, one senses, Marker ever humbly and acutely knew. In these ‘auto-perceptive’ moments exchanged between voyeurising voyeurs (Boljkovac 2015, 133), a perception of perception gives way to an awareness of death’s emancipatory double obtained via a resistance to finitude through animation and art. Following Marker’s mystical tread, Darke’s book performs its own act of (re)animation as it re-enlivens Marker scholarship for new and returning voyeurs alike.

References

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17411548.2019.1621720>

