



"...he understood there was no way to escape time."



"The man doesn't die, nor does he go mad. He suffers."



scientists know he has a deep-rooted memory from that time that will cushion the shock of 'awakening, fully born, into another age'. It is of the Orly jetty, and the woman; he was the little boy. He has grown up with the indelible image of her face and her vulnerability, and has fallen in love with her.

Time-travelling, he meets the woman. They share an intimate bond, as if they have known each other all their lives. They spend days, weeks together — and then he disappears, plucked from his reverie. The scientists send him to the future, where he is given a power supply to reignite the world's industry. Upon his return, he is to be liquidated as he is of no further use. But the denizens of the future transmit to him: 'Join us'. He refuses their offer, instead asking his new allies to transport him once again to peacetime Paris and the woman who awaits him. They grant his wish.

He is at the Orly jetty. He sees her, runs to her — and notices an assassin from the underground camp. He is shot dead. The woman watches the murder, as does the little boy, who has just witnessed the moment of his own death.

It is a familiar synopsis, given that David and Janet Peoples used *La Jetée* as the foundation of their screenplay for Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys*, a sublime, brooding masterpiece.

La Jetée's lead actors (Hélène Chatelain and Davos Hanich) are beautiful and doomed, as is Trevor Duncan's score; and the resonant, measured narration (from Jean Negroni) is

poetic and fluorescent, infused with awe and mystery — even when subtitled into English. However, like all time travel stories, *La Jetée* doesn't make much sense; but then again, time and memory do not make 'sense', at least when articulated by a technology as arbitrary as language.

Rather, *the film's* virtue is its immediate, haunting ability to evoke the emotions of love and desire; the photomontage poignantly conjures up the frozen moments that constitute memory. As the man recalls his past, and the woman, he relives it — never really sure if he is dreaming or not — one snapshot literally coming alive with his subjective colouring. The familiar SF framework is merely a narrative hook by which Marker hangs this essay on Inner Space.

La Jetée's influence is palpable. Author JG Ballard considers it to be one of the few convincing acts of SF cinema, while a scene from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* — in which a photo of Rachel's 'mother' animates for a second — is a direct homage to the truth and beauty at the core of this film (*Blade Runner* was co-scripted by David Peoples, and is about the unreliability of memory).

Our memories haunt us eternally, morphing and evolving through time so that we are constantly triggering them, revisiting them, repressing them; time-travelling to the past, so to speak, and projecting them into the future; confronting and modifying past, present, future versions of ourselves, family, lovers. This, then, is the subject matter of *La Jetée*, a minimalist masterpiece affording us an all-too-rare glimpse at the paradoxes and complexities of perception and the subconscious.

But an artificial exercise such as this can never do justice to the film.

Finally, it must be experienced. ■

La Jetée (1963)

Nothing sorts memories from ordinary moments. They claim remembrance when they show their scars.

The films of Chris Marker are often termed 'essayist', participating in a phenomenological play with deep roots in French intellectualism. Working within documentary and pseudo-documentary modes, they mimic the manner in which memory and desire flash from cell to cell — randomly, instantaneously, elliptically.

La Jetée is perhaps the most 'fictional' of Marker's output, weaving its story of a nuclear-devastated Paris in the near future;

it is far from conventional. Lasting 29 minutes, shot in black and white and consisting almost entirely of still photographs—imaginatively blended with dissolves, wipes and fades—this is the bare bones of science fiction. It highlights why we are attracted to SF in the first place: not for bug-eyed aliens or galaxy-hopping spaceships, but for the way in which it can twist our most cherished versions of reality inside out. Indeed, *La Jetée* belongs to a fascinating epoch in French alternative cinema, when a number of directors engaged with SF as a philosophical tool. Its concept of circular time and 'Chinese box' narrative recall Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) as well as Jean-Pierre Gorin's fascinating but failed attempt to film

Philip K Dick's *Ubik*.

La Jetée begins with a young boy watching passenger jets take off from the jetty at Orly Airport. There is a commotion and he sees a man fall to the ground, shot and killed. A distraught woman also witnesses the scene.

Flash-forward to the aftermath of World War Three: Paris is in ruins as a ragged band of survivors hole up underground. Here we meet our unnamed protagonist, a shell-shocked citizen who has been selected by scientists to test a new time-travel technique. He is to visit the Paris of the far future and ask for assistance — food, medicine, technology — so that the planet may be rebuilt.

He is sent to the past on a trial run: the



Above: "Paris... was uninhabitable, riddled with radioactivity. The victors stood guard over an empire of rats." Above right: "...and that this moment he had been granted to watch as a child, which had never ceased to obsess him, was the moment of his own death."