

## Representation and Quest for Reality in Chris Marker's *La Jetée*

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### Abstract

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The representation of the narrative in *La Jetée* (1963) by Chris Marker takes place through drawing on three representational methods of still photos, a narrative script, and a voiceover all fitting into form of a film. Though Marker had the possibility of representing his narrative through the medium of either scripts or still photos as his signifier, he did not feel content with any of these two techniques in isolation and sensed the inadequacy of one single representational medium in putting forth his intended meaning. Therefore, he proceeded with both of these methods and went even further by inserting a third element of voiceover to generate a greater impact on his audience. Holding these in hand, Marker has shattered the linear progress of his work by promoting to a chaotic narrative scattered in time. The present study shows how the way Marker manipulated these methods for representation of his narrative has worked efficiently in bringing his audience closer to the reality inherent in *La Jetée* and that, by saying more than what he could have said, Marker has been able to exert the influence of his signified meaning more powerfully and profoundly.

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**Keywords:** narrative, representational method, signifier, intended meaning, reality, signified

### 1.1.1. Introduction

Although Chris Marker's 1963 *La Jetée* is generally deemed as a genre trail on cinematic works, no one can gainsay the fact that it resembles few other films, just as *La Jetée* does not define itself as a film. Its attributes, however, identify it as “*un photo-roman*”. As a work hailed for inspiring many later time-travel films, *La Jetée* is a narrative told in black-and-white stills, attended by music, sound effects, and a voiceover narration. Surely, a lot has been written about this work of Marker which is constructed by “brilliant use of still images and sparse narration” (Lee, 2000), and with such deluge of critical pieces about this film, it might be assumed that there is no stone left unturned about this compelling artistic work. This essay, however, tries to approach the film in a way that proposes a new perspective on the representational methods deployed in this film. These representational methods include the scripts of *La Jetée*, the narrative voice deployed for reading the scripts, and the still photos which form the essence of Marker's work. Remarkably, each of these could have worked independently as a piece of art carrying a message of its creator. The still photos of *La Jetée* are telling enough of the incident they aim to represent; the script of the film is complete in its narration to stand as a short story and one could wonder why Marker decides to merge these with a voiceover and finally present it to his audience in form of a film or as he himself calls it a “photo-novel” (Hinkson, 2014, para 6). With all these taken into account, the focal point of Marker's work lies in its outstanding manipulation of the representational methods he adopts in depicting his intended meaning and the conceptual aura presented in his film. In other words, what brings this work of Marker to the acclaim of many critics and viewers is the way he maneuvers the artistic representations of his film to bring his audience closer to his intended meaning and the reality of his narrative and wield a greater influence on their minds. Below are the techniques Marker adopts to increase the claim of his work in its efficacy upon the audience.

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### 2.2.1. Historicizing the Fiction

Once exposed to *La Jetée*, the viewer is baffled by an unprecedented setting of the film situated in Third World War, a time which has never come in history and a disaster which has never befallen human being, yet is tied with the history of the two other World Wars which had already taken their toll on humanity. Marker endeavors to establish a historical framework to his film so as to give his work a touch of reality prior to taking any further action aimed at conveying his theme. Cunningly aware of the fact that a text gets closer to reality when associated with historical facts, Marker decides to immerse his film in a historicized context, with the hope of contributing to the veracity of his narrative. Such a decision on Marker's side leads us to the point that he was alert to the challenge he might confront as an author of a story standing merely as a piece of fiction that is not tied with reality, an argument which was also noted long ago by Henry James in his influential essay *The Art of Fiction* (1884) stating that as "the old Evangelical hostility to the novel" (378).

In this essay, Henry James informs us that "The old superstition about fiction being "wicked" has doubtless died out but the spirit of it lingers in a certain oblique regard directed toward any story which does not more or less admit that it is only a joke" (377). Therefore, Marker clings to historicizing his texts not only to strengthen the power of his work in its "reality" and consequently its acceptance in the eyes of his audience, but also to exert his sociopolitical influence on his audience and "insure his desired political reading" of his art. In a sense, Marker situates his story in a historical context so as to bring his audience closer to his anticipated meaning. Binding a fiction with historicity or in other words "historicizing" a fiction, which is also one of the essential practices of a Brechtian theatre technique of "alienation effect" (Reinelt, 1996), works effectively in exposing the horrifying terrors of a nuclear world war and forced travel in time for the fearful minds of people who happen to watch this film in 1962, not long after the Second World War had ended. Through such method, the idea of putting forth the ultimate meaning of *La Jetée* turns to be a more achievable goal for Marker who is decidedly concerned with bringing his audience nearer to what he has in mind as an artist.

### 2.2.2: Presenting the Absence

In his attempt to elucidate his image of his artistic work, Marker works his way towards seeking his inaccessible meaning in a cinematic work of art. This way, Marker calls his film a *photo-roman* so as to indicate that this is a text to be read by referring to its composition of still images. He doesn't, however; stop at this point for reflecting what he has in mind and goes further by injecting the element of a narrative voice to his work. The viewers start watching the film while they are accompanied by a voice which delineates the onset of the plot and persists throughout the film by providing more material for them to get into the stream of things happening in the narrative. Such shrewd decision of Marker to include a voice over his film scripts gives the audience a chance to listen to the film scripts while watching the static photos, the scripts which could have appeared on the papers of a novel. This voice, which specifically relies on the present tense for its narration consequently associates the film with a quest for presence, which is in a sense the ultimate quest for reality.

The notion of presence becomes of importance for Marker due to its alliance with reality; basically because presence has always been equivalent with reality and absence with falsity in Western logo-centric ideology. The other essential components of *La Jetée*, still photos, encompass the same quality of presence in the sense that photography has the ability of repeating the reality. Roland Barthes, in his book *Camera Lucida* (1980), spots a link between absented forms of photographic representation and the presence of the truth: "what the photograph produces to infinity has occurred only once; the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially ... it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency" (4). Therefore, injecting two elements of representation which both work to add an aura of presence and ultimately reality into *La Jetée* is a path safely taken by Chris Marker towards projecting the planned significance of his film, a path that follows the Aristotelian necessity of "representation" and its inevitability for presenting the desired significance of the artist. However, the same Aristotelian creed, which speaks of the inevitability of a representational form for conveying a meaning denounces the possibility that being can be elicited from any form of representation. (Bell, 2003) Following what Derrida had detected in Western philosophy regarding the fact that there is a binary opposition between text and speech and the priority of the latter due to having the quality of being 'present', Marker opts to have a voice narrating his narrative to enjoy this merit of presence and to make his narrative more touchable for his audience.

### 3.1.1. A Quest for Reality

Considering the fact that the same notion of “representation” which is construed as essential in Aristotelian creed for presenting the ultimate meaning of a work of art entails an inescapable paucity of reality, a representation such as a photo or a painting is able to deliver only a second-hand version of the reality that it aims to showcase and this ever-existing challenge urges Marker not to stop at only one of these representational techniques but to further his claim of his planned significance by merging three techniques of voice, scripts and still photos into the form of a film. Hence, to sketch the image of a troubled man who is supposedly wrecked with a childhood memory, the narrator of *La Jetée* begins to put this story into words by saying “this is the story of a man, marked by an image from his childhood, the violent scene that upset him, and whose meaning he was to grasp only years later”. This is said while the still photos show this scene later on in the film; the same notion introduced into the film but in two ways and with two representational methods. The disappointment lies in the fact that neither the narrative voice nor the photography is able to put forth the intact truth itself. That is why when in 1896 Maxim Gorky attends the Kingdom of Shadows, he expresses his amazement after watching the production of Lumière Cinématographe for the first time by stating that “it’s not life but its shadow, it’s not motion but its soundless specter”. The shadow of life which Gorky talks about is not associated with absence; it’s however a copy of the present, pointing to the fact that a shadow of life carries the spirit of life but is devoid of its reality. In Gorky’s view, the film production puts forward an imitation of life which is in fact an imitation of reality. Therefore, though a representational form in art can’t afford to convey the unmediated truth, it can do its best by delivering a copy of the “truth” as an art form through a close association with the present reality. Though such a forged reproduction of reality mediated by an artistic piece is regarded “two steps away from reality” in Platonic terms, Marker himself respects this reproduced reality as an unavoidable perspective for understanding the message of a work of art. For this reason, Marker relies on one of his favorite mottos taken from George Steiner which says “It is not the past that rules us—it is the image of the past” (Gleick, 2016). The idea nurtured by this doctrines closely associated with the outlay of *La Jetée* in the sense that a man embraces his future by a tone of reminiscence and a second comprehension of his past. The way he grasps the past determine his future and this is the motif applied here. It states that reality itself is not the thing forming a conception in the minds of those who are exposed to it, however, this is the image of reality formed in people’s minds that influences them and shapes their understanding after their encounter with an event or experiment of art.

Discussing the notion of “reality” and its representation in *La Jetée* recalls quite strikingly the scenario described in the section of Plato’s *Republic* known as *The Allegory of the Cave* (Lee). In this founding text of Western philosophy, Socrates tells the story of humans literally chained to their seats, looking at some shadows and inferring from them conception, or in Plato’s view a misconception; of the reality. The scene bears resemblance to what we encounter in *La Jetée* where a group of experimenters are surrounded in an underground shelter and obsessed with materializing their desire of power through sending victims in time travel. The same is also applicable to Marker’s fashion of treating his audience, as he wants people who sit to watch a series of photos on the screen of cinema. Nonetheless, there is a telling difference between these observant people. Despite Plato’s people or experimenters underground, Marker decides to add another element of presence as the voiceover for his audience so that they can get the benefit of listening to the scripts of the narrative displayed for them. If we presume the same for Plato’s people of the cave and imagine a situation in which these people were provided with voices of the shadows at their sight, as if overhearing some whispering and speeches of the shadows who are passing by the cave, it would be possible and not a farfetched idea that the people of Plato’s cave might have had a different understanding of the presumed reality presented for them. Purportedly, the people of the cave had only a shadow of reality and as stated by Plato himself they were two steps away from the reality and obviously the presence of a voice could give them a broader view and closer grasp of truth. Accordingly, the words that the people of the cave could have heard would play the role of the narrative voice deployed by Marker in his work. The scripts of *La Jetée* are read aloud for the audience by a narrative voice and simultaneously projected on the still photos and they are interestingly comprehensible even if one takes the inserted static photos off the work. In other words, the given scripts of *La Jetée* had also the chance of being written in the form of a novel or short story, as if narrating an event to readers and not viewers. Yet, the narrative voice is chosen to link the written text of the scripts and the photographic projection of the work and ultimately bring about a proper ground of artistic representation and critical interpretation.

### 3.3.2. A Chaotic Order

However, this is not only the materials in hand which matter to Marker as an artist but more importantly the representation of these materials. Marker decides to take the “fabula”, as the elemental materials of his story, at the service of “syuzhet”, the concrete representation deployed to convey a narrative in Russian Formalist words (Fludernic, 2009). That is not to say that the representational technique or syuzhet used in *La Jetée* takes priority over its fibula such as its scripts or its photos. The idea is that the representational methods are mingled to the power of the representation itself. Having watched the film, the viewer cannot imagine each of the constituents of the work in isolation from the others since this is the togetherness of these components and more importantly the quality of this togetherness which provide an outlook for the audience and generates the anticipated effect of this artistic piece for the one who sits to watch it. This notion could be understood by an experimental rewriting of the narrative of this film into a sequential story in a way that it is devoid of any twist of time and everything happens successively by saying “this is the story of a boy who goes through a harrowing experience in childhood and this experience comes true years later when he is older”. Compared with the original beginning sentence of *La Jetée*, such a story sounds bland to the audience who is looking for a particular influence upon watching a time-travel film. To this aim, the plot of *La Jetée* is set in an unknown imaginary time, in Paris airport, and sometime before the outbreak of World War III with the protagonist made to go through a time travel and the narrative voice informing us “this was the aim of the experiments: to send emissaries into Time, to summon the Past and Future to the aid of the Present”. So, it is obvious that the linear progress typical of a story which is based on the advancement from past to present and then to future is shattered and the narrative floats in time to exert a stronger influence on its audience. Therefore, the photos, if they are to fit their narrative, are dispersed in sequence; the beginning photos display a scene in which we can see the Paris airport, sometime before the outbreak of World War III. This way, the narrator continues the story by establishing a time frame, though a chaotic one:

“Orly, Sunday. Parents used to take their children there to watch the departing planes. On this particular Sunday, the child whose story we are telling was bound to remember the frozen sun, the setting at the end of the jetty, and a woman's face”.

This time sketched for the viewer is the time in which a child is observant of his own death scene, a blending of past and future. One more time, Marker is throwing us a curve. He leaves us up in the tension with no idea whether we are to encounter the past or this is the future of the character which sets meaning of the plot. Accordingly, at the beginning, we are not provided with a clue if we are watching a child holding the hands of his parents or the death of a man in his adulthood or even a man reviewing his retrospective childhood memories. Yet, none of the scenes is meaningful without its link to the others. Respectively, such a fusion of time bears the capacity of generating an intentional bedlam in the timeline of the narrative. This marks the moment of systematic relationships of which the Marxist thinker Louis Althusser talks about, in the sense that each of the present elements in systematic relationships can be understood only in terms of its relation to all the other elements in the system. (Ferretter, 2006) According to this structuralism point of view, the presence of a man sent on an experimental time travel can only gain significance in relation to his death scene of later life witnessed in his childhood. For that reason, this is the amorphous play of elements in the form of “signifiers” which work to build up the meaning of *La Jetée* as an art work. This differential pattern gets repeated throughout the film with the presence of three modes of narration and this way it can be claimed that the desired signified meaning of which Marker tended to convey to his audience is created through the relation of each of these narrative modes to the other one. The reliance of a single signifier upon other signifying elements for the sake of representation provides a sufficient ground for Marker’s dissatisfaction with relying on only one mode of narrating his and conveying his conceptual framework to his audience. It seems that the insufficient nature of language and generally any representational mode draws the artist into a vicious circle where the ultimate meaning evades the applied signifiers. In case of Marker, once he clings to one signifying mode, he feels the inadequacy of this and the need for presence of that. The insufficiency of each of these narrative modes propels Marker to infuse all he has in hand so as to bring his audience closer to his intended meaning.

### 3.3.3. Beyond the Representation

Digging into the essence of *La Jetée*, the narrative of the man who is sent through a time travel to the past and present for the sake of present, this film entails a series of still photos scattered in time and a text founded on a non-sequential narrative. The way each of these two lends itself to the construction of the film differs in its function and also limitation.

The fashion of practice by still photos seems not to allow any movement of thoughts but merely a projection of ideas. It appears that static photos displaying different selected images by the photographer are meant to radiate a fixated perspective for its viewer and it would not be a very unlikely claim to make if we say that getting significance beyond imagery is not feasible. This means that the photo, as the shot of a past single moment, cannot offer any ultimate meaning to its viewer. The same challenge gets recurrent in other forms of signifiers which all aim to put forth a meaning, be it an image, a text or a painting. This challenge is rooted in the deconstructive teachings of French thinker Jacques Derrida who is suspicious of the ability of signs to convey their desired meaning. His chief concern in *Of Grammatology* is that there is no outside-the text (1974). Such statement is to say that “a reader cannot get beyond verbal signs to any things-in-themselves which, because they are independent of the system of language, might serve to anchor a determinable meaning” (Abrams, 1999, p. 56). Derrida's restated claim is all Western culture alongside with Western use of language are logo-centric; which is to say that they are based on a "logos" or in Heidegger's terms they rely on "the metaphysics of presence" (Zlomistic, 2007, p. 129). He is also skeptical of the "phono-centric" assumption—the notion he concerns as central in Western theories of language— which claims that at the instant of speaking, the "intention" of a speaker to mean something “through an utterance is immediately and fully present in the speaker's consciousness, and is also communicable to an auditor” (Abrams, p. 57). In Derrida's view, we must always say more, and other, than what we intend to say. *La Jetée* is that piece of art which tries to say more than what Marker intends to say. Compliantly, the voice literally heard by the viewer of this film is saying more than merely a voice reading a text. Intentionally, Marker chooses an all-knowing narrator who also comments on the events of the story:

“Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. Later on they do claim remembrance when they show their scars. That face he had seen was to be the only peacetime image to survive the war.”

The intervening of the voiceover is itself in conjunction with the intentional insertion of other representations into this film with the purpose of channelizing the interpretation of the audience towards the intended meaning of Marker as the creator of the work. On a holistic view, *La Jetée*, with all the efforts made for its representation, stands distinctive in its supremacy of influence and piercing impression on its audience. The accumulation of different representational methods and their powerful manipulation by Chris Marker result in the penetration of the work and consequently a great level of influence on the audience, a chief target followed throughout the film. Therefore, when *The Guardian* publishes an essay about *La Jetée*, the title of the essay carries the word “influence” as its keyword and entails quotations from different critics with the same message (2014). As this Guardian essay presents, William Gibson notes that “I can't remember another single work of art ever having had that immediate and powerful an impact,” and Mark Romanek states “He's been a huge influence”.

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