

THE MYTH OF THE THOUSAND WORDS:  
EXPLORING THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN *LA JETÉE* AND *12 MONKEYS*  
Philip Krachun

So they say that a picture is worth a thousand words, that the camera never lies. These are maxims that have followed us through childhood with little more than a casual thought in their direction. People eventually start thinking that pictures take on some kind of narrative voice all their own in the false hope that a picture is worth a thousand words, when in reality, a picture is nothing without some kind of context. Photographer Chris Marker recognized this dilemma and incorporated it into the film *La Jetée*, which would later form the basis for Terry Gilliam's comment on the role of intrinsic meaning *12 Monkeys* .

What is a picture but a symbol? A photograph is little more than a moment arrested in time, a shot plucked from the environment by a wary photographer. It is little more than a record of light, technically speaking, but can photographs have another dimension—meaning? In an essay entitled "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," Allan Sekula states that "The photograph is imagined to have a primitive core of meaning . . . and] is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message" (87). This seems to suggest that photography is another means of discourse, which is to say that thoughts and ideas can be expressed through pictures. There is some credibility to the claim that a picture is worth a thousand words; simply acknowledging a motive in the creation of a thing implies meaning on some level; the picture definitely has *something* to say, even if the maxim is not taken literally.

The implication is that photographs, in the context of meaningful and artistic discourse, have stories or messages packaged within, leaving its captive audience with a responsibility to find that meaning. "The meaning of a photograph," writes Sekula, "like that of any other entity, is inevitably subject to cultural definition" (84). But, warns John Berger in his essay "Appearances," "one can play a game of inventing meanings" (86). Berger is really warning us against creating a world devoid of coherent artistic meaning. Berger places at least some of the responsibility for finding this meaning on the audience. It must take care not to find the wrong meaning. The audience owes it to the artist to find the *correct* meaning. "The photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning. Only by

its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clean semantic outcome" (Sekula 91). This is to say that the culture of the image has the responsibility of assigning meanings, so that there is some level of authority behind established meanings, and "the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined" ("Appearances" 85). The society from which the artwork comes provides a mine of meaning for the audience.

Since artistic meaning is context-determined, one must now determine the context of the artwork. This is the point in which the maxims begin to run out of breath. Society must speak for the artwork, and since conventional cultural interpretation can occasionally differ from the interpretation of the artist, the system strips the photograph itself of any real ability to speak. Or, more accurately, the system strips the artist of his ability to speak according to his own system of meaning. Berger describes a time when he was in a similar situation. "Faced with the problem of communicating experience, through a constant process of trial and error, we found ourselves having to doubt or reject many of the assumptions usually made about photography" ("Appearances" 84). Evidently, there were disagreements between the meaning intended by the artist and the society chosen to interpret those meanings. "When we speak of the necessary agreement between parties engaged in communicative activity," warns Sekula, "we ought to beware of the suggestion of freely entered social contract" (85). The artist, chained into the social contract, has a new responsibility to cater to certain cultural conventions in the creation of his works. Should he break this social contract, he owes it to society to make concessions and offer his personal interpretation in some other way. Otherwise, "what the photograph shows goes with any story one chooses to invent" ("Appearances" 87) since the audience has no established system for interpreting the symbols. This is the dilemma.

This is one of the subjects that Terry Gilliam's masterpiece, *12 Monkeys*, deals with; the film directly grapples with the quest for photographic meaning. Based on the 1962 French film-noir *La Jetée*, by Chris Marker, *12 Monkeys* is the story of James Cole, a "volunteer" selected to go back in time based on his vivid recollection of a memory or dream. He comes from a world destroyed by biological warfare and driven underground, but this world is our own. Time travel has been developed as a last ditch attempt to prevent—or at least research—the fall of man. The scientists of the future are grasping at straws at this point. They have very little history to work

with, because the virus struck quickly and lethally, decimating 99% of the world's population. There seems to have been time enough to photograph what this new culture can only assume were the key elements and players leading up to the world's destruction. Cole is sent back in time to gather information that will, with any luck, enable the scientists to bring mankind back to the top of the food chain. With no established set of meaning, the scientists seem inclined to think that one group, "the Army of the Twelve Monkeys," was responsible.

The scientists originally selected James Coles because he has a persistent memory that dates back to a time before humans abandoned the Earth's surface. More specifically, the memory is contemporary to Cole's time travel destination. Since the memory remains intact despite the pressures of underground civilization, the scientists infer that Cole has a very strong mind—and a strong mind is essential for a time-travel test subject. Since he can not survive on a strong mind alone, the scientists attempt to expose Cole to as much relevant information as possible. In preparation for his trip through time, Cole views several photographs of events, places, objects, and messages from the months immediately prior to the virus' release. This is the closest that the future can come to an actual history lesson. The scientists want to prepare Cole as best they can. Berger talks about this kind of education through pictures in his book *Ways of Seeing*, in which he writes that the oil paintings of the past, much like the photographs of the twentieth century, were "thought of as a permanent record. One of the pleasures a painting gave to its owner was the thought that it would convey the image of his present to the future of his descendants" (146).

One of the pictures depicts a dirty city wall defaced with a red graffiti stencil of the insignia of the Army of the Twelve Monkeys. Scrawled across the wall in red spray paint are the words "we did it." The logical conclusion is that this army was responsible for the virus' release. The other photographs seem to support this hypothesis, and the scientists jump to this conclusion. One can hardly blame them, since there were no documents to explain the graffiti. The people of the future need what Sekula calls "a historically grounded sociology of the image, both in the valorized realm of high art and in the culture at large" (87), since the old system of interpretation vanished along with the civilization that created it. This new society is incapable of assigning meaning consistent with the original documentary meaning. For the image to make any sense, its context must be determined, which means that the new culture must rediscover the ancestral cultural conventions. "The true

meanings of these creations are no longer accessible to the viewer, because the cultural context has been obliterated" (Horak 33). Only after uncovering the social and historical context of the photographs can the scientists "begin to acquire an understanding of meaning as related to intention" (Sekula 92).

Although the photograph in question contains the words "we did it," it has been taken out of context. Without knowledge of the history that surrounds this image, the context is lost. The problem, as Susan Sontag describes in her book *On Photography* is that "photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" (23). When studying an isolated photograph, it is important to remember "all photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity" ("Appearances" 91) and that continuity is essential for interpretation. The scientists, however, operate under the principle that "a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened," without ever stopping to truly investigate the deeper meaning of the photograph (Sontag 5). The scientists are correct insofar as the images recorded on film actually existed at one point in time, but they have no way of knowing the events leading up to and away from the snapshot. This becomes a recurring theme in the movie.

The consequences for the scientists' actions prove to be dire. There are so many elements to this biological terror that are not disclosed by the photographs alone. Together, the photographs do not tell much of a story, and the story that they do tell is flawed. Arranged in a specific sequence and devoid of any clear contextual meaning, the thousand words easily suggest that the Army of the Twelve Monkeys is responsible for the destruction of mankind. The fatal flaw of this ignorant audience is that they have no idea *what* the Army of the Twelve Monkeys has wrought . . . just that they "did it." They automatically assume that the "it" in question was the deployment of the virus. They are, in short, "inventing meaning." In the book *Making Images Move*, Jan-Christopher Horak explains the mentality of the scientists. In this situation "what emerges is a sense that the meanings of objective images are in a continual state of flux, dependent on the historical moment of reception. Newsreel images that once seemed to be pregnant with meaning for the future suddenly only document a specific moment in time that failed to influence the future in any significant way" (34). Berger prescribes a course of action for the scientists when he writes, "If we are looking at an image from the past and we want to

relate it to ourselves, we need to know something of the history of that past” (“Appearances” 101). The scientists, forced to work with what was available, had no way of knowing that the Army of the Twelve Monkeys was one such failed influence. Existing knowledge only went so far as to explain that the world was wracked by plague at a time contemporary to the photograph depicting the Army’s headquarters (once more, adorned with graffiti). The scientists inevitably felt that they had all the information necessary to go ahead with the time travel experiment.

This photograph depicts the headquarters as a run-down street front in Philadelphia. It is dirty, a place for unsavory characters and the windows are littered with fliers. Scrawled across these windows of their headquarters is a pointed question – the question that sets the stage for all of the misinterpretation that follows. “Is there a virus? Is this the source? 5,000,000 die” (*12 Monkeys*). A line from the Marker film springs immediately to mind; “they are without memories, without plans. Time builds itself painlessly around them. Their only landmarks are the flavor of the moment they are living and the markings on the walls” (*La Jetée*). The words are there, lending some context, but they can lead the unsuspected observer down the wrong path, “yet the quotation, placed like a fact in an explicit or implicit argument, can misinform. Sometimes the misinforming is deliberate, as in the case of publicity; often it is the result of an unquestioned ideological assumption” (“Appearances” 97). It is as though the picture were complete with a bad caption for a newspaper photograph. Unfortunately, the text of the article, which contextualizes the photograph, is missing. The scientists have no set of cultural conventions to reference. Ironically, this entire fiasco turns out to be its own cause. The hastiness of these scientists introduces misinformation into the past and they become victims of their own “unquestioned ideological assumptions.” Granted, this is a science fiction story, but the warning is just as poignant—do the research before jumping to a conclusion.

*12 Monkeys* is about the way we look at visual media every bit as much as it is about time travel. It serves to debunk the myth of the thousand words, since the myth implies universal interpretation. If a picture can always stand alone, then the entire story fails to work. Terry Gilliam uses his narrative to break down and depict the system of interpretation, and to address the roles of those involved. There is a shared responsibility between the audience, the artist, and society as a whole to make sense of our visual culture. These are the cultural conventions necessary to give meaning to

artistic symbolism. The act of taking a picture implies an agenda, which obliterates the concept of objectivity. If there is no such thing as objectivity, then the camera *can* tell a lie.

James Cole serves another purpose as protagonist. Cole's character serves to illustrate this connection between art, artist, subject, and society. He is exposed to both cultures, and his confusion reflects our own. He is able to step outside and make sense of things on his own. He goes back because he wants to understand. Cole exposes the audience to his superiors' folly. According to Horak, Cole allows us to view art "as the physical manifestation of human communication. By visually connecting art and audience, viewer and representation," making the audience "aware of their own subject positioning and allowing them to meditate on the relationship of high and low art" (49). Cole prompts us to think about the way we, as an audience, come to perceive things, and he does so by granting us a first-hand look at the system.

The artist also has a responsibility, as Berger is quick to point out. "The professional photographer tries, when taking a photograph, to choose an instant which will persuade the public viewer to lend it an *appropriate* past and future" ("Appearances" 89). The artist owes it to society to make his work comprehensible. He facilitates them and seeks to make his work more accessible with compositional devices. His shot must be artistic, but if he wishes his work to promote narrative, he needs to supply clues to his audience. Only then can his picture be worth a thousand words.

In Gilliam's film the questions scrawled across the headquarters of the Army of the Twelve Monkeys represent the artist's efforts to throw the metaphorical bone to his audience. Cole unintentionally incites the ingénue, Dr. Railley, to panic after introducing her to concepts from the future (specifically the Army of the Twelve Monkeys). Unsure of everything that is about to happen on the cataclysmic scale, she vents her frustrations on the wall of the headquarters with a can of red spray paint. With the wall she poses her question when the results do not seem forthcoming. "Is there a virus?" Railley asks in badly lettered graffiti, "Is this the source? 5,000,000 die" (*12 Monkeys*). The results of her question have already been described. The reason things worked out the way they did was because "Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity" ("Appearances" 87). The questions were not meant to steer the future society onto the wrong track—the message was intended

as a genuine question. Railley simply did not know, just as the scientists did not know. Had Railley known the discourse of the future society, she would have written "This is the headquarters of those responsible for a biological weapon that will decimate mankind and drive us underground." Instead, she *asks*. The implication is that breaking cultural conventions creates a chain-reaction of confusion that destroys the established convention. It becomes a vicious circle. Had the people of the future properly studied or researched the image they would have realized that the question could mean anything. In conjunction with the "we did it" photograph, Cole's superiors were led astray. "We did it," seems to be the answer to Railley's Question, so they drop the matter and make unfounded assumptions. "The contrast between publicity's interpretation of the world and world's actual condition is a very stark one" (*Ways of Seeing* 151). The people of the future believe that their collective point of view "remains credible because the truthfulness of publicity is judged, not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer" (*Ways of Seeing* 146). Since the scientists are ready to believe anything, they are willing to break social conventions. Berger says this happens because "every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity" ("Appearances" 86).

With nobody left to explain the graffiti, the people of the future feel free to interpret the graffiti as they wish. They deem the Army of the Twelve Monkeys responsible for the devastation. Because Dr. Railley's question was misconstrued as rhetorical, she provided the future with misinformation. The irony is that Dr. Railley would never have scrawled the question on the wall if the scientists of the future had never sent James back in time to tell the story of the Army of the Twelve Monkeys. The scientists are responsible for their own red herring because they effectively *created* the Army of the Twelve Monkeys by sending James back in time to ask questions and supply information about them. As events actually unfolded, the Army of the Twelve Monkeys turned out to be little more than a prankster organization. They were so desperate to believe that they found an answer to their problems that the pictures became a sort of publicity. The scientists take executive action for their society and "invent meaning." As Berger said, their actions "mask what is happening in the rest of the world."

So why then, is James Cole chosen? Remember, he is a piece of artwork just as much as the photographs. He is Terry Gilliam's artistic comment. It is important to note that *12 Monkeys* is as much a reaction to as it is a retelling of *La Jetée*. *La Jetée*'s storyline is virtually identical—instead of biological warfare, the world is destroyed by nuclear war. The post-war society in Marker's film also lives underground and attempts to manipulate time travel. Their protagonist is selected because he is tough of mind, like James Cole, and carries within him the vivid memory from before the war. "Having only sent lifeless or insentient bodies through different zones of Time, the inventors were now concentrating on men given to very strong mental images. If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it. / The camp police spied even on dreams" (*La Jetée*). The camp police, with the ability to spy on dreams know that the protagonist has this memory—because he dreams about it. Since the protagonist knows about the past, his mind will be able to adapt. This becomes important for the same reason that James' vivid memory becomes important in Gilliam's film—the ending reveals all and brings the story full circle. But Horak observes "the human ability to remember, to recall a visual, nonverbal imprint in the brain as experience and knowledge, is for Marker a never-ending theme. The narrator in *La Jetée* says from off screen: 'Moments in one's memory are like other moments. They remain conscious only because of the scars they leave behind'" (28). This means that James is a scar. He symbolizes pain. He should be remembered because it is painful for the situations that create him to exist.

*La Jetée* is more than just the story of *12 Monkeys*. Marker's film comments on the role of visual culture in different ways. Marker, to begin with, decided to challenge society's ideas about the photographic medium. He attacks the myth of the thousand words first. His goal, then, is to create *La Jetée* as a collection of narrative photography. According to Sontag, photo-narratives came in books at this time, but books were

not a wholly satisfactory scheme for putting groups of photographs into general circulation. The sequence in which the photographs are to be looked at is proposed by the order of pages, but nothing holds readers to the recommended order or indicates the amount of time to be spent on each photograph. (5)

Marker responds with *La Jetée*, a masterpiece of still-frame images slowly transitioning from one to the other. How was Marker to give a voice to his



photograph—to make his picture worth a thousand words? Literally, as Berger observes:

as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion... The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered. ("Appearances" 91-2)

Since Marker has a strict narrative in mind, the system of symbols is no longer adequate. He must define his own, true to his art. But he uses vocal narration so that we can understand and interpret his work properly. Alone, he knew his photographs were not likely to tell the same story, so he provided it separately. Going to video gave Marker more artistic control over sequence and display, something books could not do. Marker is more than happy to make certain that we get all the exposition that we require, as the entire film is narrated, presumably, by the main character.

*12 Monkeys*' use of fragmented still-frame images pays homage to this device without actually stealing it. In this way, both movies drive home the need for narrative that goes along with photography. "Unlike fiction filmmakers, who can direct the viewer's gaze from one image to the next through sheer narrative, Marker must homogenize a potpourri of images taken at a wide variety of locations over an extended period of time" (Horak 43). While Marker's film supplies narrative as a separate entity, Gilliam's shows the consequences of a world that *does not* supply that narrative. Marker hinted the problem with *La Jetée*, and Gilliam used James Cole to explore it.

The dream sequence, presented similarly in both movies, reinforces Berger's assertion that "remembered images are the *residue* of continuous experience, [but] a photograph isolates the appearances of disconnected instant" ("Appearances" 89). The photographs are truth, proof that a given event existed, but the dream is intangible. As Marker says, the dream only exists because it was painful. This is because dreams "are images between the subconscious and consciousness, between actual experience and the imaginary. Marker transforms these rediscovered images into a discourse on photographic images, a discourse about human imagination and the images in people's heads" (Horak 28). This is what drives Marker to use photos,

the idea that “in our memories we seldom remember ‘moving images’; rather, our mental images often are frozen, isolated and fragmented in time” (Horak 35). The photographs are proof that the future is immutable, and Cole comes to this conclusion that the past cannot actually change. As he watches a Jimmy Stewart film he gradually realizes that “The movie never changes—it can’t change. Every time you see it, it seems different because *you* were different. You see different things” (*12 Monkeys*). In this way, Cole recognizes that “The only objectivity... is a radical acknowledgement of subjectivity, a subjectivity that documents the relationship between the viewer and that which is seen, that acknowledge the culpability of the producer of images as representations” (Horak 33). The prints exist because Cole went back and made them exist, even though he had been there before as a child. The prints, even though Cole finally understands them, still misinform the future, and he is trapped in a loop. Every time he feels that he is changing things, and every time he fails to prevent the inevitable because his mere existence proves that the world ends. His perception has changed.

*La Jetée* is similar in that the main character’s death is orchestrated to create the dream that enables the main character to go back in time. It is a paradox, and the photography alone means that the course cannot be altered, since the camera does not lie. As Marker’s script describes it,

He ran toward her. And when he recognized the man who had trailed him since the underground camp, he understood there was no way to escape Time, and that this moment he had been granted to watch as a child, which had never ceased to obsess him, was the moment of his own death. (5)

The photographs alone are meaningless, but the narrative that accompanies them creates a deep storyline that comments on science fiction, photography, and the role of narrative. As Berger says, “It is because photography has no language of its own, because it quotes rather than translates, that it is said that the camera cannot lie. It cannot lie because it prints directly. . . . and yet photographs can be, and are, massively used to deceive and misinform” (“Appearances” 96).

Pictures *do* tell a story. And the artist owes it to himself to tell it as it needs to be told. At this point, he passes the baton to the audience—but not without a running start. The point, as *12 Monkeys* so vividly describes, is that this is often a collaborative effort. If a picture *is* worth a thousand words, then a thousand words is

not always enough. The words must contain meaning, and “Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development. Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning. Facts, information, do not in themselves constitute meaning,” Berger says; “When we give meaning to an event, that meaning is a response, not only to the known, but also to the unknown: meaning and mystery are inseparable, and neither can exist without the passing of time” (“Appearances” 89). This is why newspaper photojournalism has accompanying text.

As far as narrative is concerned, text works. Novels elaborate on the story—they do the actual telling of the story. They lack a common vision, and this is what makes a picture worth a thousand words—the house that I see in my mind is not the house you see in yours. Pictures are also capable of telling a story, if properly arranged, as storyboards and murals attest, but the words suggested by the picture differ from person to person. The perfect union is to narrate the visual culture with words. It narrows the spectrum and allows more of the idea to travel from the works’ creator to the works’ audience without leaving for interpretation (and thus *misinterpretation*). This, then, is why movies and newspapers are so popular. This is why museums have curators host guided tours—the picture says a lot by itself, but it does not say everything, just as words alone cannot truly convey an image.

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COMMENTARY: "THE MYTH OF THE THOUSAND WORDS"

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Philip Krachun's essay meditates upon the narrative of photographic meaning in the two movies whose actions depends almost totally on the existence of photographs. The issue is a difficult one and Krachun's analysis is able to address it in a way that makes it accessible to the reader without simplifying it. By using essays on the construction of meaning through photography, Krachun addresses the dilemma of photographic meaning, the distortion of artistic intent, and the imposition of competing narratives in a world viewed through pictures with varying amounts of contextualization. Krachun's essay thus gives its reader a good forum from which to think about the nature of the photograph. Unlike a painting or a written description, the photograph assumes a certain sense of truth since what it depicts actually existed and the image was produced by the mechanics of a camera, not the hand of a human. However, Krachun points out that in *12 Monkeys* and *La Jetée*, the burden of the truthfulness of the interpretation of the event does not fall on the artist, as it can with the painter or writer, but with the viewer of the picture. The artist's responsibility is to work within a context, but he has little control over the loss of this context. With the photograph, the viewer must understand the picture's context. Without this context, the picture loses its meaning and must assume a new one that may misrepresent a past event, may create a new narrative that is completely different from the reality of the situation. The essay thus raises the concerns of photographic interpretation as a means of the creation of the narrative. One must ask oneself if his interpretation of a picture is accurate. More importantly, one must ask whether a photograph can actually capture an event without distorting the circumstances and events it aims to relate. The movies ask us to question the whole idea of meaning in a medium that relies on its ability to create an objective account of an event. Where is the meaning of the event created? Can one even create a story from just pictures? What has really been created through the photograph? Who controls the narrative that a photograph must have? Krachun's essay raises many such questions and provides a great catalyst to thinking about these questions. A more lengthy treatment of *La Jetée* would have helped to answer these questions, but the independence of thought and the ambitious nature of the project of this meditation on visual imagery through *12 Monkeys* is a provocative contemplation on the topic that draws from past work but is not completely attached to it.

