'Movies are supposed to move, stupid' he said. 'Nobody can do a movie with still images'.

Thirty years passed. Then I made *La Jetée.*

Chris Marker, 'La Jetée', Brochure for DVD of *La Jetée* and *Sans Soleil*, edited by Nouveaux Pictures, Argos Films, 2003.

Uriel Orlow
The Dialectical Image: *La Jetée* and Photography as Cinema //1999/2006

Chris Marker's short science fiction film *La Jetée*, made in 1962 and released in 1964, inhabits a somewhat peculiar position both in post-war European cinema as well as in his own oeuvre. For, even though it is mainly known to initiated cinephiles, *La Jetée* is regarded as one of the bright stars in the sky of auteur-cinema; amongst many exegetical studies, it even provoked a Hollywood remake by Terry Gilliam, *Twelve Monkeys* (1996). Moreover, being the only fiction-film made by this prolific documentary filmmaker who is also a writer and photographer, *La Jetée* stands out of Marker's politically engaged oeuvre. Above all, *La Jetée*'s singularity and continuing spell must be attributed to its compelling story and intriguing imagery. The fascination of *La Jetée*'s plot stems at once from the narrative simplicity of its tragic love story as well as from the conceptual complexity of its time-travel paradigm. *La Jetée*'s representational apparatus is similarly engaging, with its balancing act on the thin line between photography and film. The unique, near-exclusive use of beautifully shot still photographic images presented as a film defies what is commonly understood to be the cinematic norm – movement, the *kiné* of kinematography. Yet *La Jetée* cannot be considered only in terms of photography either, as it paradoxically reaffirms the cinematic with its photo-novel technique (montage), as well as through the soundtrack.[1] As such it is a seminal work combining photography and cinema, allowing us to interrogate the specificities of both as well as their close interrelations. In the following, however, I shall not propose another position in the long ontological struggle to define the photographic or cinematic image respectively, but, rather, try to show how *La Jetée* powerfully turns this *quest for* an essence into a *question of* essence, defying the laws and definitions of both photography and film. It presents us with an attempt to define the image no longer in terms of a single essence, be that a photographic or cinematic one, nor in terms of a single genre – *La Jetée* bears attributes of the comic-strip, photo-album, fiction-film and documentary. Instead, the image is construed as an interplay of dialectical and often paradoxical forces. By embracing contradiction and freeing the image from the ontological constraints of singular and deterministic conceptions, *La Jetée* reveals a dialectical power of the image.

The contradictions that are played out on *La Jetée*'s image track are in many ways analogous to those played out by the story itself. The struggle between arrest and movement is not only that of photographic images under the aegis of cinema (or to put it the other way around, of cinematic motion threatened by

photographic stillness), but also that of *La Jetée*'s plot, which takes place between the same two poles of stasis and mobility: The *setting*, the narrative starting point, is one of double inertia; that of a world in post-nuclear stasis, and that of an immobilized protagonist, both physically – he is imprisoned in an underground camp by victorious survivors – and mentally as he is bound by his love for a woman in the past. Because space is completely devastated after a future World War III the survivors attempt to find help in time and use him for their experiments. The crystal-clearness of a memory image which he retained from his childhood – the face of a woman standing at the end of the jetty at Orly airport in Paris – is the force which catapults him into time. After a series of journeys through time, mainly into the past, where he meets the woman from his memory and an impossible love starts to grow between them, he eventually finds help in the future, which cannot refuse its own past the means of survival. Having completed his mission and waiting to be liquidated by his oppressors, the people he contacted in the future come back to him to receive him amongst them and in their pacified time. He declines their offer, and instead asks to be brought back to the time of his childhood, to the woman who might be waiting for him in the past. Back on the jetty at Orly airport he sees the face of the woman and runs towards her. Just before being reunited with her, he is assassinated by a guard who followed him from/since the underground camp, from which he tried to escape. 'He understood, that one couldn't escape from Time, and that this moment he had been given to see as a child, which had never ceased to obsess him, was the moment of his own death.'[2] He realizes that the child he had been is there too and will live on with the memory of his own death.

Whilst the protagonist's travel through and struggle with time in *La Jetée* is also a journey to and through the image (of the woman, and of his own death), the image's struggle between movement and arrest, between the cinematic and the photographic is, in turn, a struggle with, and journey through time. *La Jetée*'s opens up questions about experiential temporality and personal memory, ending in a moment of existential suspense, a kind of vertigo of life and death. This mirrors what is going on the level of the representational apparatus, which is caught in the contradiction of the still yet moving images, interrogating assumptions about the temporal modus of both photography and cinema. Generally, the photograph is thought to extract a moment from the flux of time, to cut out a slice of a time-space continuum and thus to have no duration of its own.[3] The cinematic image, whilst sharing with photography its chemical production as well as its claim to represent reality indexically, apparently does not stop and preserve a moment of time, but rather, through the addition of movement, is considered to represent the very unfolding of time, thus giving the illusion of the same duration as our experience. Whereas the perpetually

refreshed and ever changing image of film is a *reproduction* of the vitality of the present (even if past events are depicted), the photograph is a *representation* of the past and of mortality (even if the subject is still alive).[4] There have been two interpretations of the photograph's indexicality of the past. First, the photograph has been considered as a proof of a *there and then*, indicating both that *this-has-been* and that in a sense it is *no-more*.[5] The metaphors used to describe this notion of the photograph range from time-fossil to death-mask whose subject is long gone and can only be narrated but not reanimated. The second interpretation takes the photograph to embalm and preserve time (like insect bodies in amber)[6] and thus to eternalize the past. This photograph is a *time-mummy*, a living trace whose subject somehow is still there and could, possibly, be reanimated at any moment.

The very first image of *La Jetée* is of Orly airport near Paris. As soon as the image appears it begins to expand rapidly by way of a zoom-out, starting on the horizon-line, moving along the diagonal perspectival axis of the image and finally comes to a rest, displaying a grey and grainy bird's-eye-view of the airport grounds, with parked planes and cars and an oblong airport-building on whose roof a few tiny figures can be discerned. In the first instance it is probably the fixity of those figures that exposes the unchanging nature of the image, leading to the realization that the moving lens has not recorded this image directly from reality – where some movement would inevitably occur and be mirrored in the image – but is re-presenting an already recorded image. The image's initial zoom is exposed, in retrospect, as a supplementary or external rather than an inherent and internal movement; the image is thus identified as a still photograph – one which remains on screen for almost a minute (the first minute of the 29-minute film). The commentary's allusion to *a violent incident* underlines the assertion of 'photographicity' in this image – a triangulation of reality, past and death. The inscription of the photographic image in an economy of death continues to manifest itself in the following images. After the opening image of the airport, a series of stills follow which continue to depict or display immobility or fossilization (rather than merely being motionless images), giving a strong sense of anticipation or dread, of a catastrophe to come which has somehow already happened. They evoke fate, a reality which is still to come but is already sealed, already fixed – hovering above it all, beneath it all, is death, both imminent and already accomplished: an airport tower and an opaque, matte sun behind it (a *frozen* sun as the commentary tells us); again the airport; a grounded plane; then, a family standing still on the jetty and looking out towards the runways; the boy as if fastened to the railings; his immobile legs; three flight attendants on the tarmac, their movement suspended; and finally, the jetty itself, the *stage-setting at the end of the pier*, where the protagonist is about to die and has

already died, the calm before *and* after the storm.

Despite the assertion of 'photographicity' the cinematic is never far off in *La Jetée*. Already the initial zoom over the airport image registers as a cinematic movement and thus, somewhat paradoxically, problematizes the image's 'photographicity' at the same time as affirming it. The still images of *La Jetée* are not just single photographs collaged together into a slide show but are also profoundly cinematic. They are images-in-sequence, bound in a syntagmatic interrelation that projects them from the two-dimensional plane of photography into a cinematic illusion of a four-dimensional space-time continuum. Also, the sequences themselves are created with filmic styles: fades and dissolves create a seamless flow out of the still images. And not just between but also within the images themselves cinematic conventions unsettle the photograph, as in the addition of movement through zooms and pans. Even the formal composition of the images bears witness to the cinema: long shots of the jetty, a bird's eye view of the ruins of Paris, of a park or a museum take turns with close-ups of faces, statues and room-fixtures. In *La Jetée* the cinematic ceases to be identified by movement (and thus in opposition to photography, as defined by lack of movement) and its illusion of a time-space continuum and narrative flow becomes associated with the conventions of montage; rhythm, angles, repeated shots from different points of view, shots and counter-shots, fades and dissolves. This notion of the cinematic is not threatened by static photographic images as it no longer relies on the suppression or repression of its own photographic or photogrammatic base (the still image). Moreover, the notion of montage also challenges photography's association with death – as ultimate ontological horizon or arbiter – and cinema's consequent identification with life. Bazin had already alluded to cinema's own kinship with death based on montage, when he wrote as early as 1951 (almost pre-empting *La Jetée*): 'Death is one of the rare events which justify the notion […] of cinematographic specificity. An art of time, cinema has the exorbitant privilege of repeating it [death].'[7] And if the possibility for the repetition of death is what in his view marks cinema's complicity with death, the condition of this repetition is montage. This also echoes Pasolini: 'Editing performs on the material of the film (which is composed of fragments that can be extremely long or infinitesimal, of many sequence shots understood as possible infinite subjective shots) the same operation that death performs on life.'[8]

Cinema's own claim on death does not propose a medium specificity and thus an inverted opposition to photography in a binary ontological system. Montage – the operation of choice, assemblage, repetition, overlapping – is not an exclusively cinematic operation, even if some of its conventions are. Indeed, it extends to the presentation of all photographic images, be they in a photo-album, on a wall, or through a cinema-projector. The self-confessed medium of *La Jetée*, the photo/ciné-roman, proves exactly this point, by proposing a middle ground, an undecidability between photography and cinema, which is simply defined by the presence of photographic images (moving or not) and their assemblage into a story. *La Jetée* defies the binary oppositions between photography's kinship with death and film's association with life, between past and present, the fossil and the mummy, by making use of both photographic and cinematic conventions. This proposes a powerful critique of an essentialist medium-specificity of photography and cinema which relies on the opposition of movement and stillness. To be sure, *La Jetée*'s images never quite achieve cinematic movement. Instead, they constantly unveil the smallest unit of the film, the film still, the photographic frame. As such, they expose the illusion of duration in cinema which is achieved through a 'false' movement.[9] After all, cinematic movement is always just a very fast succession of immobile images (frames). In *La Jetée* photography reminds cinema, that like itself, it cannot but fall short of representing real duration – whose flow can neither be halted nor divided into equal parts (instants, frames, photographs). *La Jetée* strips cinema of that element which emancipated it from photography, that is of its very core, movement. By doing so it proposes a different kind of temporality which doesn't only rely on movement and combines the photographic *this was and perhaps still is* with the cinematic *this is or will be*. The photograph-as-cinema encompasses all times at once, an image proclaiming *this was, is and will be* at the same time.

This liberation of the image from a rigid syntactical tense structure and its consequent immersion into a new kind of 'holistic' time, of course mirrors the narrative of *La Jetée*, whose mental time travel shatters linear chronology and diffuses the separation of past, present and future and their alignment on an (unavoidably spatially imagined) continuum. Once chronology has exploded (or imploded for that matter) the splinters of time light up like so many facets of a crystal. Indeed, Gilles Deleuze calls the cinematic image, which represents time directly and not just as a measure of movement, i.e. linearity, the crystal-image.[10] Even though Deleuze never mentioned *La Jetée* in his cinema books it seems to be an emblematic example of the crystal-image. It portrays both the protagonist's rebellion against the tyranny of the present and unidirectional time, as well as the image's struggle to free time from its subordination to movement. The image, no longer relying on an internal movement to *represent* time, instead *produces* time through its relations to other images. In *La Jetée*, the transition from the movement-image to the time-image literally becomes visible: through a continual arresting of cinematic movement, the viewer is held in contemplation, in a kind of 'pure' spatial exploration of the image, which in turn is rendered 'purely' temporal, as the image is linked to other images.

Watching *La Jetée* can be likened to taking part in an archeological expedition, where, by digging through space a temporal dimension is excavated, one independent of forward motion or action, but rather embedded in the labyrinthine circuits of memory.[11] *La Jetée*'s photographs-as-film incorporate both the flow of time as a present which always passes (cinema), as well as a past which is being preserved (photography).

As time-images that refer both to the present and to the past, and as images that can neither be attributed exclusively to photography nor film, *La Jetée*'s images are, above all, dialectical. Walter Benjamin described the dialectical image like this: 'It is not so, that the past throws its light onto the present, or the present its light onto the past, but the image is that, in which the past coincides with the now and in a flash becomes a constellation. In other words: the image is dialectics at a standstill.'[12] *La Jetée* does not propose a synthesis of the dialectic of photography and cinema, but rather, after presenting the ontological, binary mechanism of that dialectics, it undoes the opposition itself and stops the dialectic in its tracks, showing time in the image independently of its medium. If we are, then, to push these reflections on the status of the images in *La Jetée* a step further, away from the questions of medium, genre or structure towards a notion of pictorial *operation*, that is image-dialectics, the notion of stillness can be reconsidered once more. The arrest of the images in *La Jetée* represents the power to interrupt the flow of narrative (so dear to the cinema), to insert a hesitation between the image and its meaning, and between one single image and the whole of the film. It is not just a pause within time, but rather an active halt, which works upon the image. The stopped image is transported out of time and is thus given the power to expose time, and this is a fundamentally redemptive power.

The image-in-arrest, or cinema-as-a-series-of-photographs having gained autonomy not only from movement but also from time, does not, however, claim any kind of self-sufficient authority. Rather, it shows all the more strongly, how temporality, or indeed any meaning, is produced not *in* the image, but *between* itself and another, i.e. through montage. However, *La Jetée* by the same token warns of a simplistic notion of montage, as merely putting images together and ordering them according to chronology or a-chronology. Beyond the practice of organization or juxtaposition of the visible, the most powerful aspect of montage is the gap, whose potential resides in the invisible and its force to transcend the image. The gap or interval between (the meaning, or time of) one image and another is not just a founding principle of narrative cinema (and literature for that matter) but is also the means to produce a qualitative leap or change, that is to insert a kind of revolutionary energy into the film. Whereas there is a tendency in mainstream cinema to hide the assemblage of different images, *La Jetée* turns montage inside out and shows the seams which hold the images together. Through long fades it exposes the black interval present between all cinematic images and focuses our attention onto the fabric, operational mode, and redemptive potential of the gap and the image alike. The dialectical interplay between image and gap is, of course, very much analogous to a certain conception of memory, which presents us with as many images (from the past) as gaps. And indeed, the stage of this interplay is also where the protagonist of *La Jetée* fights for freedom from the constraints and oppression of 'wrong', linear and irreversible time in order to fulfil his love for a woman once glimpsed in the past. Crucial in this quest for lost love, and thematizing the notion of redemption, is the moment of their closest intimacy in the middle of the film, when he watches her sleeping, turning her head in an ever accelerating replacement and superimposition of images, and finally opening her eyes, in an image which is famous for being the only *moving* image of the entire film. Yet, contrary to the general assumption that this 'climax of the eye' coincides with the achievement of the 'truly' cinematic through the reanimation of the stasis of photography, this short moving image after the fast succession of still frames, rather creates a kind of (ar)rest, or stoppage. Thus it does not so much represent the victory of cinema over photography, but reveals a dialectical image at a standstill, an image defined by photography and cinema, and paradoxically autonomous from both, a redemptive image.

1   There are a number of studies which deal with this problem, one of the most detailed being Roger Odin's 'Le film de fiction menacé par la photographie et sauvé par la bande-son', in *Cinémas de la Modérnité*, ed. Dominique Chateau et al. (Paris: Klinksieck, 1981) which was further elaborated by Réda Bensamaïa in 'From the Photogram to the Pictogram', *Camera Obscura*, no. 24 (September 1990).

2   Chris Marker, *La Jetée*, 1962. Zone Books have published a book with the off-screen film commentary of *La Jetée* and a selection of images (New York, 1996).

3   This also relates to the temporal lexis of the image: in a way a photograph only *lasts* as long as we are looking at it

4   'The snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time – unlike cinema which replaces the object, after the act of appropriation, in an unfolding time similar to that of life.' Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', in *October*, no. 34 (Fall 1985) 83; essay reprinted in this volume, 124–33.

5   See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).

6   See André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema? 1* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967)

7   André Bazin, 'Mort tous les après-midi', in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, vol. 1 (Paris: Cerf, 1958) 68 (first published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1951). 'An intolerable spectacle, not so much due to its objective horror but rather due to its ontological obscenity. The profanation of cadavers and the

rape of burial places was known before cinema. But thanks to film, the only temporally non-alienatable thing we have, can today be exposed at will. Deaths without requiem, eternal re-deaths of cinema!' (70; my translation). The notion of death as cinematic specificity was perhaps first articulated in Cocteau's famous dictum: 'Cinema is death 24 times a second.'

8   Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Observations on the Long Shot (1967)', in *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988). 237. 'Dying is absolutely necessary, because, as long as we are alive, we lack meaning, and the language of our life […] is untranslatable: a chaos of possibilities, a search for connections and meanings without resolved continuity. Death carries out a lightning montage of our life: it chooses from it the most significant moments (which can no longer be modified by other possible, contradictory or incoherent moments) and puts one next to the other […].' 236. Earlier in the same essay Pasolini shows how, if cinema always shows the present, it must consequently create a multiplication of presents which in turn abolishes the present. See Owens and Macafee's translation in this volume, 84–7.

9   Real movement is indivisible, which distinguishes it from the space covered, cf. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1968).

10   See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London, Athlone, 1992). see also D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997).

11   This metaphor is borrowed from Laura Marks, 'A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 35, no. 5 (London, 1994).

12   Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N3.1, in *Collected Writings* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982) 578 (my own translation).

Uriel Orlow, 'Photography as cinema: *La Jetée* and the redemptive powers of the image', *Creative Camera*, no. 359 (August–September 1999), 14–17. Revised by the author for this publication, 2006.

David Campany
Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of 'Late Photography'//2003

Several weeks into the intensive coverage of the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center, Britain's Channel Four News screened a thirty-minute special report entitled 'Reflections on Ground Zero'. It followed New York photographer Joel Meyerowitz as he manoeuvred diligently around the smoking rubble and cranes with his large format camera. He had been commissioned by the Museum of the City of New York to make for posterity the 'official' images of the scene and the clean-up operation. He was granted exclusive photographic access to the site and produced a substantial body of colour photographs, exhibited in the city and later internationally. Just about everyone worldwide with access to a television had seen the fall of the towers and the ensuing news reports, through electronic images transmitted globally and instantaneously. Lower Manhattan became the most imaged and visible of places, the epicentre of a vast amount of state-of-the-art digital and video news production. Yet here was a report beamed to Britain featuring a solitary man, his tripod and his forty-five pound, sixty year old Deardorff camera. It was a slow and deliberating half-hour, imbued throughout with a sense of melancholy by the constant tinkling of a piano in a minor key. There was an air of ritual too, since this was at least part of the function of both the programme and the photographs. In being about photography the report almost managed to draw attention to the medium of television. It made much play of the contrast between the complexity of the geopolitical situation and the simplicity of Meyerowitz's camera and working method. The suggestion that photography, rather than television, is the better medium for official history was unusual. Television was deeming itself unable to perform an image task given over to photography, even while it was showing us images at least as informative as the ones being taken by the photographer. The photographs were positioned as superior to the programme in which they were presented. Meyerowitz was filmed telling us at one point 'I felt if there was no photographic record allowed, then it was history erased.'[1] No doubt the special sanctioning will symbolically structure how his pictures are seen as they tour. Even so this status will probably become less secure in the future – they will probably take up a place alongside so many other images in the constructions of history. What *may* mark them out in posterity is the very act of sanctioning itself, the idea that there was a need, a desire, to nominate an official body of images, and that these should be photographs.[2]

Meyerowitz's imagery is not so much the trace of an event as the *trace of the*