

Chris Marker, Jon Rafman: Our Relation to Images

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OUR RELATION TO IMAGES

The first time I watched *You, the World and I*, by Jon Rafman, I had a vague feeling of déjà vu. The feeling that a similar quest had already been the subject of a film production haunted me. Then I remembered. Due to a few common features, which for the moment I sensed by pure intuition, this video brought me back to Chris Marker's influential work, *La Jetée*, made in 1962. Yet what were these points of convergence linking one to the other? I couldn't say. Though I felt that some kind of comparison would arise; some conclusion that, in a manner still unknown to me, would elucidate our relation to images as it might have changed between the time when *La Jetée* was shot and when Jon Rafman made *You, the World and I*. Or I could discover that this relation might also have remained unchanged in other respects. The starting point, and narrative pretext, of the two works is certainly very different. In the case of *La Jetée*, the protagonist is haunted by a ghost image of a woman's gentle face in a scene in which he sees a man die. He is not in search of an image, in contrast to the narrator of *You, the World and I* (YTWAI). He is impressed by a scene he incessantly recalls, whose premise for being predominantly escapes him. Moreover, it is this fixation that leads him to be selected by the scientists employed in opening a hole in time. We are thrown into a post Third World War era. Paris is destroyed and the survivors

now live as prisoners of the victors. They have settled beneath Chaillot, in an underground network of galleries, as the surface, riddled with radioactivity, has become uninhabitable. The only possible solution to ensure the survival of the human race is to call past and future to the rescue of the present, creating a route by which provisions, medicine and sources of energy could flow. *La Jetée*'s protagonist is selected for the power of the mental image haunting him. His voyage in time is a redemptive effort. If he succeeds, humanity will be in a better place, or even be saved. He thus appears as a possible saviour because haunted by an enigmatic image. This predisposition to the image makes him, more than the other guinea pigs, more capable of living in a different epoch, a moment in the past or future. It is as though the fact that a fragment of space-time, retained in the image-trauma, is fixed in him makes him better able to endure the temporal dimensions of the experiment proposed to him.

Moreover, the character of *La Jetée* succeeds. He is able to find a past epoch, in which he meets a woman who seems familiar to him. His sojourns last longer and longer and he is so successful a time traveller that the scientists decide to send him into the future. He thus achieves his purpose and returns from the future with a power unit capable of regenerating human industry.

Shortly after his return, the beings from the future invite him to come live among them. Yet he prefers to return to the past, the twice-lived time of his childhood, into which he will return as an adult to join the woman who perhaps still awaits him. Once there, he ends up in Orly, on the jetty he saw as a child. As he rushes towards the woman to whom he wants to return, an agent from his time shoots him down, and he realizes that the incident he witnessed as a child, this scene which has haunted him, is his own death.

Things happen very differently for the narrator and protagonist of YTWAI. From the outset, this protagonist laments the fact of not having a single photograph of the woman with whom he spent most of his youth. Despite all the expeditions and journeys they took to numerous archaeological sites and regions of the world, not one image of her remains. Yet he suddenly remembers. One image does exist. A photograph of her was taken by a car in the Google Street View fleet. The car drove on the street where the two lovers were staying in a hotel on the Italian east coast. Thus, accidentally and against her will—she had always refused—a photograph of her exists.

Both protagonists have suffered loss. For the character of YTWAI, it is the starting point of his search. This loss is real: it is the loss of the loved woman of whom no trace remains. An image of

her could partly fill this void. She's rumoured to be on an island of Turkey, trying to decipher pre-Socratic fragments. Her image, compensatory, will surface at last.

Yet the narrator will not be satisfied simply with this aleph of memory. It would be better if there were more. In his search, he projects his beloved's face onto the landscapes observed. When he finally accepts that only this one image exists, the photograph disappears, swept along like many others into the dustbin of information where all images end up today, driven out by other more recent ones. Meanwhile, he will have scoured, literally before our eyes, the entire batch of trembling images, made surreal by their immediacy, their image quality like that of video games, Google Street Views and Google Maps. It is surprising to realize to what degree he could have searched and searched, incredulous that only one image of her could exist. So it is not the excessive use of these tools that prevents the disappearance, that curbs the unavoidable momentum of the search in this work, when loss follows loss. The conclusion is that the frantic momentum of the quest for images cannot be delayed for much longer. As a work about the search for one image amidst the many images shown from the most distant corners of the world, *YTWAI* nevertheless leads to the downfall of the image, since the image found cannot survive the search. It is as though the frantic momentum of this search is corroborated by the fact that the image holds within it its own obsolescence and that, soon, it will no longer exist. Tracked down, neglected, then rediscovered, the loved (lover's) image cannot survive since everything is reduced to it. One could say that the image cannot support the density of the lovers' numerous states of existence amassed within it. For this reason, it dies. As it first died in the eyes of the narrator: insufficient, given that no other image could follow it to give it continuance, to give it a history, since two states of space-time need to be interlaced for a fiction to be born.

With *La Jetée*, one is instead confronted with a loss of reference. While in *YTWAI* it is a matter of finding an image that could compensate for an emotional loss, an image that would take the place of the woman gone, for *La Jetée*'s protagonist only the image exists, whose meaning he has difficulty grasping. The image is there, buried but available, transformed into a mental image of such power as to make time travel possible. It is as though the image's energy enables a re-enactment of it. Yet the image still doesn't lead to something precise. We don't really know to what it could correspond. The entire story of *La Jetée* is an ascent towards the meaning of the image. Everything comes together so that the protagonist can rediscover its meaning, which

corresponds to events he has witnessed but of which he no longer has any knowledge. The character returns to the events surrounding this pregnant image, which is fixed in his mind, an obsessive presence since his return to real time. He returns to the place he once visited, in a spatial and temporal proximity, close to the place and time whose traces he has held within him. He goes back as if the event, because unexplained and enigmatic, produced the image. Yet the image's meaning rests in the one who experienced it. What remained fixed in his mind was his own death, and rediscovering the image's meaning kills him.

It seems that this is the price he has to pay to understand what makes the image. To meet the events lost in the labyrinth of time brings death; it creates the experience that reconciles the image—the path leading to death—and the event at last. The protagonist doesn't know anything about the image, he knows only the image and lives in a fallen world. The one who returns to the golden age in an anachronistic move that turns back the course of time and things, returns so that the image and the event fashion a death out of this impossible fusion.

Comparing the tone of this image and the one operating in *YTWAI* brings us to the opening remark in the second work: "I don't have one single photograph of her!" This statement and its intonation illustrate a kind of incredulity. How can one, *in this day and age*, not be able to get a hold of a person's image? While the image in *La Jetée* and the images in *YTWAI* seem like the remains one must work to recover and conserve, to be able to go back to them, the cherished image in *YTWAI* is incongruous in its singularity. In today's world, it is increasingly unlikely that only one image of an event or person could exist. Several must exist! In opposition to the post-human world of *La Jetée*, prone to rediscover and relive its images, is the world of *YTWAI* with its overrepresentation. The work even shows a certain kind of superhumanity, as evidenced by the satellites relaying the images of Google Street Views. The point of view of most of the images in *YTWAI* is a high-angle shot, God's eye looming over the archeological sites consulted, spanning the most remote corners of the world. The search is an overflight, a bird's eye view falling from the sky. This day and age is surely ruled by a certain supremacy of the image, given the alarming number of images, and the fact that they manage to capture everything from satellites, stationary or mobile devices, extending the monitoring of surveillance cameras. Yet this can only be done through processes which, in view of what analogue photography could accomplish through its physico-chemical apparatus, seem fairly unreal. We are no longer in an indexical relationship

between the thing shown and the one actually seen. We are rather in the realm of signals when a photograph can be taken without a human camera operator and be relayed by being transmuted into archived digital data, which could eventually be reactivated and give us an image. The quality and rendering of the images in *YTWAI* show this well; this proceeds less from direct filming than from reconstructions based on encoded data, recreating reality like a video game in 3D. Yet this allows everything to be included; nothing is left unseen other than, inexplicably, the image of this loved woman, who has avoided any images being taken of her all her life.

The digital image is, in a certain manner, the result of a relegation; it comes to us through a mediation via remote-control mechanisms; it's reconstructed and recreated through codification. It is, above all, transitory, ephemeral, constantly under threat of extinction, obsolescence; it can always sink back into the non-existence on which its virtuality ceaselessly verges, since we have, in a way, accorded it existence. The digital image encodes its distant capture—that indexical relationship whose memory the image keeps and from which it stems. This is the corollary of its excessive use and also its nature. It suffices to look at images of known archaeological sites to be convinced. There, the simulation is not of images shot directly, but is synthesized from encoded direct shots.

In the end, we won't see any part of this loved woman. The image given us is too blurry. For us, she will never be more than a sketched outline. Despite the sophisticated means used to capture and relay her to us, she remains as forbidden to us as objects were for Plato's cave dwellers, condemned to see only shadows.

YTWAI is thus the story of this drive for the image, caught in an aporetic understanding that leads the image from its impossible fetishism to its vacancy. The image is excess and insufficiency. Its need stems from a void that the obsessed seeker hopes to fill but to which he finally returns. It is also vacancy, in the disturbing sense of seeing it be available, open to meaning for a time, and also understanding it as a vacuity and a withdrawal. It takes up its vacancy the way one takes a vacation, leaves its place of meaning to be absorbed by leisure, the availability to which we return. This is what shuts off the drive's momentum and allows it to resume its cycle of dissatisfaction with the image, with any image.

From the analogue image to the digital image, only a kind of frenzy has occurred, a wild acceleration of this momentum.

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