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Chris Marker and the Cinema as Time Machine (Chris Marker et le cinéma, la machine à voyager dans le temps)

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Paul Coates

Chris Marker and the Cinema as Time Machine

1. Time Travel at the *fin de siècle*. The emergence of time travel as a literary theme at the end of the 19th century is a phenomenon one may suspect to be linked to the simultaneous emergence of cinema, with its capacity to manipulate the illusion of time. It also appears connected with two other phenomena: the growing acceptance of the idea of evolution and the rapid expansion in knowledge of the sheer size of the universe. In the work of H.G. Wells, who deemed evolutionary theory the formative influence upon his world-view, the motif of time travel intertwines with that of utopia: time travel is fuelled by a hope that it will enable one to miss out a stage or two of the evolutionary process and take a short-cut into the future. Wells was to propose in *A Modern Utopia* the idea of a kinetic, rather than a static, utopia. The acceptance of evolutionary theory in Wells's culture finally exploded the notion of the 6,000-year universe, transforming time into a vast field to be mapped and colonized, creating—in a sense—a domain for colonial enterprise once all the available space in the world had been taken up. The spreading knowledge of the extent of the universe, in its turn, rendered it apparent that a great deal of time is required to cross it. To move with reasonable speed from one world to another (eliminating the dead time of the black intervening space, as in the shots, which never last very long, of spaceships moving between planets in SF films while the space travellers often sleep out the time between solar systems—thereby justifying the text's omission of this time too) is in essence to travel through time, traversing light-years of distance.

The notion of the possibility of time travel begins to be formulated as the development of the cultures of *this* world becomes increasingly uneven. Although the late 19th century experiences the cementing of the unity of the world economy, it is in fact a period of continental drift in the technological sphere: cultures drift apart, as some become “advanced”—and hence qualified for the role of “master” and “Superman”—whilst others become “backward” and so are slated for servitude. Travel in time is in a sense travel between the unevenly developed countries of this world mapped onto the space of the universe. Hence in the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), the other civilization drawn to Earth by the fear that the world's inhabitants may abuse the rudimentary form of nuclear power they have just discovered is defined as more “advanced” than ours. Here we see one of the consolatory functions of time travel in SF at work: it domesticates a feared future, dispelling our terror at the possible consequences of technological change by

demonstrating that its denizens (the visiting aliens) either look just like ourselves or—if not—feel as we do. This is the rational and rationalizing version. We see the future and—yes, it works. The horror future-fiction film, by way of contrast (as practiced, for instance, by David Cronenberg), exploits our deep-seated dread that the time that has witnessed so many profound evolutionary changes may conclude by generating another species out of humankind—Foucault's "death of man" with a vengeance. It was this fear, of course, that prompted Butler's Erehwonians to destroy all their machines.

The idea of time travel in the *fin de siècle* period is not restricted to SF, however. It is the motive force of Proust's mammoth work, whilst the resemblances between *The Time Machine* and *Heart of Darkness* are less the fruit of the acquaintanceship of their authors than of the murmurings of the ideology of the era, for which "the fourth dimension" had assumed the status of a cliché. The structure of Conrad's work replicates that of Wells's, and shows the difficulty of disentangling "high" and "low" culture during this period: both show a journey into another culture that is also another time. Kurtz has revealed to Marlow the possibility of regression from "civilization" to "savagery"—i.e., of the movement in time from a "higher" stage of evolution to a "lower" one. The other country stands for another time—again the theme of uneven development.

It is Wells's awareness of the human cost of innovation that gives his work its power. The Time Traveller mounts his machine for the first time in the mood of a suicide readying himself for his demise. The subsequent description of the actual process of movement through time—the nausea, the cinematic time-lapse effects, as day and night blur into greyness—is one of the most remarkable passages in this remarkable story. With all the aplomb of the realist novelist, Wells scrupulously considers the obstacles the Time Traveller will have to surmount. How, for instance, is he to pass through the different solid objects that will arise upon the space he now occupies but cannot reserve for himself at a future time? Time travel itself becomes a form of Russian roulette; to halt may be to encounter the object that will annihilate one. A Bergsonian might applaud Wells's solution—the thinning out of matter at high speed, he says, renders the Time Traveller invisible and invulnerable—whilst decrying as a petrification of the movement of time his readiness to drop his traveller off in the future and stage a drama there. One has to admit the extreme fortune of the Time Traveller in landing in a conveniently empty space. So long as he moves, however, he can slip through matter with the ease of a ghost (ghosts being, after all, the prototypical time travellers): he is himself the laser-beam of time. Hence Wells's Time Traveller and his Invisible Man are related figures: for as long as he travels, the Time Traveller *is* the invisible man (for we cannot see time). Is it coincidental that Wells presents the image-movement (to use Deleuze's term) of time travel as that of a man dissolving against the solid background of the present during an era in which cinema, with its capacity to superimpose and dissolve forms, was coming into being?

The Time Traveller and the Invisible Man are intimate relations, for their attributes are those of the viewer of a film. The great Polish film theorist

of the inter-war period, Karol Irzykowski, wrote of an innate human desire to view events in abstraction from the moment of their first experience, and applied this idea to cinema. Thus the viewing of an event in a cinematic auditorium, whose darkness renders one an invisible man, becomes a species of time travel. (Obviously so, for the events appearing on the screen are not occurring at present but have long been “in the can.”) Leaps backward or forward in time involve a syncopation of history that closely resembles the mechanism of cinematic cutting: the intervening events are edited out. The events left out by time travel—as one fast-forwards the film of actuality on the editing table of history—blur into invisibility and end up, as it were, on the cutting room floor. This invisibility is of course a *fin de siècle* theme and even *epistemè*. It is in part the consequence of the convergence of multiple forms of alienation; the artist begins to feel invisible to his or her audience, as the shared conventions linking her or him to a public of peers are broken down by the growth and unpredictability of the new mass audience—the fruit of the spread of literacy and the mass circulation newspapers. Invisibility, however, is not simply a sign of alienation; it also has a utopian meaning. Here it is related to the idea of time travel as metamorphosis: a travelling backwards down the evolutionary scale towards the blessed irresponsibility of the animals. Or of children, who should be seen rather than heard—but preferably not even seen. The look of the moviegoer—as Walker Percy notes in his book of that title—is like that of “a boy who has come into this place with his father or brother and so is given leave to see without being seen.” This boy is the child taken out on Sunday to watch the planes from the observation platform in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*: a boy who will emerge from his invisibility through the identification with the on-screen figure, who is always *seen*; a boy who will thus come in the end to share the exemplary death of that seen figure.

2. The Haunting of Time: *La Jetée*. The more time passes, the more *La Jetée* (1962) grows in stature, acquiring a resonance its mere 29 minutes would hardly lead one to expect. It is worth the revisiting that gives it its theme and structure, as it evokes a world in which everything (including one’s own death) has always already happened. Here, as in Proust, the precondition of time travel is revealed to be the end of time (the sense of the *fin de siècle*): the protagonist has pre-experienced his own death; or, rather, the entire film can be seen as the unfolding of the contents of the moment of death, in which memory ranges through time in search of a way out of the present moment of imminent demise, only to return—having failed—to that deferred moment (just as the whole of Cocteau’s *Le sang d’un poète* [1930] occurs whilst the chimney falls). The central figure is a revenant, a discarnate spirit moving towards the embodiment of his own past. He has been pursued by a vision of the enigmatic face of a woman and the image of a man falling nearby, at Orly airport. Only at the end of the film, which is also the end of his life, does he discover this primal scene to be that of his own death, that he is the man falling.

La Jetée begins with the world devastated by World War III. An oracular, poetic voice-over that derives from Cocteau (as does some of the film’s

imagery—for instance, the defaced heads of the classical statues) recounts events. And so seldom is this great film shown—its brevity and its unusual aesthetic strategies providing the distribution networks with an alibi for its scandalous marginalization—that it may be helpful to begin by summarizing these events.

After World War III, the radioactivity on Earth's surface is so intense that the survivors have had to retreat underground. Marker sardonically notes the fruits of victory: "the victors mounted guard over an empire of rats." The survivors fall into two groups: experimenters and experimentees. The first experiments prove unsuccessful; their subjects either die or go mad. Their purpose will later be explained to the protagonist by the director of the camp, who is not the expected mad scientist but a man who gently explains that humanity has been cut off from space and its only hope of survival lies in time (the new domain of the colonial enterprise): if a hole can be found in time, then the present will be able to import the necessary resources from the past and future. The death of space in the present is reflected in the way Marker builds up his film (or "photoroman," to use his own term): by a succession of still photographs.

Following the initial disappointments with randomly chosen subjects, the experimenters concentrate upon subjects capable of conceiving strong mental images. "The camp police spied even on dreams," Marker notes: they select the nameless protagonist as their subject because of his obsession with a childhood image. It is their manipulation that ferries him into the past; since they use injections, it is almost as if Marker is implying that the artificial heightening of the senses by cinema is also a drug, against whose effects he practices therapeutic sensory deprivation, reducing film to its origin in a series of stills in black-and-white.

On the tenth day of the experiment, images begin to materialize: "a bedroom in peacetime—a real bedroom," for example. The insistence on the reality of these things paradoxically draws attention to their status as *images*. The nameless subject—his namelessness a metaphor for the damage consciousness has suffered, but also a means of easing our identification with him, since we too are viewers of images—may see "a happy face" from the past, but it is always "different": no longer reality, only an image; no longer present, but framed as *past*. Other images appear and mingle in what Marker terms "the museum that is perhaps his memory," anticipating the later appearance of the museum as the scene of the last meeting between the protagonist and the image of the girl he pursues into the past. It is as if the museum is simply a materialization of his dreams.

Finally, on day 30, he encounters the girl. The separation of the sexes that could well have been the motive force of the destruction of this world (one sees no women in the underground realm) is briefly abolished. He is sure that he recognizes her; it is indeed the only thing that he is certain of in a world whose physical richness disorients him. She greets him without surprise: reality is always already-known. They come to inhabit an absolute present, "without memories or projects." "Later they are in a garden—he remembers there once were gardens." Again, it is as if they have materialized out of his memory—rather as whole worlds depend on the observer

(*esse est percipi*) in the fiction of Borges. As he watches her face asleep in the sun, he fears that in the course of the time it has taken him to return to her world she may have died. The imperative to annihilate time thus becomes all the more pressing. On about the 50th day they meet in a museum, a place of “eternal creatures.”

When he next comes to consciousness in the laboratory, the man is told that he will now be despatched into the future. In his excitement, he fails at first to realize that this means the meeting in the museum has been the final one. “But the future was better protected than the past.” He enters it wearing dark glasses, as blind to the future as Oedipus. When he breaks through at last he encounters “a transformed planet,” its “ten thousand incomprehensible avenues” embodied in a close-up of the grain of a piece of wood. The people of the future have a dark spot on their foreheads in the position where mystics locate the third eye, an enigmatic echo of the protagonist’s dark glasses. At first they reject him as a vestige of the past; they then give him a power supply sufficient to restart the world’s industry.

As “the doors of the future close,” the man realizes that the completion of his task has rendered him expendable. Fearing liquidation by the experimenters, he responds to a message from the denizens of the future; declining their offer to take him into their society, he asks them to send him back into the past. He does not yet know that in doing so he has chosen death. He arrives on the jetty of Orly airport. As he runs across it, he senses that the child he once was—and with whom the film has begun—must be out there somewhere, watching the planes. Death manifests itself—as so often—as the double, as the self occupies two places and times simultaneously. As he runs towards the woman whose image has obsessed him, he sees a man from the underground camp (wearing the glasses that recur in so many forms in this film, signs of the damage to sight—and cinema—that has reduced everything to stills) and recognizes that “one cannot escape time”: he himself was the man he saw fall dead on the jetty as a child.

As the sound of jets rises, echoing the beginning, the film comes full circle, to then continue circling endlessly in the minds of the spectator and of the child the man once was, who is still looking towards a future that has now closed, and of the man himself, always heading towards this future past. At the start of the film, the protagonist had wondered whether he had really seen the image that so obsessed him or had only invented it “to shield himself from the madness to come.” The image itself, however, proves to be the madness, and his entry into it the self-splitting of death. It has left him trapped in the labyrinth of time.

At one point the girl whom the time traveller visits in the past terms him “mon spectre” (“my ghost”): like a phantom, he comes from a nameless, distant land. Strictly speaking, he is both a medium (used to gain access to past and future) and a ghost (he haunts—and is haunted by—the scene of his future death; like all of us, he is so habituated to living life in a linear fashion that he can make no sense of the vouchsafed glimpse of the future, which has the opacity of the flash-forward in so many films, of the unheeded prophesies of Cassandra). His insubstantiality is that of a ghost (as Wells has shown, time travel calls for dematerialization—a sign perhaps that it is

only *the mind* that truly travels). It is quite deliberately that I term the film's protagonist a medium: *La Jetée* reestablishes the links between SF and the supernaturalism SF writers so often deny, desirous as they are of colonizing and domesticating the unknown.

The theme of time travel corresponds to the notion of parallel worlds generated by the spiritualism of the late 19th century. In Elizabeth Phelps's enormously influential *The Gates Ajar* (1868), for instance, the temporality of the spirit world runs parallel to that of our own; the absence of the dead became a form of presence. The notion of the parallel world is cemented by the emergence of photography, which sifts the detached surface of one time into another like a card reshuffled in a deck. Thus it is appropriate that Marker's film should be an assemblage of photographs.

Critics writing of *La Jetée* often begin by stating that it is made up entirely of stills. This is *almost* true—for there is one exceptional moment in the film, to which I will return later. The use of still photographs creates a sense that all that remains after the disaster of World War III are the fragments of a narrative. The very form of the film is the imprint of death—rather as the still photographs at the end of Andrzej Munk's *The Passenger* (1963) stand for the director's premature death and inability to complete the film.

In the midst of the sombre succession of stills, however, the image flickers into life for a moment as the eyes of the girl in the past are seen to blink. On occasions Marker has varied the rhythm of his film by dissolving from still to still, rather than simply juxtaposing one baldly with another. Here the dissolves accelerate into normal motion; it is like the mysterious birth of time itself, and can also be compared with Godard's wondering use of stop-motion techniques at points in *Sauve qui peut* (1980). The acceleration indicates the presence of fantasy, of film as animation of the inanimate. As the girl's eyes flicker while she lies in bed (the eyes of the remembered mother, at the child's eye level?), there is a sound as of the dawn chorus, the sound of a world awakening. Then the moment is cut short. The girl's eyes are, as it were, animated by love, her love for the man/child, the love that has transported him into the past. For it is this sense of the possibility of renewed movement, of the flame of life being rekindled out of the universal ashes, that draws the protagonist backwards. The regressive magnet can of course also be seen as Oedipal, the search for the lost love doubling with the quest for the seductive mother, the unity of eros and thanatos; yet this in no way diminishes its poignancy.

La Jetée taps the inherent poignancy of the photograph, that sign of an absent presence, aligning stills in a series as if in the hope that a spark might leap from one to the next and animate all the figures, thereby cheating death; the occasional dissolves are the moments at which such a hope flickers into plausibility. The elegiac quality of this film in black-and-white may well owe something to the threatened status of monochrome itself, about to be generally displaced in European filmmaking when Marker composed *La Jetée*. When the protagonist and the girl in the past walk through a natural history museum, the use of stills generates a piercing irony that is also heart-breaking: there may once have existed a distinction between the skeletons of the extinct animals and the people standing beside them, but

death has rendered them all equally antediluvian: in a photograph (is it of relevance that these are the photographs of a *Frenchman*?) they cease to be “still life” and become “nature morte.”

Perhaps the most powerful image in *La Jetée* is the uncanny one of the blindfolded protagonist, electrodes apparently attached to his eye-mask, during the experiments that employ him to break out of the devastated present. The image derives much of its resonance from the manner in which this post-World War III experiment repeats the pattern of the ones conducted in the German concentration camps during World War II (a suggestion reinforced by the German words whispered on the soundtrack). A paradox of great power links the capacity to travel through time with impotence. Time travel becomes an ironic reflection of Marker’s own freedom, as he sits at his editing table, to voyage across the surface of images whose original moments he is not only unable ever to re-enter, but never even inhabited in the first place; for the process of filming them held him at one remove from them. But it also provides an inkling of the utopian possibility of actually reimmersing oneself in the moment when the image was first etched on the negative. The blindfolded time traveller may be likened to the implicit viewer of Buñuel’s *Chien Andalou* (1928): to open one’s eyes in the cinema is to lose them in actuality. (Buñuel will use the cutter’s razor to open our eyes so wide that their contents literally fall out.) When visiting the future, the protagonist wears dark glasses. His damaged vision corresponds to the way the film identifies time less with the visible world of the image-track than with the audible one of the soundtrack: the images may be frozen, but the words one hears are not; the images float upon the soundtrack like ice-floes upon a river.

The time traveller is sent into the past in preparation for his all-important voyage to solicit the technological aid of the future. He himself, however, views the movement into the past as more important: when offered the chance of permanent residence in the future by its inhabitants, he asks to be sent back in time instead—a request that clearly differentiates him from the curious protagonist of most SF, and suggests that Marker would criticize much SF as in thrall to a future-mindedness he deems manipulative in the experimenters.

One could argue that time travel into the past is a motif more emotionally charged than similar travel into the future, which involves a debilitatingly arbitrary speculative projection. Time travel backwards becomes a metaphor for the regressive movement of imagination and desire, for the split-second resurgence of the totality of one’s life in the instant of one’s death. Time travel here fuses with memory and becomes the herald of death. The life one can traverse instantaneously has already become its own ghost: it no longer offers any of the material resistance of real experience. The circle closes as the past reveals its identity (its simultaneity) with the future. The consequence is the perennial repetition of death.

The time travel that had seemed to offer infinite possibilities is transformed into fate, the dark fulfillment of the oracle of the opening scene. As beginning and end interlock, the open linearity upon which time-travel feeds collapses into a circularity that is strangely satisfying, even as it

entraps us. The satisfaction is of course the aesthetic one of circular form. The trip around the curved universe returns one to base. The fact of imprisonment (the protagonist's—in the camp; our own—in the cinema) finally seeps into the dream of escape, darkening it in the moment of waking. The hope of self-transcendence that fuels time travel crumbles into an illusion.

If Wells's *Time Machine* derives poignancy from its final reference to the Time Traveller's failure to return, *La Jetée* does so from its presentation of return as a tragic recognition of misrecognition. Only in the moment of death does the protagonist know himself; only in the moment of its demise does humanity achieve such self-knowledge. This self-knowledge entails self-destruction, in part because the self one knows is no longer there, but also because it involves the transformation of subject into object required by the science whose consequences (nuclear devastation and experiments on human beings on the one hand; self-transcendence on the other) are considered in the fictional form that is itself impregnated with science (its own antibody, whose lack of empathy it heals with the antidote of identification, whose trappings and air of precision it employs as cryptic coloration for and counterweight to its own anthropomorphism and romanticism): in the *science fiction* so profoundly and pregnantly embodied in *La Jetée*.

RÉSUMÉ

Paul Coates. *Chris Marker et le cinéma, la machine à voyager dans le temps.*—*A la fin du siècle dernier, l'apparition du voyage dans le temps était un thème littéraire répandu et faisait partie de la quête de nouveaux espaces à coloniser une fois que le colonialisme avait étendu sa domination sur toute la planète. En quelque sorte, le voyage dans le temps est un voyage entre les pays inégalement développés de ce monde projeté dans l'univers. Wells et Proust ont rêvé, bien que de manière différente, de pénétrer et de dresser la carte de "la quatrième dimension" (un cliché de l'époque) et c'est l'esprit du moment qui a conduit le cinéma à effectuer le voyage dans le temps. Au cinéma, l'homme invisible de Wells s'allie à son voyageur du temps: le spectateur se promène invisiblement à travers les époques. Ceci nous prépare à l'analyse du film de Chris Marker, La jetée, qui est probablement la plus puissante incarnation cinématographique du thème du voyage dans le temps. Les subtilités esthétiques du film (par exemple, l'utilisation de photographies) crée un "temps après le temps" dans un monde dévasté par un conflit nucléaire. Il transforme aussi le temps linéaire en temps circulaire; il souligne les préoccupations proustiennes de la mémoire et de l'imagination, de l'absence et de la présence. Il infuse également à la science-fiction un sens du tragique, une sophistication philosophique et même un surnaturel qui fait défaut à la plupart des œuvres du genre. Dans ce film, considéré comme l'un des plus grands films de la science-fiction, le véhicule technique en devient également un spirituel. (PC)*

Abstract.—*The emergence of time travel as a widespread literary theme in the fin-de-siècle period was part of a search for new areas for colonization once colonialism had completed its domination of all the world's blank spaces. Time travel is*

*in a sense travel between the unevenly developed countries of this world projected onto the universe. As Wells and Proust dreamed—each in his different way—of entering and mapping “the fourth dimension” (a period cliché), the Zeitgeist generated cinema to effect this time travel. In the cinema, Wells’s invisible man fuses with his time traveller: the film viewer moves invisibly across the ages. All this prepares for an analysis of the film which is perhaps the most powerful cinematic embodiment of the theme of time travel: Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*. The film’s aesthetic strategies (e.g., the use of stills) create a “time-after-time” in a world devastated by a nuclear war. It also translates linear into circular time; reveals a Proustian concern with memory and imagination, absence and presence; and integrates a sense of tragedy into SF, along with philosophical sophistication and even a supernaturalism often denied mainstream SF works. In one of the greatest of all SF films, the technological medium becomes a spiritualist one also. (PC)*