

Abstract

This paper looks at Alain Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961) and Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). It rests on a premise of film as a constructed, ordered world that answers only to itself. Both films address particular questions about time: what happens to our anticipation of the future if we move back and forth in time reinventing our past and present? (*Marienbad*) or, can we escape our ruined present by moving into the future? (*La Jetée*). From Jacques Lacan, it borrows the concepts of the mirror stage by which we recognise ourselves, and of the *objet petit a*, the looking for which (both in terms of 'search' and 'seeing') is that from which we derive our pleasure. From Jean-Luc Nancy it adopts descriptions of how film touches us, and the careful orchestration of the pleasure that is *jouissance* in being within this moment, not knowing where we are going.

Keywords

Film, *jouissance*, Jacques Lacan, Jean-Luc Nancy, space, time

Introduction

Utopia is a 'no-place' that is also 'every place', entirely suited to the medium of the imaginative, contrived, controlled world of film. It presents a moment in time as if ungrounded, the world of 'what if'. There is no 'past'; the characters come into being as the film begins, and their presence fades as the final credits appear on screen.

Utopias operate dialectically with the given realities, the dystopias, from which they spring. One of the distinctive traits of the Utopia is its contemporaneity, what Frederic Jameson refers to as 'topical allusion'.¹ The Utopian vision suggests what could be, in order to critique what is. Rather than setting out a perfect place, a perfect society, Utopias create *aporia*, that is, unanswerable questions, whose function is to provoke a conscious awareness of the current situation.² While one can never step outside history, the Utopian film suggests a suspension of place and time that then situates a specific question relevant to contemporary concerns. For example, if we repeatedly revisit, and re-invent, our past, then our present, can we break through the inevitability of ourselves and re-invent what is to come, asks Alain Resnais' film *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961)? If we destroy the world we live in, can we move into the future? – this is the question raised by Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* (1962).

Despite being filmed on location the films are as much no-place as they are no-time. Opening up time opens up space for pleasure. *Marienbad*'s filming that moves seamlessly between past, present and future, between settings and locations, in and out of paintings, at and through mirrors, is technically flawless. Marker's film is told through a series of lingering still images that we read as a logical sequence of events, underscored by the voice-over narrative. Particular themes explored within the films that include: time; the mirror stage; the *objet petit a*; and *jouissance* cast light on the pleasure in being de-situated.

Time: Past, Present and Future

If time, comprised of past, present and future, is re-framed and re-assembled, to create new patterns, new memories, new futures, what does the future look like? Jameson suggests that the gilded hotel with its opulent baroque interiors, endless corridors and endlessly reflecting mirrors of *Marienbad* "stand more vividly as a symbol of isolation from the currents of life than any spaceship" since they are more readily accessible to our imaginations.³ In *La Jetée*, the observation pier of Orly airport, South of Paris, from which, in the 1960s it was possible to watch planes taking off represents the perception of moving not to distance places but distant times. Orly airport stands in for itself, a place already removed

from everyday concerns. Embarkation is always a symbol of the future, and an adventure into distant unknown places, or to take off into our imagination, the flight of fancy.



Figure 1. Observation Deck at Orly airport, *La Jetée*, Chris Marker, 1962.

Neither film presents a 'futuristic' vision. *Marienbad*, designed to evoke the glamour of 1920s films, is like a spaceship or time travel machine hurling back and forth through place and time, stopping only for a moment at the end, for the lovers to disembark. Marker's past is symbolised by the jetty, and the optimism it represents, while his present looks like a second world war bomb shelter and his future is represented by abstraction.

In film we are always in the present moment, watching the images on the screen, while in our imaginations we project the future, imagining what might happen, and we stop paying attention to what is around us. Jean-Luc Nancy writes that the "spacing of time", which is not the spacing between things, but the establishment of place, and is through which time appears, lies in the tension and extension that is also "the tension of nothing which opens time".⁴ Extension is time extended, drawn out, measurable. Between the two a space opens up for being, for perception and for pleasure. This is not Zeno's paradox, in which the arrow never reaches its target, but the ultimate pleasure to be found in the paradox itself - the search for or mere appearance of the *objet petit a*. There is gratification in a riddle that will never be fully resolved. The possibility we might be able to solve it opens up the mind involuntarily in ways we find pleasurable.

In French the future is *le futur* but also *l'avenir*, both a noun and a verb. The future, we see it coming, *voir venir*, we know we can not avoid it. Even if it is a surprise, as Nancy suggests, it still seems inevitable once it is upon us.⁵ The unexpected arrival gives us pleasure.⁶ Desire suggests anticipation, and a lack; *jouissance* is the pleasure of its fulfilment.

Le futur is the distant, imagined 'one day' on which we project our wishes. In contrast, *l'avenir* puts us in situations of hope or despair. It is usually translated into English as 'futura' or what is 'yet to come'. It is that which arrives as opposed to what is wished for. If *le futur* focuses on what the future is, *l'avenir* focuses on what we do with the future, or what the future does with us.⁷ In *Marienbad* the projection of desire creates a new future, in which A and X are lovers, and go off together into *le futur*. In *La Jetée l'avenir*, what is coming, is the death foretold on the pier at Orly. *Jouissance* in the films' narratives opens up the characters' futures to new possibilities. Opened up time and space in narrative situation invites *jouissance* in us, the viewers.

Mirror Stage

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan first proposed his concept of the mirror stage at a psychoanalytical conference in Marienbad in 1936. A constant point of reference throughout his work, Lacan's mirror stage is part of the personal development of the self. It is the moment in which we recognise our own selves in the mirror's silvered surface, and understand that this is an image of ourselves. We smile at the recognition, while knowing that this is, in fact, not ourselves, but our own image, one we may take great pleasure in viewing. This moment of identification, when the subject assumes her image as her own, is described by Lacan as a moment of jubilation. It is the libidinal relationship in which the subject is caught and captivated by her own image. It leads to mimicry or mimesis in which one might begin to assume the traits and characteristics of the image seen.

objet petit a

Lacan places the *objet petit a* at the centre of the intertwined orders of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. It is the object of desire, forever just out of reach. What we strive after, the *objet petit a*, is the utopian perfection, the ultimate dream, the perfect love, the perfect life - and in film, this pleasure is in the viewing. We want this thing and there is also pleasure in knowing we may not have it, that we have to return to our mundane 'real' worlds. Pleasure lies in feeling we have detached from this world; untouched by the detritus of the everyday. The *objet petit a* is the search for that which we always seek: what really happened? The

future, will it come to pass? It can never be attained but inspires and gives pleasure to the pursuit.

Jouissance

Jouissance is a specific form of pleasure related to the future.⁸ In its most expressive form *jouissance* is purely sexual, an organ of understanding that brings the individual from one physical place to another.⁹ As Alberto Pérez-Gómez describes it, the moment of orgasm is both infinite and defined, a 'unique incidence of the coincidence of infinity with the instant.'¹⁰ Sexual fulfillment can be far clearer than logic. The less we know the more pleasure we get. There is no arrival, only a coming, offered up in an instant.¹¹ The present moment is unstable of both sense and what escapes sense, but it touches us.

The world 'to come' and *jouissance* come together in the films through the images, our imagination and their merging of time, past, present and future. By unhinging space and time, *jouissance* in the filmic narratives opens up new future possibilities. While we may (or may not) look forward to a successful resolution of the filmic narrative, the moment of *jouissance* always takes place somewhere, a 'where' that someone has designed, has chosen. As Nancy tells us, there is pleasure when our eyes meet, but what is really at stake is the pleasure taken in pleasure itself.¹² While film is primarily a visual medium, we find pleasure in the haptic; in the sensory input of film, in the visuals and aural and also how watching a film makes us feel. The issue of *jouissance* must be addressed with an immediacy both in time and space, not from a distance. For example, we can not follow a linearity in *Marienbad*, but have to experience it through our senses.

Having examined temporality, reflection, and erotic desire, we now see how these themes manifest themselves in the films that are both black and white, and made in France in the early 1960s. The best way to watch the two films is to be carried along by the images; the actor's voices; the soundtrack; the rhythm of the cutting; the passion of the characters.

Last Year in Marienbad

In a sumptuous hotel, a man tries to convince a woman that he has had an affair with her in the past, and they have arranged to meet in the present hotel in order to run away together.

The film was shot on location in the interiors and gardens of several chateaux in Bavaria, including Schleissheim, Nymphenburg, and Amalienburg as well as on sets. None of it was shot in Marienbad. The interiors are enormous, ornate with marble, stucco, gilded

cornices, but quite cold. The servants and often the guests in this hotel seem almost motionless. They obey strict rules as if in a game.¹³ Actors and statues are lit and framed in the same manner as if interchangeable.¹⁴ The film's emblematic tracking shots make no differentiation between actors and ornaments within the endless hallways, corridors and rooms.¹⁵

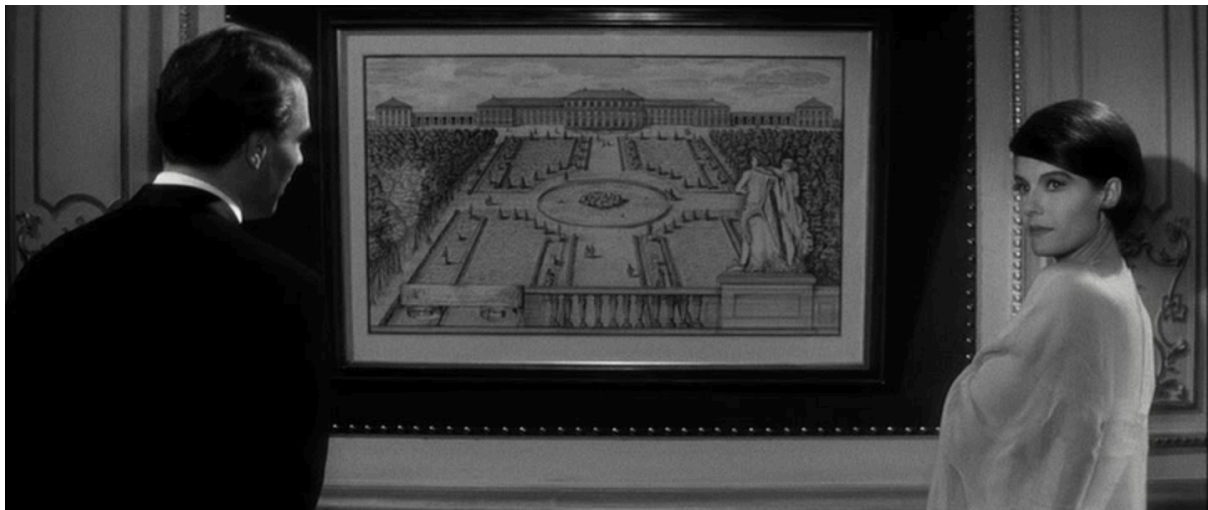
The three nameless characters A, the woman, X, the man who may or may not have been her past present or future lover, and M, a man who may or may not be her present husband are linked by their gestures, voices, presence and imagination which is also our imagination. Director Resnais and writer Alain Robbe-Grillet together construct a narrative of mental space and time so that we (the viewers) fill in the ellipsis of what we do not see. There is no cause-effect, or logical time-sequence in *Marienbad*. The story is about a persuasion, a memory that X creates with his words. If he succeeds in persuading A, it is not only through his persistence but also the film's repetitions, its false trails, mirrors of reality, and cul de sacs that lead no where but back to the beginning.

Mirror

In *Marienbad* we walk along corridors of mirrors; and pass through what seems like a perspective painting on a wall directly into the landscape depicted. At different times we see either A or X in the mirror. In one scene, while X watches, A approaches, reflected in the mirror as if coming out of the realm of the imaginary. Later, when X discovers her in her bedroom she appears first in the mirror, looking up at the intruder (both X and the camera, us). The mirror is also mentioned repeatedly in the voice-over, which is spoken in an insistent voice that seems sometimes hesitant, sometimes irritated, sometimes suppliant: "a big mirror just inside the door, an enormous mirror you didn't dare go near it, as if it frightened you."¹⁶ At the mid-point of the film, A and X argue over a mirror. The word is repeated over and over again, in different settings, even by different characters while, with each iteration, the voice's register seems to become more threatening, but this is because the settings alter. For example, the bedroom grows darker and more claustrophobic as X's insistence penetrates A's imagination.

In several scenes in *Marienbad*, the camera moves in for a close up of a *parterre*, a formal garden. It draws back and we find ourselves in this landscape, where suddenly A and X stand and have a conversation as if the memory that X has suggested has been enacted, or is being mimicked.¹⁷ When the camera turns to show the house behind them, it is identical to the one they have seen earlier in a print on the wall. Both house and garden

have 'appeared' in earlier scenes as images hanging along the corridor. It is as if the relentless pursuit and insistent dialogue have 'brought them forth' into the imaginary present.



Figs. 2 + 3 Transgressing time and place, X and A pass through a perspective drawing into the landscape depicted. *Last Year in Marienbad*, (Alain Resnais, 1961)

The camera constantly draws our attention to these images, which are perspectival, and then draws us into them. Like the mirrors, these images are a trope of the film, by which it recognises itself. Characters such as M, or generic hotel guests, stare at them as they hang on the wall, drawing our attention to them. In one scene the false perspective seems to become alive, as if animated.

Sound

Just as the visual details of each scene are made over-prominent, demanding to be registered, so too is the sound. The voice-over narration is difficult to understand at the beginning; it competes with relentless music that seems to follow the opening tracking shot. But it does not matter that we cannot properly hear the words, because the same speech is repeated over and over again, like a refrain that is both important and incidental.

As in a romantic film, the music often swells, then subsides, to signify passion and emotion. Resnais wanted it to echo the hypnotic language of Robbe-Grillet, in sound that was lyrical and sinuous, itself becoming part of the overly-insistent décor.¹⁸ Sound touches us, penetrating deep into our perception. Nancy declares that that which is sonorous is omnipresent – it is present in all places at all times. He suggests that to listen is to “enter that spatiality by which *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for (...) it opens me inside me as well as outside” a simultaneity of time and space completed by the music.¹⁹

Time, No-Time

Throughout the film, the image, swelled by the music and the verbal narration lead the viewer in different directions, making us doubt what we see. Have X and A ever met before? Was it last year? Did it happen? Will it happen? Whether or not the past or even indeed the present ever happened or are entirely fictitious becomes irrelevant. The budding desire creates anticipation that begets a future that includes the two of them together.

Place No-Place

Marienbad presents a sealed and empty world, and the characters have no existence outside of it, as if everyone is under a spell, guided by fate towards which it would be futile to try to change the slightest detail. Hypnotic and obsessive, the film begins: “Once again ...” as if in a recurring dream, or re-enacting a ritual. We do not know who is speaking, the mysterious X, the actor on stage, or someone else telling us a story. This speech is repeated with subtle variations: once again, once again, once again, with different baroque backgrounds, different endless corridors, as though sound too is trapped in the sealed world where nothing escapes. “Once again, I made my way ... losing your way, for ever alone with me The walls were always there, the silence too. Conversation took place within a vacuum.” As Robbe-Grillet suggests, by giving A a past present and future, X offers her freedom from this labyrinth in which time is on an endless loop. He states: “There is no last year and Marienbad is no longer to be found on any map. This past, too, has no reality beyond the moment.”²⁴

La Jetée

In a dismal apocalyptic future and hidden deep underground because of radiation, scientists use time travel to fix the life-saving technology destroyed in the present through war. By accessing one man's memories and dreams, they communicate with people of the future, and ask them for help in the present.

Marker's film, *La Jetée* is presented as a sequence of still images. We watch as if in the tension between time understood as a succession of presents and the experience of the presence of time, that is, time taking place as such. The film proposes using the past as a means to access the future in order to help the present.

Mirror

In the dark, dusty, claustrophobic world of *La Jetée* there are no reflective surfaces or mirrors. However, the memory images in which the protagonist recognises and identifies himself thereby reconstructing his past, constitute the mirror stage in the film. He sees himself, smiling, laughing, in love. And this opens up time. And like all mirrors, his image is reversed, deceptive and not to be trusted.

Sound

In *La Jetée* the voice over narrative tells a story often at odds with the visuals, but we put the two together. This dominance of visual presence over narration is inherited directly from the avante-gardist tradition of the 1920s that also privileged image over text. Film does not exist as a readymade but requires our participation. As cinematographer Robert Bresson suggests, no matter how disparate, sounds and images, once heard and viewed, are like "people who make acquaintance on a journey and can not later separate."²⁶ The voice over narration of *La Jetée* tells us that " ... the inventors were now concentrating on (...) very strong mental images. If they were able to conceive or to dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it."²⁷

Where are we when we are in-between two worlds, in between two times, in between waking and sleeping? Our human counterparts in the future, with what looks like radio microphones stuck to their forehead where their third eye would be suggesting they have temporal prescience, are adept at traveling back and forth through time. They give the man the power pack that will save humanity in the present and invite our hero to join them in an infinite future. He declines and asks instead to be sent back in time to the jetty at Orly, hoping to find his love, but instead realises his own death.



Fig. 4 His eyes are covered by a white mask, from which wires protrude, suggesting that scientists can both see and control his dreams. *La Jetée*, (Chris Marker, 1962)

Vision

In order to look into the future, the subject is given suggestions, accessed through his memories. We 'see' these memories, images, and the future through his eyes, which are covered by a white mask from which wires protrude, suggesting that the scientists can both see and control his dreams.²⁸ In *La Jetée*, everyone, whether in past, present or future, sports interesting eyewear. In both films there is an endless interplay of looking that includes in *La Jetée*: eyes looking gently off into the distance, eyes searching, eyes closed, eyes in pain, eyes covered, eyes wearing apparatus to enhance vision, eyes wearing apparatus to protect vision, third eyes. In *Marienbad* there are: eyes reflected in mirrors, eyes cast downwards, eyes whose staring creates distance, eyes compelling, eyes denying, eyes connecting two disparate spaces through a mirror, eyes looking elsewhere than the subject.³⁰ In *La Jetée* the only moving image shows the female love interest opening her eyes, as if awakening after intimacy. Instead of leading to further sexual congress with her in the past, this opens the way to the future.

Conclusions

In *La Jetée* the narrow framing that includes no vistas except that of the jetty suggests there is no escape. Each film has a particular perspective – the long thin jetty or

the perspectival landscape of *Marienbad* – the point towards infinity. Perspective can mean vision, as in ‘our perspective’ but it can also mean a narrow vision, or a horizon, that suggests no escape, as the vanishing point is at infinity. The long perspectival corridors suggest distance and a direction, linearity, of a past and a present rather than simultaneity. In *Marienbad* the glance, the blank stare, the gaze, the beseeching look, the inquisitive penetration of space as the camera searches for something, and finds it, the deception of entering the mirror, entering the picture frame, does not reflect an outside, but it opens an inside onto itself. As Nancy suggests, the image on the screen is ‘itself the idea.’³¹

With their immediately recognisable, distinct and emphatic styles both films express the premise that being de-situated (not knowing where we are in time or place) is the essence of pleasure. We can enjoy them without necessarily parsing what they bring to cinema. To those looking for a conventional narrative, a happy ending, a logical sequence of space and time, *Marienbad* may seem interminable. For those looking for action and adventure the sequence of stills that comprise Marker’s film may disappoint. While this may seem obvious for a French ‘arthouse’ film of the 1960s, it is worth noting that both films conform to standard conventions of the romantic love story. The first presents a love triangle of a woman, her husband and her lover. In the second, the male protagonist’s strong memory of his love, and their intimacy and adventures, is both his escape and his ultimate downfall. Yet these films offer themselves to be watched while derailing the conditions of their watching. They suggest that there is pleasure in understanding and also pleasure in not understanding.

List of Captions

Fig. 1 Opening image of the film, the observation deck at Orly airport, *La Jetée*, (Chris Marker, 1962)

Figs. 2 + 3 Transgressing time and place, X and A pass through a perspective drawing into the landscape depicted. *Last Year in Marienbad*, (Alain Resnais, 1961)

Fig. 4 His eyes are covered by a white mask, from which wires protrude, suggesting that scientists can both see and control his dreams. *La Jetée*, (Chris Marker, 1962)

¹ Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future; The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, (Verso, London, 2005).

-
- ² Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 39.
- ³ Harry Harrison and Brian Aldiss, ed. *Best SF: 1969* (New York, 1970) Quoted in Frederic Jameson, "Archaeologies of the Future", 263.
- ⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, translated by R. Richardson and A O'Bryne, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 170.
- ⁵ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 173.
- ⁶ Jean-Paul Martinon, *On Futurity; Malabou, Nancy and Derrida*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 98.
- ⁷ Martinon, *Futurity*, 1.
- ⁸ In French *jouir* is slang for 'to come'. *Jouissance* is untranslatable, and refers to pure enjoyment, unmediated pleasure, beyond the pleasure principle, the desire for immediate gratification.
- ⁹ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion; Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, (New York, Verso, 2002), 39.
- ¹⁰ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love* (London: MIT Press, 2006), 120.
- ¹¹ Martinon, *Futurity*, 97.
- ¹² Jacques Derrida, *On Touching Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans by C. Irizarry, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 284.
- ¹³ There is a game in the film, one that, like all other motifs, is repeated as a refrain. This is the game of 'sevens' that is played with cards, matchsticks and other *objets* throughout the film. While seemingly a game of chance, it suggests fate and destiny for, as M suggests: You can win, but I never lose.
- ¹⁴ Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 39.
- ¹⁵ Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, 39.
- ¹⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Last Year in Marienbad*, trans. Richard Howard, (London: John Calder: 1961).
- ¹⁷ Robbe-Grillet, *Last Year in Marienbad*, 110.
- ¹⁸ To create the distinctive sound track, Resnais worked closely with Francis Seyrig, who wrote the score and had been a student of Olivier Messian. Francis Seyrig was the brother of actor Delphine Seyrig who played A in the film.
- ¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, tran. Charlotte Mandell, (New York, Fordham University Press, 2007), 14.
- ²⁴ Robbe-Grillet, *Marienbad*.
- ²⁶ Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, trans. Jonathan Griffin, (London: Green Integer, 1997), 47.
- ²⁷ Chris Marker, *La Jetée; ciné-roman*, (New York: Zone Books), 1992.

²⁸ Marker adapted this image from one of his first works in which he montaged films of wind tunnel experiments. *Cine-tracts 1 – 16*, (Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, et. al., 1968) 16 mm.

³⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Abbas Kiarastami; The Evidence of Film*, (Paris: Yves Gevaert, 2001).

³¹ Nancy, *Evidence of Film*, 46.