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by Melina Lima

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## In the Twinkling of an Eye: Nietzschean Undercurrents in Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys*

Sean Cridland

Terry Gilliam's film *12 Monkeys* is not about time travel and is only circumstantially a work of science fiction.<sup>1</sup> It is about existential self-consciousness. Time travel is simply the mechanism through which the viewer is led toward the violent and disturbing climax of a death foretold. Its dénouement is not so much a solution as it is a re-entry, a new beginning. It escorts the viewer out of the theater to puzzle over the potentiality that arises from the existential psyche as it faces the inevitability of death.

Although *12 Monkeys* shines as a vehicle for demonstrating the long hidden acting talents of Bruce Willis (as James Cole), Madeleine Stowe (as Dr. Railly), and Brad Pitt (as Jeffrey Goines), it is Friedrich Nietzsche's eternal return that steals the show and provides the comedic and tragic settings that keep the viewer entertained and terrorized by revealing the absurdity, the emptiness, and, eventually, the fulfillment of one man's life. It is a film whose climax is most powerful not for its violence but for the troubling realization that everything witnessed has happened before and will happen again — without end. In *12 Monkeys*, the protagonists find themselves caught in an eddy of time, marked only by Cole witnessing his own death.

Of course, the existential content of *12 Monkeys* finds its roots in the 1964 French film, *La Jetée*, made by Chris Marker. *La Jetée*, a film remarkable for its dark existential overtones and its *film noir* sensibilities is hardly a film at all, but rather a black and white slide show narrated by a sad, anonymous voice. It, too, is the story of a man who witnesses his own death. But while the title of *12 Monkeys* merely suggests a puzzle, the title of *La Jetée* lets the audience in on its riddle; it is one of those troublesome word plays for which the French are so famous. One connotation of *jetée* is obviously appropriate for the film's setting: an airport. But its other connotations supply the force for the film's existential theme. A *jetée* is also a breakwater, a wall designed to break the continual pounding of sea waves. Depending on context, in its verb form the word can also connote: to fling, to hurl, to drop anchor, to lay the foundations, or to utter a cry (*jeter*), to flow (*se jeter river*), and to rush toward (*se jeter vers*). *La Jetée* is a film which intends much more than the usual fare encountered in science fiction cinema. It is a film designed to disturb its audience, to make them question their own fallen-ness, their own place in the flow of time.

*12 Monkeys* is Gilliam's *La Jetée* for the Nineties. The serpentine plot tells of Cole, a political prisoner and survivor of a planetary holocaust caused by the release of a biological weapon in all of the world's population centers by the infamous and mythic Army of the 12 Monkeys. Cole is classified as criminally insane because of a violent streak which appears to be brought on by recurring episodes of a strange and unsettling dream that could be classified as a nightmare if it weren't for a puzzling and comforting finish. In the dream, Cole witnesses a man

gunned down in an airport. But there is more. A woman, apparently the murdered man's lover, looks up from his body and smiles. It is this image of violence, recognition, and joy that vexes Cole forever after. His future is determined, it seems, by this troublesome apparition.

We first encounter the adult Cole as he is literally plucked from his prison cell by a large evil-looking machine to 'volunteer' for a journey onto the plague-ravaged surface of the planet to gather data for scientists working to assess the level of active contamination. His journey takes him to a strangely familiar world he has no recollection of living in. His familiarity is disorienting. He feels as if he has been there many times before, though he cannot remember when such an opportunity could have arisen. The surface of the planet has been dead to human beings for decades. Only animals roam there now. Upon his return underground, on the promise of release if he is successful, Cole then volunteers to travel through time to gather samples of the original virus that killed over 5 billion people and drove the survivors underground.

Just as the anonymous protagonist in *La Jetée* is hurled into the flow of time, Cole finds himself thrown into the incessant, pounding chaos of the past. He, himself, acts as the jetty against which this resurging tide of time crashes. It is on this initial trip through time that the viewer is first exposed to the Nietzschean undertones of the film. Cole finds himself hurled into a world of danger and insanity. In the same way that Deleuze describes Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Cole's adventure becomes "...a comic opera about terrible things."<sup>2</sup> Though his target date is 1996, Cole arrives in the year 1991 and, appearing to be an indigent, he is beaten up by the police and thrown in jail. There he repeatedly asks what the date is and declares himself to be in the wrong time. "I'm supposed to be in 1996," he insists. Inevitably, this lands him in a mental hospital where he is derided by his inquisitors for his contention that he is from the future. But that is merely *their* impression of his story; Cole insists that he is not from the future, but from the present, that they are from the *past*!

At the mental hospital Cole meets the beautiful Dr. Railly and the crazy but charismatic Jeffrey Goines, who each provide the first hints that Cole's vexing dreams and his troubled existence are more than symptoms of a mental condition. Dr. Railly insists that she has met Cole before, although given the circumstances this is impossible. Jeffrey Goines, though schizophrenic, seems to have an uncanny comprehension of the situation that he and Cole find themselves in at the hospital. It is Goines who tells Cole that the real "nutcases" are the ones who can't understand time. And, during the diversion that he creates so that Cole can escape, Goines screeches: "Take a chance....Live for the moment....Now's the time....Seize the day....The future can be yours!" Shortly after, Cole disappears from 1991. He has been retrieved to 2035.

Though the experience has been traumatic, Cole enthusiastically volunteers to return to the past where for the first time in his adult life he has experienced compassion, fresh air, and music. Life in the past, traumatic as it is, is preferable to his horrible existence as a prisoner living underground. Besides, there is something strangely comforting about Dr. Railly. But, Cole now finds himself living in two times and this becomes problematic. Given his medical history, could this not be yet another horrible delusion: proof of his schizophrenia? Perhaps, but it becomes evident that Cole's temporal divergence might also lead to his freedom. As the Head Experiment-er (*chef des travaux*) of *La Jetée* would say: "The only hope for survival lay in Time."<sup>3</sup>



Cole's second time-journey briefly lands him, naked, in the chaos of a World War I battlefield where he is shot in the leg. Just as suddenly, he is yanked through time to 1996, where he stalks and kidnaps Dr. Raily, who has just published a book on Cassandra. Just after Cole recognizes Raily as the woman in his nightmares, Raily comes to understand that Cole is who he says he is: a man displaced by time. This explains the strange familiarity he evokes in her. Just then, Cole is again yanked back to 2035 to be quizzed about "the past."

Ironically, Cole's fixation on Dr. Raily leads him to believe that his dream actually is a symptom of his mental disease. Cole, now thinking that he is merely playing along with his own self-delusion, volunteers to return for yet a third time to 1996 where he beseeches Dr. Raily to help him with his mental disease. On this go-around, it is only too clear that Raily and Cole have been paired together before. The recurring dream seems to be more than just a dream, the familiarity more than just an uncanny feeling. It becomes evident that James Cole is on his way to his death and both of them know it. But, there remains the problem of the dream's vantage point. Has Cole been dreaming the dream simply because the miserable scene has played itself out so many, many times before? Could Cole be suffering the fate Alan Lightman describes in his book *Einstein's Dreams* where:

Some few people in every town, in their dreams, are vaguely aware that all has occurred in the past. These are the people with unhappy lives, and they sense that their misjudgments and wrong deeds and bad luck have all taken place in the previous loop of time. In the dead of night these cursed citizens wrestle with their bed-sheets, unable to rest, stricken with the knowledge that they cannot change a single action, a single gesture. Their mistakes will be repeated precisely in this life as in the life before. And it is these double unfortunates who give the only sign that time is a circle. For in each town, late at night, the vacant streets and balconies fill up with their moans.<sup>4</sup>

After all, Cole repeatedly asserts that the past cannot be changed. Or, is Cole's recurring dream simply the repetitive semi-conscious expression of a death obsession? That is a question that is answered in the final moments of the film.

Both *La Jetée* and *12 Monkeys* suggest that humankind can escape its miserable plight only by reconsidering its understanding of temporality, not by retrieving some gem of knowledge from the past. It is not escape from temporality which redeems humanity, but affirmation of its repetitiveness. Redemption requires affirmative and active engagement with time. And, though the authority figures in both films suggest that living in two or more times simultaneously is dangerous and illegal because such an existence fosters a reflective attitude toward the many small evils taken for granted in inauthentic existence, in both films, it turns out that the reflective consciousness of the temporally multiplicitous self opens the door to authentic existence. As Heidegger tells us,

Temporality makes possible the unity of existence, facticity, and falling, and in this way constitutes primordially the totality of the structure of care. The items of care have not been pieced together cumulatively any more than temporality has been put together 'in

the course of time'["mit der Zeit"] out of the future, the having been, and the Present. Temporality 'is' not an *entity* at all.<sup>5</sup>

Time, Raily and Cole find, reveals itself as they accept their fallen-ness, their location in an absurd whirlwind of events and their inability to do anything to change their situation, their facticity. Thus, for Cole there is no choice but to affirm his tortured dreams, his violent behavior, the hits and misses of his wayward journeys through time, and his own temporal schizophrenia, just as he chooses to affirm his infatuation for Dr. Raily, the clean air, and the rock and roll music of 1996. But it would be presumptuous for the audience to expect a happy Hollywood ending, and Gilliam's film succeeds by denying them one.<sup>6</sup> The eternal return is not a device for righting past wrongs or reconstructing the events of shattered lives. The affirmation of the eternal return does not win us any prizes. Gary Shapiro reminds us that

...it might be supposed that within a single cycle of my life the thought of eternal recurrences could play an integration role for me, allowing me to see my life as a meaningful progression. But to the extent to which I affirm the thought I affirm also my error and ignorance of it: for in affirming the whole of my life I must affirm all of those moments before I knew of the thought, or when I rejected it, or when I was considering it, as well as those (possible) moments of my future when I may forget it or (for whatever reason) cease to affirm it.<sup>7</sup>

No, the eternal return simply provides for the affirmation of life — its ugliness as much as its beauty. Its only mechanism of escape from the torture of eternity is its ability to affirm and empower it. Rather than shrinking from life's trials, *will them to be!* As Deleuze tells us,

...will to power does not at all mean 'to want power' but, on the contrary: whatever you will, carry it to the 'nth' power — in other words, separate out the superiour [*sic*] form by virtue of the selective operation of thought in the eternal return, by virtue of the singularity of repetition in the eternal return itself.<sup>8</sup>

It turns out that Cole's dream is prophetic and symbolic of the return. But more than that it is his nightmare which acts as the impetus for him to choose his return to the site of his death. In the final moments of the film, Cole rushes through the airport brandishing a pistol with which he hopes to kill the carrier of the holocaust virus. As one would expect, he is gunned down by airport security agents. Raily rushes to his side and — realizing that it is too late, Cole is dead — looks up and searches the shocked crowd until her eyes settle on the face of a little boy — the young James Cole — who has come with his parents to watch the planes take off. In an epiphanic moment, she smiles, knowing that she has set the future in motion for this all to happen again. Then we see the young Cole who returns her smile and seemingly blinks his eyes in recognition. This is the moment in Cole's life from which the nightmare has materialized, but it is also the moment which will lead him back to the one person in his troubled life who offers him compassion: Raily.

We can only wonder if Gilliam intended such a direct reference to Nietzsche's eternal return. But Gilliam need not have been specifically thinking of the twinkling eye-blink of the



eternal return — it is enough that the eternal return motif so clearly derives from Nietzsche, whose commentators are such excellent vehicles for illuminating the affirmation of the film, and through it back to Nietzsche and the affirmation of the acceptance of the eternal return. For in the German language the word for moment and eye twinkling are the same. Shapiro reminds us that:

The *Augenblick* is the time founded from a phenomenological point of view by the blinking of one's eyes; this sense of concrete content with sharp boundaries is not conveyed by "moment," the usual English equivalent. What recurs in eternal recurrence are *Augenblicke*. And in the vision of Zarathustra where he confronts the spirit of gravity, the two stand before a gate that is inscribed *Augenblicke* at the conjunction of two paths that stretch indefinitely into the past and the future.<sup>9</sup>

The young Cole's twinkling of the eyes at the moment of the adult Cole's death provides the marker from which the past and future emerge in the present, not as separate entities (as Heidegger warned against), but as emerging from one moment of "care." This "care" has been brought into the open by the obviousness of Cole's mortality, but also by the inevitability of his return. It also reveals death as a moment of affirmation for all that precedes and follows. Cole's death demonstrates that instant that Nietzsche describes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where,

Two paths come together here: no one has ever reached their end. This long lane behind us: it goes on for an eternity. And that long lane ahead of us — that is another eternity. They are in opposition to one another, these paths; they abut one another: and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is written above it: "Moment."<sup>10</sup>

For Nietzsche, past and future are in opposition to one another in the same way that, for Cole, past and future burden him with a mental/temporal divergence. And, in Cole's case, the way in which his past and his future abut one another provides the tension that makes *12 Monkeys* such a troubling and thought provoking film. Cole's death is the perfect example of Nietzsche's gateway called "Moment" because it reveals the haunting dreams to be apparitions of an eternally reenacted death, but also as a moment leading toward the affirmation of his life. As Nietzsche says, while it may be the case that "Dreaming, it writhes upon a hard pillow,"<sup>11</sup> making us struggle with the meaning and consequence of every action, every event, it is also true that "...only where there are graves are there resurrections."<sup>12</sup> Salvation is to be found only where we offer ourselves to potentially the most tragic of consequences.

It could be said that the young Cole's twinkling his eyes signals an acceptance, though a troubled one, of the eternal return. His life is determined to be a tortured one, but it will be one of affirmation. The young Cole that we see calmly walking back to the family car under the foreboding shadow of the jet that will spread a worldwide plague has embarked on another cycle of the eternal return. With this in mind, it should not surprise the audience that Cole would eventually volunteer to return to the torment of temporal and mental divergence that leads to his death anymore than it is surprising that he should will his desire to be with Dr. Railly.

Finally, it is apparent to the audience that the role of time travel is to disorient the viewer and dislodge his or her clutch on linear time. The confusion that arises when one is forced to

account for the adult Cole's presencing himself in a past relative to his present (in the mental hospital), a present which is in our distant past (his appearance in a World War I battle), or a presence painfully made present (his own death) demonstrates that temporality is *not*, as Heidegger says, some entity, but is that which presences itself in our approach to the world. It is what grounds and makes obvious one's existence, one's facticity, and one's fallenness. That the young Cole is present to his own death provides the catalyst for the viewer to live and re-live his or her own death, and to create and re-create every moment as if bringing these paraphrased words of Flannery O'Connor's back to life: we all would be much better people, if there was somebody there to shoot us every minute of our lives.<sup>13</sup> Cole's death reminds the audience that most of us bring a child's innocence to our own deaths. Other people's deaths may be disturbing, saddening, or even inconsequential. Only our own deaths strike us as paradoxical, troubling, dismally fear-some.

Yet, the gateway called "Moment" is not a singular gateway, one that opens only once for each of us as we face death. It was Nietzsche's intention, and I think Gilliam's too, that we might find a way to devote such attention to every moment. To do so would be to experience *both* the weight *and* the potential of every action. It would be to embrace change and accept chaos, even to choose it. As Deleuze says, the eternal return

...is already present in every metamorphosis, contemporaneous with that which it causes to return. Eternal return relates to a world of differences implicated one in the other, to a complicated, properly chaotic world *without identity*....[Nietzsche] said that chaos and eternal return were not two distinct things but a single and same *affirmation*.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly for Cole and Railly, this would be a scene they would play out for eternity, something much larger than themselves. Whether the moment of Cole's death is a breakwater, standing in the way of the endless ebb and flow of time as it is for the anonymous hero of *La Jetée*, or whether it is a gateway called "Moment" (*Augenblicke*) as in *12 Monkeys*, it emerges as the past and future collides, falls away, and the present forces itself into the world of Cole, Railly, and the audience as an affirmation of mortality. And it all happens in the twinkling of the eye.

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## Notes

1. For a thorough account of the history of time travel in science fiction, see Bud Foote's *The Connecticut Yankee in the Twentieth Century: Travel to the Past in Science Fiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 9.
3. Chris Marker, *La Jetée: the book version of the legendary (1964) science fiction film* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), pp. 40-43.
4. Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams: A Novel* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 11-12.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), p. 376-377.
6. Gilliam's avoidance of the Hollywoodesque happy ending stands in sharp contrast to other Hollywood films that have dealt with time travel, as James W. Newcomb noted in his article "Hollywood Mediated Reaganism" (*Film and Philosophy*, Volume I.). Newcomb noted that such Reagan-era films as *Back to the Future* (1985), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), and *The Best of Times* (1986) suggested that "...an unsatisfactory present...can be remedied by magically altering the past." While it would be a difficult stretch to suggest that Gilliam's film suggests any tinge of Clintonian philosophy, unless we interpret Clinton-era cinema to be wildly eclectic, since in addition to *12 Monkeys*, *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1996) must all be considered to fall within the Clinton-era, it is worth noting, however, that reviewer Bob Green of the *Honolulu Weekly* (Volume 6, Number 3, p. 15) suggested that *12 Monkeys* is "...one of just a handful of subversive movies to sneak through the big-studio system since Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo*, another film about freedom and power, to which Gilliam's visuals pay (proper) homage."
7. Gary Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 90.
8. Deleuze, p. 8.

9. Shapiro, p. 144.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1961, 1969), p. 178.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
13. Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955). The original line, referring to the death of the hypocritical grandmother of the story, reads: "'She would of been a good woman,' The Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.'"
14. Deleuze, p. 57.