

CHF STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The following lesson plans, “Experimenting with ‘Reel Time’” and “*La Jetée*: A Lesson Plan,” appeared in the 2004 Chicago Humanities Festival spring study guide.

The Chicago Humanities Festival is grateful to foundations and individuals for their dedication to children and schools, and for their generous financial support of the Children’s Humanities Festival and of CHF education programs. The CHF receives major support for its education programs from Nuveen Investments, the Polk Bros. Foundation, the Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, and the Albert Pick, Jr. Fund. We thank the Takiff Family Foundation, Virginia S. Gassel, and the Elizabeth Morse Charitable Trust for making the Children’s Humanities Festival possible. Additional support for education programs is provided by Judy Neisser, Kraft Foods, and Target Stores.



The Chicago Humanities Festival also wishes to acknowledge the following people whose intellectual contributions and guidance have fostered the creation of the 2004 spring study guide: Mary T. Christel (Adlai E. Stevenson High School), Ted Latham (Watchung Hills Regional High School, Warren, New Jersey), Christopher Merrill (University of Iowa), and Cin Salach.

This guide was created by Christopher P. Swanson, education publications editor; assisted by Carolyn Sommers, education department intern; with additional support from CHF staff, including Greg Alcock, education program manager and Cris Kayser, vice president.

This document and other educational materials are electronically archived as PDF files at:
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Time and Film, Time on Film

Few art forms can rival film for its close relationship to concepts of time. The filmmaker's craft is inherently dependant on time, and indeed, the machines that capture a dancing image and project it on the silver screen are both timepieces. As a character in a film by Godard explains, "Cinema is truth 24 frames a second," referring to the rate of projection. Time is often an explicit subject in the stories told on film. Even when it isn't, time is likely an implicit issue, whether because the narrative interrupts time (flashback), or because montage is used to compress or expand the actual time it takes for events to occur.

The lesson plans that follow suggest two avenues to discuss the idea of time in the classroom using film. One looks at film technique: the examples and projects in "Experimenting with Reel Time" draw students' attention to the ways film manipulates time. The other looks at time as the subject of a film: a lesson plan introduces a classic short film well suited to the classroom, *La Jetée*.

Bring the *ch* into the Classroom!

Experimenting with “Reel Time”

By Mary T. Christel

Background

The medium of film represents time in a manner that is not achievable in any other art form. Film translates words and ideas into action that can be manipulated in a variety of ways to reflect the passage of time. Film’s use of editing, the joining of individual images or shots to create a sequence of action, is that tool for manipulating time.

Editing Techniques

Editing can manipulate the impression of time by reflecting

- actual or real time
- simultaneous time
- expanded time
- condensed time

In the examples that follow, “The Odessa Steps” illustrates expanded time, and “At Breakfast with Emily” illustrates condensed time.

Basic ways to join a series of shots include

- straight cut direct transition from one shot to another
- fade out/fade in fading transition usually suggests the passage of time
- dissolve one image briefly merges or overlaps with another
- superimposition two overlapping images held on screen
- crosscut transition between shots to follow two distinct, yet parallel or complementary plot threads
- flashback editing transition that moves narrative back in time
- jump cut transition between shots that doesn’t maintain visual or narrative continuity
- montage usually fast paced editing technique that strives to create emotional or psychological impact on viewer or reflect the same as it applies to a character in the film

Time can also be lengthened or shortened by the duration of individual shots. The longer the shot, the longer the sense of elapsed time.

Shots can manipulate the illusion of time by

- undercranking produces fast motion
- overcranking produces slow motion

Bibliography for Teachers

For further information about editing consult one of the following resources:

Books

Gianetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998.

Krueger, Ellen and Mary T. Christel. *Seeing and Believing: How to Teach Media Literacy in the English Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.

Teasley, Alan and Anne Wilder. *Reel Conversations*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999.

Videos

“Basic Film Terms: A Visual Dictionary.” Pyramid Films.

“The Edited Image.” Art of Film series. Coronet Films.

“The Hold-Up.” Master Class series. First Light Productions.

These videos are available for purchase from Insight Media.

Analyzing Film Sequences

Looking at particular film sequences is an easy way to begin a conversation with students about the ways film manipulates time. Here are some examples.

The Outlaw Josey Wales

Sequence to Watch: Title Sequence
Begins 0:06:53

How does the use of editing help to compress the amount of time that passes?

How is superimposition used? Which image is held on the scene the longest in shots using this technique? Why is that image so important in the sequence?



The Battleship Potemkin

Sequence to Watch: The Odessa Steps
Begins 0:44:35

How would you describe the pacing of the editing at the beginning of the sequence prior to the appearance of the word "Suddenly" on the screen?

Once the soldiers begin firing on the citizen trapped on the staircase, how does the director slow down the events occurring as the people try to escape the gunfire?

How does the filmmaker attempt to depict simultaneous actions of various people who are caught in the mayhem or witness it?

How does combination of specific shots attempt to provoke strong emotional responses from the viewer?

How does the sequence of shots focusing on the statues of the lions bring them to life?



Citizen Kane

Sequence to Watch: News on the March
Begins 0:03:12

How does this newsreel sequence chronicle the life of Charles Foster Kane?

Which events of his life are given the most screen time? the



least?

How does the voice-over narrator provide information that supports or contradicts the visuals?

How does music set a tempo for the pacing of images on the screen?

Why is some information presented in a printed form on the screen?

Sequence to Watch: At Breakfast with Emily
Begins 0:51:55



How does this sequence reveal the disintegration of Kane's marriage to Emily over time through the following elements:

- the breakfast table
- the centerpiece and table settings and other props on the table
- Kane's and Emily's position at the table
- costuming (including clothing and hairstyles)
- use of dialogue and silence

Notice how the camera seems to be spinning between the shots. How would you describe the effect of these transitions? Director Orson Welles and his director of photography Gregg Toland innovated this editing technique, called a "swish pan." What kind of momentum or energy does the use of the swish pan give to the overall sequence? What if Welles had decided to use dissolves instead?

To what extent do the duration of individual shots increase or decrease as the sequence develops?

Sequence to Watch: Susan's Opera Tour
Begins 1:34:38



How is superimposition an important element of moving quickly through time? How many layers of superimposition are used in most shots? What do those layers of images reveal?

How is sound used effectively throughout and at the end of this sequence? How does the use of sound coordinate with the pace of the editing and the content of the shots?

How would this qualify as a "montage" sequence?

Filmmaking Activities for Students

The following range of activities can be produced in as high- or low-tech manner as suits students' and teachers' level of comfort and experience as well as the availability of video and digital camera equipment.

Creating a Storyboard

A storyboard is simply a series of thumbnail sketches to indicate what will be filmed in order to create a sequence of action. Students' storyboards should include a brief description of each shot, focusing on the arrangement of the subject (people, props, setting), the placement of the camera (distance, angle), use of lighting, and any critical aspects of sound (music, effects, dialogue) that cannot be represented in the sketch.

Have students plan a sequence that will involve 12 shots to tell a simple story. The sequence could chronicle a simple process like making a sandwich, applying eye makeup, building a snowman. It could also tell a story such as sneaking out of the house or pulling a prank on a friend. It might be interesting to choose an activity that all the students will tackle, and then compare their approaches. The point of the activity is to select twelve images that will depict the sequence vividly and completely.

This activity can be extended in several ways. To further explore the "time" an activity takes, the twelve-shot sequence can be expanded to twenty-four shots to consider what additional visual details could make the activity or process more vivid or complex.

Students can also move from sketching the storyboards to shooting still images with standard, digital or Polaroid cameras and mounting those images on posterboard. Students should finish off this version of the storyboard with narrative captions under each image.

Chronicling a Day in the Life

Have students focus on a real or imagined day on which someone has to overcome an obstacle or deal with a conflict.

Once students determine what the obstacle or conflict will be, they need to select six moments or sequences from that day to depict the course of events that have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Students can create a film script format that includes dialogue, character movement, placement of the camera, use of editing transitions between sequences (rather than individual shots), and sound including music and effects.

Students could also use the storyboard method of developing their story idea. They could also be encouraged to shoot a video version of their chronicle.

Creating a “Newsreel”

Using “News on the March” in *Citizen Kane* as a model, have students create a newsreel segment that features themselves, a historical figure, or a fictional character.

The newsreel may be planned in storyboard fashion. For this assignment, students should not only plan the images that would be presented to chronicle a person’s life and times, but also script out the voice over narration that would accompany the images. The students should consider how objective or biased the view of this individual would be based on the way the visual and verbal information is presented. An interesting variation on this assignment is to assign a historical figure or fictional characters to several students, and to give each a particular bias to represent in their portrayal of that person.

A project like this can be assembled as a PowerPoint slide show, having students gather still and moving images from a variety of pre-existing sources. Students should keep a bibliography of the sources for their images as they do when they use information for written research based projects.

Creating a Trailer

Select a favorite short story, poem, novel or play and create a trailer to preview the “coming attractions” of that piece of literature. Consider the following elements to include in the trailer:

- important characters and relationships
- key conflicts
- signature images or symbols
- any catch phrases or memorable quotes

Students need to consider what will pique the viewer’s interest, and give them enough information about what they could expect from the piece, but not give away too much.

Once again, this assignment can be realized through a storyboard, or by shooting images that the storyboard calls for. If students are actually filming the trailer it should not exceed 2 minutes in length.

Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

La Jetée: A Lesson Plan
By Christopher P. Swanson

About the Film

La Jetée (also known as *The Pier*)
1962
29 minutes
Black and white
Directed by Chris Marker

This film is available on DVD on a compilation of short films entitled *Short 2: Dreams* (ASIN B000031VPS). *La Jetée* is also available on VHS (ASIN 6304827865).



The Narration

Chris Marker calls his film a ciné-roman—a film-novel. There is narration, but there are no lines spoken by characters. Without the words, the images would be stranded; without the images, the words tell an incomplete story. The script is a starting point and a useful reference, but no more. The text that follows varies slightly from the English narration on the DVD of La Jetée.

This is the story of a man, marked by an image from his childhood. The violent scene that upset him, and whose meaning he was to grasp only years later, happened on the main jetty at Orly, the Paris airport, sometime before the outbreak of World War III.

Orly, Sunday. Parents used to take their children there to watch the departing planes.

On this particular Sunday, the child whose story we are telling was bound to remember the frozen sun, the setting at the end of the jetty, and a woman's face.

Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. Later on they do claim remembrance when they show their scars. That face he had seen was to be the only peacetime image to survive the war. Had he really seen it? Or had he invented that tender moment to prop up the madness to come?

The sudden roar, the woman's gesture, the crumpling body, and the cries of the crowd on the jetty blurred by fear.

Later, he knew he had seen a man die.

And sometime after came the destruction of Paris.

Many died. Some believed themselves to be victors. Others were taken prisoner.

The survivors settled beneath Chaillot, in an underground network of galleries.

Above ground, Paris, as most of the world, was uninhabitable, riddled with radioactivity.

The victors stood guard over an empire of rats.

The prisoners were subjected to experiments, apparently of great concern to those who conducted them.

The outcome was a disappointment for some—death for others—and for others yet, madness.

One day they came to select a new guinea pig from among the prisoners.

He was the man whose story we are telling.

He was frightened. He had heard about the Head Experimenter. He was prepared to meet Dr. Frankenstein, or the Mad Scientist.

Instead, he met a reasonable man who explained calmly that the human race was doomed.

Space was off-limits.

The only hope for survival lay in Time.

A loophole in Time, and then maybe it would be possible to reach food, medicine, sources of energy.

This was the aim of the experiments: to send emissaries into Time, to summon the Past and Future to the aid of the Present.

But the human mind balked at the idea. To wake up in another age meant to be born again as an adult. The shock would be too great.

Having sent only 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.

This man was selected from among a thousand for his obsession with an image from the past.

Nothing else, at first, put stripping out the present, and its racks.

They begin again.

The man doesn't die, nor does he go mad.

He suffers.

They continue.

On the tenth day, images begin to ooze, like confessions.

A peacetime morning.

A peacetime bedroom, a real bedroom. Real children. Real birds. Real cats. Real graves.

On the sixteenth day he is on the jetty at Orly. Empty.

Sometimes he recaptures a day of happiness, though different.

A face of happiness, though different.

Ruins.

A girl who could be the one he seeks. He passes her on the jetty.

She smiles at him from an automobile. Other images appear, merge, in that museum, which is perhaps that of his memory.

On the thirtieth day, the meeting takes place. Now he is sure he recognizes her.

In fact, it is the only thing he is sure of, in the middle of this dateless world that at first stuns him with its affluence.

Around him, only fabulous materials: glass, plastic, terry cloth.

When he recovers from his trance, the woman has gone.

The experimenters tighten their control. They send him back out on the trail.

Time rolls back again, the moment returns.

This time he is close to her, he speaks to her. She welcomes him without surprise.

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.

Later on, they are in a garden. He remembers there were gardens.

She asks him about his necklace, the combat necklace he wore at the start of the war that is yet to come. He invents an explanation.

They walk. They look at the trunk of a redwood tree covered with historical dates.

She pronounces an English name he doesn't understand. As in a dream, he shows her a point beyond the tree, hears himself say, "This is where I come from..."—and falls back, exhausted. Then another wave of Time washes over him. The result of another injection perhaps.

Now she is asleep in the sun. He knows that in this world to which he has just returned for a while, only to be sent back to her, she is dead. She wakes up. He speaks again. Of a truth too fantastic to be believed he retains the essential: an unreachable country, a long way to go. She listens. She doesn't laugh.

Is it the same day? He doesn't know. They shall go on like this, on countless walks in which an unspoken trust, an unadulterated trust will grow between them, without memories or plans. Up to the moment where he feels—ahead of them—a barrier.

And this was the end of the first experiment.

It was the starting point for a whole series of tests, in which he would meet her at different times.

Sometimes he finds her in front of their markings.

She welcomes him in a simple way.
She calls him her Ghost.

One day she seems frightened.

One day she leans toward him.

As for him, he never knows whether he moves toward her, whether he is driven, whether he has made it up, or whether he is only dreaming.

Around the fiftieth day, they meet in a museum filled with timeless animals.

Now the aim is perfectly adjusted. Thrown at the right moment, he may stay there and move without effort.

She too seems tamed. She accepts as a natural phenomenon the ways of this visitor who comes and goes, who exists, talks, laughs with her, stops talking, listens to her, then disappears.

Once back in the experiment room, he knew something was different. The camp leader was there. From the conversation around him, he gathered that after the brilliant results of the tests in the Past, they now meant to ship him into the Future.

His excitement made him forget for a moment that the meeting at the museum had been the last.

The Future was better protected than the Past. After more, painful tries, he eventually caught some waves of the world to come.

He went through a brand new planet, Paris rebuilt, ten thousand incomprehensible avenues.

Others were waiting for him. It was a brief encounter. Obviously, they rejected these scoriae of another time.

He recited his lesson: because humanity had survived, it could not refuse to its own past the means of its survival.

This sophism was taken for Fate in disguise.

They gave him a power unit strong enough to put all human industry back into motion, and again the gates of the Future were closed.

Sometime after his return, he was transferred to another part of the camp. He knew that his jailers would not spare him. He had been a tool in their hands, his childhood image had been used as bait to condition him, he had lived up to their expectations, he had played his part. Now he only waited to be liquidated with, somewhere inside him, the memory of a twice-lived fragment of time.

And deep in this limbo, he received a message from the people of the world to come. They too traveled through Time, and more easily. Now they were there, ready to accept him as one of their own. But he had a different request: rather than this pacified future, he wanted to be returned to the world of his childhood, and to this woman who was perhaps waiting for him.

Once again the main jetty at Orly, in the middle of this warm pre-war Sunday afternoon where he could now stay, he thought in a confused way that the child he had been was due to be there too, watching the planes.

But first of all he looked for the woman's face, at the end of the jetty.

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.

Source: Marker, Chris. *La Jetée: ciné-roman*. New York: Zone Books, 1992.

Pre-viewing Questions

What is time? What are some of its properties? For instance, can you hold it, bend it, relive it?

What is your most powerful memory? What is important about the thing you remember so strongly?

If you could go back in time and observe that moment or event, would you?

Viewing Questions

If students are unaccustomed to taking notes while viewing a film, it is advisable to give small groups of students one category to focus on.

Characterization

- Who are the main characters in the story? How do we know them? How well do we know them?

Words and Pictures

- What information do you obtain from the narration? What information do you obtain from the pictures?
- What are some of the strongest images to you personally? Why do they affect you?
- Which images are shown for a long time? Which images are shown only briefly?
- At times in the film, the narration stops for a while: we see pictures, we hear music, but we don't hear words. How is the film different or the same in these "gaps"?

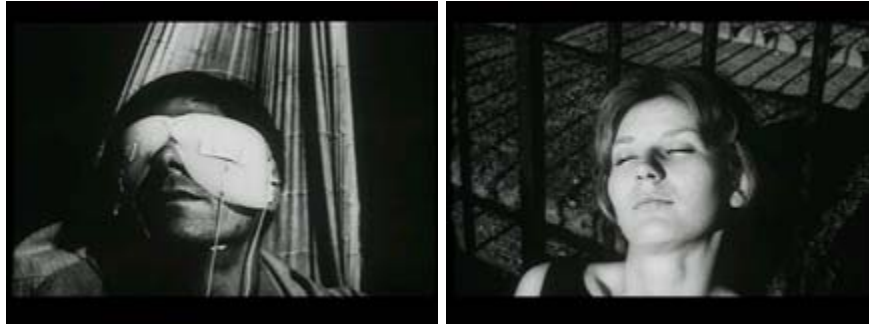
Motifs

- What meaning do you attach to any of these motifs: faces, museums, travel, dreams, animals.
- What other motifs do you notice? What is their significance?

Images

- What images are most important in this film? Are they shown just once, or do they recur?
- What is the importance of light and darkness in the film's images?

- Watch for images, such as these, that recall each other. What do they have in common? What is different?



Post-Viewing Discussion Topics

How is this film like or unlike others? In some regards, this film is like most any other, using common film techniques such as montage to tell a story. But you could also think about *La Jetée* as a slide show with narration: the film's images are all still.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce and aesthetic response in the viewer.” By this definition, is *La Jetée* essentially a comic book? Why or why not? How is film like or unlike a graphic novel?

Think about the uses of montage in *La Jetée*.

- At the end of the film, a sequence of distinct images illustrates the man's death on the pier. You might think of the juxtaposition of images as “action to action” (a man aiming, a man falling, and so forth).



- At other times, the juxtaposition of images is “moment to moment,” such as when we see a series of images of the woman in bed, each image similar to the one that preceded it.



- At other times, a sequence of images creates a collage, such as the series of photos of Paris after the war.



The director calls *La Jetée* a “cine-roman” or, as we would say in English, a “cine-novel.” How is this film like a novel? What is the importance of the narration and of the images?

The man has one strong memory, which allows him to travel to the past. What is time travel? Is remembering a sort of time travel?

What is the chronology of the story? When is “now”? Where does the story begin and end?

What is real or dreamlike about each of the film’s three times: the time of the man’s childhood before the war; the time after the war; and the distant future.

Why does the film end so abruptly?

What is déjà vu? In what ways is this film about déjà vu?

For Further Exploration

La Jetée bears some resemblance to *film noir*. For instance, a juxtaposition of “real” time and “remembered” time is a common feature of *film noir*, as is a narrator. As the term itself suggests, *film noir* is marked by photography with sharp contrasts between black and white. Look at a classic film noir such as *Double Indemnity* and compare it to *La Jetée*.

La Jetée inspired the film *12 Monkeys*, and may have inspired *Terminator*. Compare *La Jetée* to one of those films.

In 1961, Hannah Arendt famously used the phrase “the banality of evil” while writing about the trial of Nazi SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann for crimes against the Jewish people. The phrase suggests that however monstrous his crimes, Eichmann himself was a dim and mild man. *La Jetée* was filmed the next year, and in the film, the man expected the head experimenter to be a mad scientist. “Instead, he met a reasonable man.” Learn more about Eichmann and his trial. How does *La Jetée* relate to World War II and its aftermath?

Many disturbing images by German artist Gottfried Helnwein are reminiscent of the experiments in *La Jetée*. Learn more about his work. One useful “official” image archive is the website: <http://www.helnwein.com/werke/werke/home.html>.

Study this passage from the poem “Little Gidding” from T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* in relation to *La Jetée*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Ask students to discuss how the following symbols do or do not express the story structure:

The infinity symbol



The *uroboros* (the snake that bites its own tail)



The yin-yang

