

## Posthistorical Anxiety in *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys*: Temporal Palimpsests and Cinematic Memory

### *La Jetée* ve *12 Maymun*'da Posttarihsel Kaygı: Zamansal Palimpsestler ve Sinematik Bellek

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examines the narrative and formal continuity between Chris Marker's experimental short film *La Jetée* (1962) and Terry Gilliam's reinterpretation of its cinematic memory in *12 Monkeys* (1995), through the conceptual lens of the palimpsest principle. A palimpsest refers to a form of rewriting in which new narrative layers are inscribed without entirely erasing the traces of the underlying structure. *12 Monkeys* preserves the temporal and traumatic core of *La Jetée* while reworking it within a postmodern aesthetic. In doing so, it offers a visual manifestation of intertextuality and provides an intellectual framework for exploring the cinematic rewriting of memory. *La Jetée*, composed almost entirely of static photographs, represents time through frozen moments. The protagonist's return to a childhood memory culminates in his witnessing of his own death. This structure is examined within the frameworks of Freud's compulsion to repeat and Caruth's theory of deferred trauma. Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* expands this narrative architecture through dynamic visuals, a dystopian atmosphere, the fear of viral catastrophe, and a psychotic cognitive structure. In this context, both films initiate a multilayered discourse on the cinematic representation of time, trauma, and memory. The article argues that *12 Monkeys* is not merely a remake, but a cinematic palimpsest constructed atop the indelible traces of *La Jetée*, simultaneously rendering it visible and transforming it. These two films reveal how memory is constructed in cinema through a multilayered structural logic, while also exposing the non-linear nature of time. *12 Monkeys* reconfigures Marker's static memory within a chaotic visual domain; thus, the viewer bears witness to how the same traumatic core is articulated through two distinct aesthetic configurations.

**Keywords:** Palimpsest theory, hauntology, lost futures, ontological uncertainty

#### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Chris Marker'ın *La Jetée* (1962) adlı deneysel kısa filmi ile Terry Gilliam'ın onun sinemasal belleği üzerine inşa ettiği *12 Maymun* (*12 Monkeys*, 1995) filmi arasında kurulan anlatısal ve biçimsel sürekliliği palimpsest ilkesi doğrultusunda incelemektedir. Palimpsest, bir anlatının yeni katmanlarla yeniden yazılırken alttaki yapının izlerini tamamen silmeden koruması ve yeniden biçimlendirilmesini ifade eder. *12 Maymun*, *La Jetée*'nin zamansal ve travmatik çekirdeğini muhafaza ederek, onu postmodern bir estetik içinde yeniden işler. Böylece metinlerarasılığın görsel bir karşılığı olarak, sinemada belleğin yeniden yazımı üzerine düşünsel bir zemin oluşturur. *La Jetée*, neredeyse tamamen hareketsiz fotoğraflardan oluşan yapıyla zamanı donmuş anlar aracılığıyla temsil eder. Başkarakterin çocukluk anısına dönüşü, aynı zamanda kendi ölümüne tanıklık etmesiyle kapanır. Bu yapı, Freud'un tekrar zorlantısı ve Caruth'un gecikmeli travma kuramları çerçevesinde ele alınır. Gilliam'ın *12 Maymun* filmi ise aynı anlatı yapısını hareketli görsellik, distopik atmosfer, viral felaket korkusu ve psikotik bilinç yapısıyla genişleterek yeniden üretir. Bu bağlamda her iki film, zaman, travma ve belleğin sinemasal temsiline dair çok katmanlı bir tartışma açar. Makale, *12 Maymun*'un yalnızca bir yeniden çevrim olmadığını, aynı zamanda *La Jetée*'nin silinmemiş izleri üzerine kurulmuş hem onu görünür kılan hem de dönüştüren sinemasal bir palimpsest olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu iki film, sinemada hafızanın nasıl çok katmanlı bir yapısallıkla inşa edildiğini ve zamanın doğrusal olmayan doğasını açığa çıkarır. *12 Maymun*, Marker'ın durağan belleğini kaotik bir görsel düzlemde yeniden işler; böylece izleyici, aynı travmatik çekirdeğin iki farklı estetik yapıda nasıl kurgulandığına tanıklık eder.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Palimpsest kuramı, hauntoloji, kayıp gelecekle, ontolojik belirsizlik

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## Introduction

In cinema, temporality is not merely a narrative device that structures chronological progression. Rather, it emerges as a conceptual terrain where memory, trauma, subjectivity, and historical rupture are aesthetically reconfigured and philosophically contested. Particularly within post-traumatic or post-apocalyptic cinematic narratives, time ceases to operate as a unidirectional continuum and instead assumes a fragmented, recursive, and stratified ontology. Chris Marker's experimental photo-roman *La Jetée* (1962) and Terry Gilliam's postmodern reinterpretation *12 Monkeys* (1995) exemplify this mode of temporal representation through their shared yet distinct meditations on memory, perception, and the irreversibility of historical trauma. Both films center on the motif of time travel not as an escapist fantasy but as a structural mechanism through which psychological and collective ruptures are navigated. Crucially, Gilliam's adaptation does not merely replicate Marker's minimalist narrative. Rather, it reinscribes it within a cinematic matrix characterized by paranoid epistemology, dystopian biopolitics, and postmodern aesthetics. This dialogic rewriting, which simultaneously preserves and transforms its source, can be productively theorized through the conceptual framework of the palimpsest (Genette, 1997; Hutcheon, 1988).

The primary aim of this study is to explore the intertextual, formal, and aesthetic relationship between *12 Monkeys* and *La Jetée* through the lens of cinematic palimpsest. It interrogates the extent to which Gilliam's film enacts a process of spectral inscription upon the visual and thematic architecture of Marker's original. Furthermore, this paper examines how both films embed the key thematic triad of temporality, trauma, and memory not merely as narrative content but as constitutive elements of cinematic form. The fragmented temporality in *La Jetée*, rendered through still imagery and narrated voice-over, evokes a sense of frozen consciousness and eternal return. In contrast, *12 Monkeys* accelerates this condition into a frenetic *mise-en-scène* of delusion, dislocation, and epidemiological catastrophe.

Additionally, the analysis considers how the transformation from still to moving image functions not only as a technical evolution but also as a philosophical and affective shift. Where Marker's work relies on the still image to foreground memory as stasis and rupture, Gilliam's mobile camera and kinetic editing techniques articulate a cinematic grammar of instability and collapse. In this sense, the adaptation becomes not simply a narrative reinterpretation but an ontological reformulation of how time and memory are cinematically constructed. The palimpsestic relationship between the two films allows

for a unique reflection on visual repetition, cinematic inheritance, and the hauntological dimension of media temporality.

By situating the analysis within Sigmund Freud's theory of repetition compulsion (1920), Cathy Caruth's trauma hermeneutics (1996), Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image (1989), and the intertextual poetics of Linda Hutcheon and Gérard Genette, this study offers a multifaceted theoretical scaffold for interpreting how cinematic palimpsests operate across temporal, visual, and affective registers. Ultimately, it argues that *12 Monkeys* is not a derivative remake but a re-embodiment of *La Jetée*'s cinematic memory. It functions as a spectral palimpsest that simultaneously reveals, destabilizes, and regenerates the aesthetic and philosophical skeleton of its predecessor.

## Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical foundations that inform the analysis of *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys*, drawing from film studies, trauma theory, poststructuralist poetics, and philosophies of time. The interpretative framework integrates four interrelated axes: the notion of the palimpsest, trauma and temporal rupture, the cinematic construction of time images, and the role of visual memory.

First, the concept of the palimpsest, as articulated by Gérard Genette (1997) and expanded upon by Linda Hutcheon (1988), provides the structural underpinning for reading *12 Monkeys* not as a derivative remake but as a layered intertextual rewriting of *La Jetée*. The palimpsest functions here as both a metaphor and a methodology. Gilliam's film inscribes new thematic and visual material onto the scaffold of Marker's original without erasing its aesthetic trace. Marker's still photography and restrained narration construct a sparse memory architecture, which Gilliam reanimates through frenetic editing, narrative multiplicity, and dystopian *mise en scène*. Similar palimpsestic dynamics are observable in films such as Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* (2007), which reconfigures Bob Dylan's persona through six disparate characters, each reflecting a different aesthetic register. In a similar vein, Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010) can also be read as a temporal palimpsest that reconstructs cinematic history through thousands of intertextually assembled time-stamped film clips, revealing how temporality itself becomes an archival montage.

Second, this analysis is situated within the framework of trauma theory. Sigmund Freud's notion of repetition compulsion (1920) and Cathy Caruth's theory of belatedness or deferred trauma (1996) offer critical insights into how both films revolve around the inability to assimilate or narrativize traumatic events within linear

temporality. In *La Jetée*, the protagonist is haunted by a recurring image of a woman and a man's death, which ultimately converges in the revelation that he himself is the dying figure. *12 Monkeys* reconfigures this trauma as both personal and planetary. James Cole is burdened with fragmented recollections of an airport shooting, which are gradually revealed to be memories of his own death. Both films dramatize the structural impossibility of temporal mastery, portraying time travel as an attempt to retroactively heal what remains epistemically inaccessible. A comparable treatment of trauma and time can be found in *Denis Villeneuve's Arrival* (2016), where the nonlinear perception of time becomes essential to processing grief and confronting irreversible loss.

Third, the analysis employs Gilles Deleuze's concept of the time image as developed in *Cinema- 2* (1989). In Deleuzian terms, *La Jetée* is a paradigmatic instance of the time image, wherein the disjunction between movement and time allows pure temporalities to emerge. The film's use of static images resists narrative causality and instead evokes a contemplative temporality, a kind of temporal paralysis that foregrounds memory as an image in stasis. By contrast, *12 Monkeys* oscillates between time image and movement image logics, fusing classical narrative propulsion with postmodern fragmentation. Its time loops, parallel timelines, and unstable subjectivities exemplify what Deleuze might term a crystalline regime, where actual and virtual temporalities coexist. The aesthetic oscillation in *12 Monkeys* recalls the structure of Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), which similarly visualizes fractured memory as spatialized, recursive, and affectively volatile.

Finally, this study considers visual memory and the materiality of cinematic images, drawing on Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1981). Marker's photographs function as punctum, in Barthes's terms, images that wound, disrupt, or pierce the spectator with their emotional resonance. The moment in *La Jetée* when the woman briefly blinks, a rupture of stillness, is often cited as a cinematic equivalent of the punctum. In *12 Monkeys*, visual memory is more fluid and destabilized. The protagonist's inability to distinguish between memory, dream, and hallucination parallels the instability of the cinematic image itself. These films invite a reflection not only on the ontology of the image but on the conditions of historical remembrance and psychic repetition. Similarly, Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) interrogates the visual apparatus through an alienated gaze that renders the human form uncanny and memory as disembodied affect. Together, these theoretical perspectives construct a robust analytic framework that enables a nuanced reading of how *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* function as cinematic palimpsests.

They do not merely narrate time but embody its fractures, its compulsions, and its recursive hauntings, revealing the deep entanglement of narrative structure, image composition, and the traumatic architecture of memory.

### Media Archaeology and Intermediality

The aesthetic dialogue between *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* cannot be fully understood without situating both films within the broader discourse of media archaeology and intermediality. These two frameworks allow us to move beyond content and narrative to interrogate the technological, archival, and material substrates of cinematic memory. Both Marker and Gilliam create works that are deeply intermedial. They quote, rework, and critically engage with the visual technologies of their times. What we encounter in these films is not simply a story about time travel, but a meditation on the shifting nature of media and the specters it leaves behind.

*La Jetée* is constructed almost entirely from still photographs, thus occupying a liminal space between cinema and photography. As Raymond Bellour (2000) argues, Marker's photo-roman form deconstructs cinematic motion by highlighting the static, indexical nature of the image. The movement in *La Jetée* occurs not on screen, but in the mind of the spectator. This aligns closely with Siegfried Zielinski's idea of the "deep time of media" (Zielinski, 2006 p.3), wherein historical and forgotten media forms resurface to destabilize our understanding of linear technological progress. The film is not simply using photographs for stylistic effect. It performs a kind of media archaeology, drawing attention to photography's role as both a scientific and memorial technology.

*12 Monkeys*, on the other hand, expands Marker's aesthetic archive into a full-fledged postmodern media collage. Gilliam introduces a vast array of intermedial forms: psychiatric interview recordings, television news footage, radio broadcasts, surveillance videos, and photographs. These diverse media formats do not merely populate the *mise en scène*; they mediate the characters' perception of reality. Thomas Elsaesser (2004) emphasizes the cinematic function of these formats in post-classical cinema, where narrative coherence gives way to fragmented, archival excess. The memory of catastrophe in *12 Monkeys* is therefore shaped and distorted by its mediation through technological residues. The past is not accessed directly but filtered through a barrage of mechanical reproductions that blur the line between authentic memory and systemic recording.

In both films, media serve not as neutral conduits of memory, but as haunted surfaces through which history returns. In *La Jetée*, the still image emphasizes absence,

loss, and suspended temporality. The use of narration over silent photos evokes the memory work involved in post-war documentation and trauma testimony. In *12 Monkeys*, moving images are paradoxically less stable. Gilliam uses digital glitches, overlapping timelines, and abrupt visual ruptures to suggest that even motion cannot guarantee continuity. As Erkki Huhtamo (2011) argues, media archaeology focuses on the cyclical and recursive logics of media history, revealing how older forms return with uncanny force. *12 Monkeys* is haunted not only by *La Jetée*, but by cinema's own archival unconscious.

Moreover, both films articulate a critique of technological positivism. Rather than portraying scientific progress as liberatory, they frame it as a recursive entrapment within systems of control and observation. The laboratories in both films function as intermedial spaces, half clinical and half theatrical, where time is dissected and replayed. This echoes Foucault's notion of the "clinical gaze" (1973), where the body becomes an object of knowledge and power through visual regimes. In this sense, both Marker and Gilliam anticipate contemporary anxieties about datafication, algorithmic prediction, and techno-surveillance. The intermedial structure of these films thus performs a critical function. It shows us how memory, identity, and temporality are constructed not only through narrative but through media itself. These films remind us that cinema is not just a window onto the world, but a palimpsest of prior forms: photography, painting, radio, archive, and database. By excavating these layers, *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* do not simply tell us stories about time. They show how time is stored, mediated, and reanimated through the ghosts of media past.

### Temporal Politics and the Ethics of Remembering

Beyond their shared narrative skeleton and aesthetic dialogue, *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* unfold a profound ethical meditation on the act of remembering and the human desire to intervene in time. Both films represent temporality not merely as a narrative structure but as an ontological condition embedded with moral consequences. In this regard, they challenge the viewer not only to witness the recursive structure of trauma and memory but also to confront the existential weight of historical recurrence and the illusion of correction.

In *La Jetée*, time travel is framed as a melancholic return. The protagonist is chosen for his strong mental images of the past, a quality that renders him both useful and tragically vulnerable. His return is not redemptive but fatal. The memory he clings to, the woman's face, the airport scene, becomes the very stage of his death. The ethics of remembering here is paradoxical: it is both a means of

survival and a path to self-destruction. The film suggests that the past is not a space to be altered but a wound to be endured. This reflects Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence as a burden, not a liberation (Nietzsche, 1887/2006). Memory, far from being a tool of empowerment, becomes a trap of inevitability.

Gilliam's *12 Monkeys*, while structurally indebted to Marker, deepens this ethical problematic by introducing global catastrophe into the equation. Cole's journey through time is motivated by a desire to stop a viral apocalypse. However, the more he remembers, the more he becomes disoriented. The film resists any simplistic teleology of progress or salvation. Cole's increasing awareness of the past's fixity renders his mission tragically ironic. In seeking to repair history, he only ensures its repetition. This aligns with Paul Ricoeur's view that memory must be understood through its "dialectic of remembering and forgetting" (Ricoeur, 2004, p.7). Similarly, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory emphasizes the belated, fragmented, and involuntary nature of traumatic memory (Caruth, 1996). In her account, trauma does not simply reside in the past but persists as an unassimilated experience that returns unexpectedly and shapes temporal perception (Caruth, 1996, p. 17). Cole's recollections are not vehicles of agency but manifestations of psychic rupture. The traumatic past in *12 Monkeys* is never fully accessible; it is scattered across visual fragments, paranoid recollections, and institutional narratives.

The ethics of memory are also encoded in the gendered dynamics of witnessing. In both films, the female figure is the one who survives. In *La Jetée*, she remains after the protagonist's death, her fate unknown. In *12 Monkeys*, Dr. Raily becomes the reluctant archivist of Cole's suffering, a witness to the tragic cycle. Her final realization in the airport, coupled with the subtle presence of the future observer (the young Cole), emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" (1997) becomes applicable here: the future generation inherits the memory traces of a past they did not experience directly but that shapes their reality. These transgenerational haunting turns trauma into a cultural phenomenon, not just a personal affliction.

Moreover, the ethical framework of both films points to the fragility of agency within techno-scientific structures. The institutional control over memory, whether through experiments, data collection, or surveillance, challenges the possibility of authentic historical engagement. These interventions echo Giorgio Agamben's (1998) critique of biopolitical regulation, in which life itself is subjected to the logic of control and exception. The time traveler, in both narratives, becomes a bare life, a figure caught in the

crossfire of memory and power.

The films also suggest that technological mediation, photography, surveillance footage, scientific recording, complicates the ethical terrain of memory. As Jacques Derrida argues in *Archive Fever* (1995), the archive is never neutral. It is always structured by power, repression, and loss. The archive does not save; it replays. It verifies what is already lost. The image becomes a repository of repetition rather than revelation. What both Marker and Gilliam seem to propose is a form of temporal humility: the recognition that the past, once encoded in memory, becomes a structure that resists moral intervention. Time is not a line to be rewritten but a spiral in which ethical subjectivity is defined not by control but by endurance. Through these ethical entanglements, *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* reveal the political and moral fragility of historical agency. Remembering is not always redemptive. Sometimes, it is the most haunting form of repetition. Their cinema suggests that to live ethically in time is not to master it but to endure its weight as a form of resistance to forgetting and as a quiet refusal to let the trauma of history dissolve into abstraction.

### **Palimpsest in Action: A Comparative Scene Analysis of *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys***

The palimpsestic relationship between *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* is most clearly illuminated through a detailed comparison of specific scenes that echo, transform, and reinscribe each other. This section explores a series of such scenes, demonstrating how Gilliam's film functions as a spectral rewriting of Marker's original through formal, thematic, and narrative recomposition.

One of the most striking parallels is the airport scene, which forms the narrative and emotional fulcrum of both films. In *La Jetée*, the protagonist is haunted by a recurring childhood memory of witnessing a man's death at an airport. Only at the film's conclusion does he realize that the man he saw die was his future self, assassinated as he tries to escape with the woman he loves. This revelation collapses the temporal distinctions between past, present, and future, underscoring the film's meditation on the circularity and inescapability of time. Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* restages this moment with greater visual dynamism and emotional intensity. James Cole experiences fragmented visions of the airport throughout the film, but in the final sequence, the fragmented images coalesce. As Cole is gunned down by airport security, witnessed by his childhood self, the traumatic loop is sealed. Gilliam's use of slow motion, intensified sound design, and the emotional resonance of Madeleine Stowe's reaction foregrounds the unbearable weight of repetition and the futility of

intervention. The past, already remembered, becomes inescapably real.

This recursive structure is further emphasized through the imagery of witnessing and memory fragmentation. Both protagonists are tethered to visions they do not fully understand until the conclusion of their respective narratives. The circularity of time is not only structural but existential: the image of death, glimpsed as a child, becomes the endpoint of their journey. These films do not merely dramatize time travel. They critique the illusion of agency within a predetermined system. Cole's final act of witnessing his own death from a child's perspective collapses identity, temporality, and perception into a singular traumatic moment. This collapse parallels the viewer's own act of spectatorship, implicating us in the loop of memory and image.

Another key intertextual moment is the scientific experimentation scene. In *La Jetée*, the protagonist undergoes a form of time travel facilitated by shadowy scientists in a post-apocalyptic underground society. The *mise-en-scène* is minimal, abstract, and heavily reliant on narration. By contrast, *12 Monkeys* expands this scene into a grotesque and bureaucratic apparatus. Cole is strapped to a chair, bombarded with questions, and subjected to absurd psychological evaluations. Gilliam exaggerates the institutional coldness and absurdity, transforming Marker's poetic introspection into a satirical critique of scientific rationality and surveillance culture. The exaggerated performances of the scientists, paired with the disorienting visual style, highlight the loss of autonomy and the reduction of the human subject to data. Here, Gilliam's palimpsest does not simply preserve. It mutates the original's contemplative tone into Kafkaesque horror.

The female figure as a temporal anchor also reflects palimpsestic layering. In *La Jetée*, the woman is unnamed and functions largely as a visual and emotional constant amid the protagonist's temporal displacements. She is his only tie to a world beyond the experiment, appearing mostly in quiet, tender moments. Her stillness and presence resist the fragmentation of time. In *12 Monkeys*, Dr. Kathryn Raily is far more developed. She evolves from a skeptical psychiatrist into a believer, an accomplice, and ultimately a witness. Her transformation mirrors Cole's descent into instability and reasserts a form of emotional and narrative continuity. Their relationship introduces dialogical complexity, replacing the oneiric silence of Marker's film with verbal negotiation, ideological tension, and emotional urgency.

The visual language of the two films further underscores the palimpsest metaphor. *La Jetée* is composed almost entirely of black-and-white still images, evoking a photographic archive. The famous moment in which the

woman blinks, a singular motion amid stasis, constitutes a rupture in the temporal texture of the film. It is a punctum in Barthesian terms, a shock of the real within the suspended logic of the image. *12 Monkeys* replaces stillness with perpetual motion. Its jagged editing, wide-angle lenses, handheld camerawork, and saturated color palette embody a world on the brink of collapse. The image is no longer an archive but a fever dream, oscillating between coherence and chaos. In Deleuze's terms, the time-image dismantles traditional sensory-motor links and opens up a direct presentation of time's virtual and layered dimensions (Deleuze, 1989, p. xi). Yet beneath this turbulence, the emotional core of *La Jetée* persists.

Moreover, the psychoanalytic implications of both films enrich their palimpsestic dynamic. Cole's institutionalization and fragmented recollections echo Freud's theory of trauma, in which the event is not remembered directly but reconstructed retroactively. Just as *La Jetée* uses visual repetition to evoke compulsive memory, *12 Monkeys* dramatizes memory as both unreliable and violently persistent. The inability to differentiate between dream, memory, and hallucination becomes a formal structure, not just a narrative theme. Through these parallel sequences, *12 Monkeys* performs a cinematic palimpsest, layering dystopia upon dystopia, image upon image, memory upon memory. The airport, the laboratory, the woman, the witness, all recur in altered yet recognizable forms. Gilliam's film does not merely echo *La Jetée*. It speaks through it, transforming its silence into speech, its stillness into motion, and its elegy into alarm. In doing so, *12 Monkeys* does not erase *La Jetée* but reanimates it, allowing us to watch a film haunted by another film, a memory refracted through a moving image.

### Spectral Time and Cinematic Hauntology

The concept of hauntology, introduced by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993), provides a compelling lens through which to examine the spectral temporalities embedded in *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys*. Both films operate not merely through linear or cyclical structures of time but within fractured, recursive, and ghost-laden temporalities that undermine the stability of past, present, and future. This section explores how these works render time not as a stable continuum but as an uncanny domain haunted by memory, loss, and the repetition of unresolved trauma.

In *La Jetée*, the protagonist is pursued by an image from his childhood, the death of a man at an airport, that later becomes the moment of his own death. This temporal loop is not only narrative but ontological. He lives in a time that is already foreclosed, a moment that has already occurred yet returns as if for the first time. The still photographs,

frozen yet narrativized, reinforce this spectral temporality. As Derrida notes, the specter is "neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (Derrida, 1993, p.5). The protagonist becomes such a figure: a being suspended between memory and foreknowledge, caught in a pre-scripted loop that he cannot escape. His very existence is haunted by his future.

*12 Monkeys* expands this ontological haunting into a socio-political and apocalyptic dimension. James Cole's fragmented memories, involuntary visions, and temporal displacements mark him as a subject out of time, a ghost of the future who exists in the wrong moment. His repeated attempts to warn others and alter the course of history fall on deaf ears, reinforcing the Derridean notion that the specter cannot be integrated into the order of presence. The film's recursive structure, its endless looping of the airport scene, and the imposition of memory as fate rather than freedom all indicate a hauntological mode of time. Time returns not as progress but as trauma. This compulsive return of the traumatic scene exemplifies what Freud conceptualizes as the repetition compulsion, a psychic mechanism through which unmastered traumatic experiences are involuntarily re-enacted in distorted and fragmented forms (Freud, 1920/1955, p. 18). This repetition compulsion, both visual and narrative, inscribes a melancholic condition wherein history is doomed to relive its own failure.

Hauntology also manifests through the films' aesthetics. *La Jetée's* use of black-and-white stills produces a sense of archival absence, photographs that look like evidence but cannot be interrogated. They evoke what Avery Gordon (2008) calls "ghostly matters": the persistence of that which has been repressed, forgotten, or excluded from the historical record. *12 Monkeys*, by contrast, utilizes motion and saturation, but the effect is no less ghostly. Its cinematography is claustrophobic, its mise en scène littered with ruins, flickering monitors, and decaying institutions. The future is not gleaming; it is a broken repetition of past failures, haunted by its inability to change. As Vivian Sobchack (2004) might suggest, these films operate not through spectacle but through a carnal temporal texture, a sensorial haunting wherein time is felt in the body, not merely plotted in the narrative.

Moreover, both films enact what Mark Fisher (2014) described as "lost futures," the idea that time is not only haunted by the past but by unrealized possibilities. The time travelers in both films are emissaries not of hope but of melancholia. Their task is not to restore but to witness. They are messengers of doom; spectral agents whose very presence confirms the impossibility of the future they seek. Their journeys reveal that history is not a linear progression toward salvation but a palimpsest of broken timelines,

ghosted identities, and aborted promises. This aligns with Walter Benjamin's notion of history as catastrophe, where the angel of history "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin, 1940/2007, p.392). Ultimately, *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* do not just narrate hauntological time, they perform it. They fragment the viewer's temporal anchoring, disorient narrative causality, and foreground the instability of memory and perception. "They are not simply films about time travel but films that embody the spectrality of time itself, staging what Derrida calls "the time out of joint" as a cinematic condition (Derrida, 1993, p. 20)." These films transform cinema into a haunted archive, wherein images return not to comfort but to disturb, not to resolve but to remain unresolved.

### Conclusion

This study has explored the complex temporal, ethical, aesthetic, and ontological dimensions of *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys*, reading them as palimpsestic cinematic texts that engage in a recursive dialogue with history, trauma, and visual media. Through the analytical framework of intertextuality, trauma theory, media archaeology, and hauntology, we have shown that these two films do not merely represent stories of time travel, but function as philosophical meditations on the instability of temporality itself. Rather than conforming to the conventions of science fiction or post-apocalyptic narrative closure, both films resist resolution, opting instead for open-ended structures that foreground repetition, fragmentation, and the unreliability of memory. At the heart of these films lies an epistemological challenge: how do we know the past, and what does it mean to remember? The protagonists of both films are entrapped in loops of time, recollection, and fate that render their agency ambiguous. The future does not unfold as possibility, but as an echo of loss. *La Jetée* achieves this through its photographic stillness and narrative economy, while *12 Monkeys* reanimates it in chaotic excess, creating a postmodern mosaic of competing truths and unstable identities. Each film, in its own manner, reveals the fragility of historical knowledge and the disintegration of narrative linearity in the face of trauma.

This destabilization is not limited to narrative structure. It extends into the material form of the films themselves. Both works interrogate the boundaries between media: cinema and photography, stillness and motion, silence and voice. They become laboratories for thinking not just about time, but about how time is stored, mediated, and made visible through technology. In doing so, they enact a self-reflexive critique of cinema's role in constructing memory and historical consciousness. Ultimately, what binds *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* together is their shared refusal of

temporal mastery. They resist the utopian promise of time travel as a means of control or correction. Ultimately, through their recursive structures and spectral imagery, both films dramatize Freud's notion of the compulsion to repeat, embody Caruth's understanding of trauma's temporal disjunction, and exemplify Deleuze's vision of cinema as a medium that renders time's fractures visible and affectively resonant (Freud, 1920/1955, p. 18; Caruth, 1996, p. 17; Deleuze, 1989, p. xi). Instead, they embrace time as rupture, as haunting, and as ethical weight. The specters that populate these films, images of the past, fragments of lost futures, echoes of unfulfilled desires, do not offer salvation. "The specters that populate these films, images of the past, fragments of lost futures, echoes of unfulfilled desires, do not offer salvation; rather, they demand recognition. As Derrida observes, "one must learn to live with ghosts, to learn to speak with them, to recognize them" (Derrida, 1993, p. 34). Through this spectral dynamic, these films transform cinema from a narrative medium into a philosophical one, prompting the viewer to reflect not merely on what happens in time, but on what it means to exist within it, a question that lies at the heart of Ricoeur's exploration of the dialectic between memory, forgetting, and temporal existence (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 57)."

Furthermore, these films raise urgent questions about the cultural memory of catastrophe and the ethical limits of historical intervention. As visual allegories of collective trauma and techno-scientific alienation, they articulate a deep anxiety over the archive, the body, and the future. They offer not comfort, but confrontation. The viewer, like the protagonist, is caught in a loop, invited to see, to remember, and to reckon with the persistent ghosts of history. In the ruins of causality and the shimmer of recurring images, these films challenge us to consider not how to fix the past, but how to live with its unresolvable echoes. In the end, *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* leave us not with answers, but with questions about history, about memory, and about the images that return to us again and again, demanding to be seen anew. They remind us that cinema, at its most powerful, is not simply a vehicle of entertainment or representation, but a haunted archive in which our deepest temporal anxieties are projected, refracted, and eternally replayed.

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