

The Illusion of Sight: Analyzing the Optics of *La Jetée*

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The theme of the eye in cinema has dominated film history, from Dziga Vertov's omniscient mechanical eye to Alfred Hitchcock's possessive human gaze to Ridley Scott's replicant eye as a source of truth and soul in *Blade Runner*. In Chris Marker's 1962 experimental film, *La Jetée*, the concept of sight achieves new meaning. Composed almost entirely of still frames, *La Jetée* asks new questions of the viewer, who must piece together separate frames without the illusion of movement. The film tells the story of a prisoner of war during the aftermath of World War Three, whom scientists send to the past and future in search of a key to survival in the present. Just as The Experimenter (Jacques Ledoux) tosses The Man (Davos Hanich) into different realities, Marker crafts the film in a way that forces the audience to question its perception of reality within the narrative and about the film itself. This illusory nature manifests itself in the film's motif of eyes, forms of gaze, and unique usage of editing and image.

Eyes

Throughout the film, the audience can identify certain characters and their narrative and thematic roles based on the presentation of their eyes. One of the chief scientists (Uncredited), who will later follow and kill The Man, wears spectacles that obscure his eyes for the duration of the film. This apparatus provides two functions: it allows the scientist to improve his sight while also preventing the viewer from meeting his gaze. This simultaneously portrays him as more perceptive, yet more inscrutable, producing an uncomfortable aura around this character.

However, glasses and other eye coverings do not serve only to enhance sight or block out the viewer, but also to inhibit the subject's perception. A sequence of shots of the prisoners illustrates this as low-key lighting casts hard shadows on a prisoner, covering his eyes so that they appear hollow (06:17-06:33). The juxtaposition of these images to a shot of a rock with dark, empty holes reinforces this depiction. The insanity of the prisoners has made them delusional, obstructing their vision of reality to the extent that they bare more resemblance to the statues than to the scientists.

These opposing portrayals of eyes indicate the dialectic of eye coverings in the film. The Man, who finds himself in various realities, embodies this dichotomy in his differing appearances in each time period. In the present, the scientists cover his eyes with an opaque visor. In the future, he wears sunglasses. In the past, nothing conceals his eyes, excluding the final scene. Each of these representations symbolize The Man's relationship to that reality. He disconnects himself from the present, hence he cannot see through his eyeshade. Working in similar fashion to the prisoners described above, this eye covering impedes his vision of reality. A shot of a statue-head with empty eyes which dissolves into a shot of The Man emphasizes this comparison (12:43-12:57). In the future, The Man resembles the scientist by donning sunglasses that aid his vision but hinder the audience's view of his eyes. This increased perception allows him to seek out the resolution of his mission, while obscuring the gaze of others to protect himself from the unknown future. The lack of an eye covering in the past, though, reflects that he has chosen the past as his preferred reality. Therefore, his sight and the view of the audience remain unadulterated.

The Man's understanding of reality displays flaws in this respect. He can reach his ideal reality in the past only by tainting his perception of reality in the present. The film's final scene highlights this concept. Having travelled to the future in his sunglasses, The Man then heads to the past, still wearing them. Covering his eyes at this moment of choosing another reality signifies his blindness to the truth. Hence, he fails to anticipate the scientists' plot to murder him because his love for The Woman (Hélène Chatelain) has blinded him.

In contrast, The Woman never wears an eye covering, maintaining a pure view of reality. But the lack of a visual aid limits her perception, portraying her as naïve since she does not know that the narrative's true reality lies in the present, her future. This irony, that the only character without a physical optical impediment understands the least about the plot, develops the notion of the film's deceptive reality.

The Gaze and "Looked-at-ness"

The absence of visual obstacles surrounding The Woman plays a vital role in attracting the gaze of The Man and the camera. The camera's first close-up of a face belongs to The Woman, setting her apart from the faceless people at the airport in the opening scene. The Man clings to the memory of her face, driving the narrative as the scientists select him for experimentation due to his strong connection to the past. Thus, The Man's gaze appears throughout the film as he travels back in time to see her. But this gaze exhibits unconventional properties. Typically, the male or camera gaze connotes desire for and possession of the objectified female. But in *La Jetée*, the arrangement of the gaze departs from this model by

confronting and hijacking The Man's gaze. This raises further questions about the identity of the original onlooker and the reality of the observed image.

The Man and The Woman's first meeting demonstrates this novel approach. The Man sees The Woman looking at herself in a mirror, partially covering her face with her hand (13:19-13:23). In this shot, The Man gazes at The Woman who gazes at her mirror-image that gazes back at The Man. This showcases the "Triangulation of the Gaze" as The Man admires the idealized mirror-image of The Woman, which The Woman imitates to attract him. But The Woman breaks this structure by blocking her face in the mirror, preventing both herself and The Man from seeing her perfect mirror-image. She then uses her mirror-image to stare back at The Man, confronting his gaze to further dismantle the traditional principles of the male gaze. This calls into question the gazer's identity and authority. Who initiates the gaze? Whose gaze dominates? Furthermore, the shot of a mirror-image casts doubt over the reality of the object of the gaze, capturing the film's recurring predicament.

A later sequence of shots of The Woman waking up uses the gaze to develop this uncertainty of reality. When she opens her eyes to meet the camera's gaze, the film speeds up to produce the only moving frames in the film (19:44-19:51). This shot cuts to a low-angle close-up of The Experimenter from The Man's point of view, implying that The Man had been gazing at The Woman in his dreams. These shots parallel each other; The Man wakes up to see The Experimenter observing him just as The Woman wakes up to find the camera/The Man looking at her. This results in a "gaze-chain": the camera watches The Experimenter who watches The Man who watches The Woman, thereby challenging the possessive authority of each gazer and

the tangible existence of each gaze. Building on the previous example, this extended link not only detracts from the gaze's objectification, but from the reality of the gazer himself.

The Museum Sequence (20:04-23:36) encapsulates this enigmatic application of the gaze. In this case, the scientists observe The Man who gazes at The Woman who looks at the animals. The imagery alludes to this gaze-chain by capturing the couple from different vantage points. Early in the sequence, a full shot depicts The Man gazing at The Woman (20:22-20:27). He stands behind her, a fair distance away, in the background of the shot. A large line of bones above The Man accentuates his small figure, alluding to his true lack of dominance despite his possessive gaze. The Woman stands in the foreground, looking at the museum exhibits in amazement. On screen left, a pair of gazelles in the glass casing appear to be looking at her, thereby confronting the end of the gaze-chain.

Later in the sequence, The Man and The Woman look at the animals together, but the camera position switches to show the couple from within the glass museum cases. This crossing of a liminal space eliminates their safety as audience members, transforming them into objects of the gaze. In the first of these shots (22:09-22:13), the window panes frame The Man and The Woman as the animals inside watch them. Now, the camera displays The Man and The Woman behind a screen, flipping the perspective. This prompts two queries: Who is really watching? Who is being watched? High-angle shots add to this dilemma by diminishing the couple's size and power while birds watch over them. As The Man returns to the present, he discovers that the scientists have been watching him, revealing the rest of the gaze-chain. His gaze merely functions as one link in a chain of superior onlookers from the reality of the present, rendering his role as gazer in the past fictional.

Optics, Motion, and Montage

The film's mechanics convey this theme of the imaginary aspects of The Man's reality. By using still frames, the film resembles the dream state. In dream logic, the subject can move from place to place instantaneously, without noticing how he or she arrived at that point. This lack of definitive motion permeates *La Jetée* as the narrative explores various realities through The Man's imagination. This dream-like nature therefore hints to the falsehood of his reality.

The film does manage to create movement despite these visual limitations, using sound to produce flow. Replacing the image's role, the sound moves constantly, enhancing the audience's experience of motion through auditory senses. The score's use of jarring, mechanical sounds builds a sci-fi atmosphere while the foreboding singing of a funeral choir elicits the film's dramatic tone.

But the disparity between image and sound inevitably provokes tension. The image, which generally moves, remains still, whereas the sound, typically interpreted as immaterial, constructs an almost palpable sense of movement. These unconventional uses of the two mediums clash with each other. Because the frames stay still, the sound emanates from an undetectable source, debilitating the audience's sight. The whispering of the scientists exemplifies this tension since the audience cannot always see the speaker. Playing over images of The Man in the past, the whispering in the present unsettles the audience. The scientists whisper loudly enough to hear, but quietly enough that the listener cannot decipher all the words, further distressing the audience. This results in a feeling of vulnerability due to the unknown source and content of the sound. Thus, the tension between image and sound

disturbs the audience's visual perception, the mode of interpretation traditionally required to understand a film.

The film confronts this lack of clarity in its only moving frames, those of The Woman waking up (19:44-19:51). This shot centralizes The Woman in the film as a thematic device, calling to attention her role as the object of the gaze and as the only unimpaired viewer. By creating a moving image, the film abandons its own reality of the still frame. Thus, The Woman escapes the film's dream world, opening her eyes to live in the world of motion, the world of reality. Looking back at the camera or observer, she thereby reverses her and the audience's respective roles. She possesses an omniscient view as the film's embodiment of reality, whereas the audience must question its perception of reality due to the film's stationary elements restricting its view.

Alternatively, as discussed earlier, the narrative affects even The Woman's omniscience since she remains unaware of events outside of her timeline. On the other hand, the audience witnesses the events of all the film's time zones. But perhaps this knowledge gives the viewer a false sense of security. Although the viewer receives all necessary plot information, *La Jetée* successfully disorients its audience through its montage of still frames. This ignites a relationship of shared experience between the viewer and the characters, who endure a similar examination of their reality through the film's motifs of eyes and the gaze.

Works Cited

La Jetée. Dir. Chris Marker. Argos Films, 1962. Film.