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**Identity and Narration in  
Chris Marker's *La Jetée* and the  
Appearance of the Internet as a  
Symptom of Cold-War Anxiety.**

"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, happened on the main jetty at Orly, the Paris airport, sometime before the outbreak of World War III." (Marker 1992: preface)

CHRIS MARKER'S 29 minute film, *La Jetée*, first appeared in 1962 in the era of the Cold War, an era which also gave birth to the Internet. The Internet appeared in 1968 as the DARPA network, invented by Paul Baran at Rand Corporation; Baran had been looking at packet-switching since at least 1964 with the idea of building resilience into communications networks (de Rosnay 1995). Taking in turn the three themes of: image, time and narration, this text attempts to show how the building of the Internet and the fears explored in *La Jetée* have much in common, suggesting that they are both a symptom of the over-arching anxiety of that cold war age which we have inherited and now need to re-analyse today.

**Image**

Late in the film and book version of *La Jetée*, the hero of the story makes contact with the future. The photographic image that Marker uses to signify the hero's passage into this unknown space is that of a spider's web. The web (*la Toile* as French's leading daily, *Le Monde*, now refers to the WWW), is a powerful image that suggests connectivity and mutual interaction between nodes in the network. However, at the heart of the web sits the spider, invisible but omnipresent. A cold, calculating creature detecting its prey by eavesdropping on the signals transmitted by their throes of entanglement in the web. The spider's movements are erratic (no smooth acceleration here) like packets of data it either moves or it is at rest (1 or 0), seeking and capturing its prey. In networked datacommunication systems like the Internet each packet of information must contain the address of the intended recipient (Comer 1997: 147) every terminal and hence, every user, has a unique Internet Protocol address (IP):

"Each packet sent across the internet contains the 32-bit IP address of the sender (source) as well as the intended recipient (destination). Thus, to transmit information across a TCP/IP internet, a computer must know the IP address of the remote computer to which the information is being sent." (Comer 1997: 188)

Basically this means that whenever we make a request for a web page, the owner of that web page can see who has asked for it. As we engage in activity on the web we

are sending out signals saying exactly where we are located (the IP address), like the fly caught in the spider's web.

Marker's vision of life just after WW3 in *La Jetée* is set in the underground passageways of Paris. Aboveground the planet is uninhabitable because of radioactivity. The DARPA Net communications system was built with just this image of the future in mind. Telephone cables beneath the ground would provide the necessary communication links to retain command after the nuclear holocaust. Communication must not be left to chance though, and in the age of representation, where the visual dominates, messages must be shown to those under command rather than merely spoken to them. The insistent demand of email to be read and responded to are witness to the unequivocal visual command structure of the Internet. Marker is sensitive to this, the device he presents as the message connector is a wired patch over the eyes of the hero. It is through the eyes that his new world will communicate in the same way that emails are served up for our eyes on the computer screens of the WWW.

The experimenters, too, in *La Jetée* are characterized by their ability to surveil by being equipped with watchmaker's spectacles. Surveillance is a key characteristic of the cold war machine which was being built simultaneously with Marker's filmmaking.

## **Time**

Multiple aspects of time run throughout *La Jetée*, even the title is suggestive of the past 'The I-was' or 'there I was' (La j'étais ou là j'étais) but the aspect I want to examine is the relationship datacommunications gives us to other parts of the planet. Europe has always looked to the New World as an example of what the future may hold. The cold war positioned Europe as the theatre where WW3 would be played out, if NATO could contain it there by strategic command. Marker opens his story at Orly airport, the aircraft take off, bound for the future world of America. The drive to build the Internet was to put us in direct communication with this new world, yet, ironically, the speed of communication, when almost instantaneous, reveals that the new world is, in fact, five or more hours behind the old, in short in the past. After WW3, Paris is uninhabitable because of radioactivity, the planes no longer take-off from Orly Airport to carry messages to and from the rest of the world. In the book version of *La Jetée* a printed version of the film's voice-over is provided for the reader. The text is in both French and English as parallel versions. Applying dialogic analysis to these texts (Pearce 1994), especially looking for chronotopes in the translations, proves illuminating: Early in the book version of *La Jetée* the English text reads: "Space was off-limits. The only hope for survival lay in Time". The French text offers a tantalizing additional notion « la seule liaison possible avec les moyens de survie passait par le Temps. » Liaison, the opportunity to communicate and to relate are tantamount to survival in the world Marker proposes. This is the dream offered by the Internet, perfect communication with the past or the future, whichever way Europeans choose to view America, and reciprocating interactivity with the message machine. As early as the 1970s (Weizenbaum 1976) anxiety about this reciprocating machine were beginning to surface; Weizenbaum wrote a computer program in 1964 to simulate the role of a Rogerian therapist. The program, ELIZA, feeds back questions to users based on their typed inputs. Weizenbaum became

disturbed by the reception to his program; he felt that people did not understand the logic in the computer and so were attributing human characteristics to the machine. He felt that this was symptomatic of a whole shift in human understanding. The very instrument that had been born from the anxiety of the cold war, the Internet, was beginning to be the source of fear itself.

## **Narrative**

Self narration makes a comprehensible history of the past. The re-narration of the self in psychoanalytic dialogue during therapy is effective because the analyst offers story spaces for the analysand to appropriate and form their own narratives for their previous behaviours or traumas. If the analysand recognizes their self in a proffered narrative they can continue their interrupted self-formative process and gain emancipation (Bernstein 1995; 64). The hero in Marker's *La Jetée* witnesses a traumatic event in his childhood; the event cannot be understood by the child and the resolution of this mystery provides the narrative drive for the plot of the story. Bernstein asserts that Habermasian depth hermeneutics (reading of the self) has narrative at its centre (Bernstein 1995; 58); for this reason Bernstein says that Habermas' depth hermeneutics has all the characteristics of a normal hermeneutics, viz. historical, contextual and productive elements. Bernstein offers, as an illustration, the example of beliefs within people. For beliefs to have the value of true beliefs they must be acquired without indoctrination or censorship; if there is a mark of the origin of the indoctrination in the belief then this is a false belief. The value in western European culture for belief acquisition to take place without the mark of the origin is when the belief is acquired in the field of reason and in an ideal speech situation. Self-reflection is a way to remove any deception which may have taken place during the acquisition of beliefs. Thus, a belief acquired during re-narration of the self will have the value of a true belief and will go towards the formation of personal values and self-identity. Psychoanalytic narrative praxis is more than an emancipatory project because of the constraints upon what can be narrated and because self transformations work through Hegelian causality (Bernstein 1995; 61) and "...this causality involves the acknowledgement of an always already presupposed alterity... The narrative form that articulates ... causality ... is tragedy." Habermasian self-reflection is both cognitive and tragic. "Narratives represent events not as instances of general laws but rather as elements of a history where a continuing or collective subject suffers or brings about dramatic ie meaningful, changes. A change is meaningful in virtue of its relation to past and future events." (Bernstein 1995; 62) "Constructing narratives involves eliciting connections between events by describing them in one way rather than another." "In narrative self-reflection we rehearse past events as turning points in a life-history." (Bernstein 1995; 62) By using a theoretical language, available to us in the present, we can re-narrate events from our past in a such a way as to come to a new self-understanding using those events which did not make sense at the time.

Marker seems well aware of the power of this re-narrating and employs the idea in *La Jetée*: « Rien ne distingue les souvenirs des autres moments » (Marker 1992) This I would translate with a different emphasis from that offered by the parallel English text in *La Jetée*. "Memories are indistinguishable from other events; it's only later that they make themselves known through their scars." Using the three mental agencies from psychoanalytic theory: id, ego and superego, the subject forms a contingent or interrupted narrative to comprehend the misery of the original scene; the analyst, in

therapy, makes suggestions for re-narrating this pre-formed narrative and, if successful, enables the analysand to continue the interrupted narrating and self-realising process. (Bernstein 1995; 63). The success of continuing self-reflection is autobiographical. The tragic aspect of this modernist life narrative is well illustrated by Marker's *La Jetée*. The modernist subject accumulates self-knowledge through re-interrogating the past as Habermas describes. The truth being sought concerns an event which did not make sense at the time. The tragic consequence of modernist narrative is that at the moment of the fullest knowledge about the subject's life and its originary events is a belief in the truth of causality and the only rational final step in the sequence of events made plausible by narrative is death.

Narrative at its most strained is presented through a series of black and white still photographs captioned in English and French parallel texts. Some of the captioning points precisely to the process Bernstein outlines for re-narrating in therapy: "Sometimes he recaptures a day of happiness, though different", "A face of happiness, though different", "Other images appear, merge, in that museum, which is perhaps that of his memory." (Marker 1992). As if to affirm this idea of the subject on the analyst's couch this broken or fragmentary sequence is terminated with a close-up of the hero's face with the hammock clearly visible. On the Internet we narrate our autobiographies to an interactive audience.

The reciprocating addressee which we have built into the machine is termed interactivity. We are thus guaranteed a hearing, like the analysand in therapy. Connected "in an underground network of galleries", like those depicted in *La Jetée*, the Internet lets us express our anxieties in emails, web-pages and in our contributions to bulletin boards or web fora. Email systems respond, often appending our original messages to the recipient's reply, thus giving back our texts to us from the past and acting as a kind of memory.

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