

Alain Resnais (1922-2014), a major figure in postwar filmmaking

David Walsh
12 March 2014

The life and films of Alain Resnais, the French director who died March 1 at the age of 91, bring many artistic and historical issues to mind, as well as memories of having first seen his films more than forty years ago. *Night and Fog* (1955), *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Muriel* (1963), *La guerre est finie* [*The War is Over*] (1966), *Stavisky* (1974), *Providence* (1977) and *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* [*My American Uncle*] (1980) are among his best known works.

The director continued working past the age of 90. His last film, *Life of Riley*, had its premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February.

It is an unhappy irony that Resnais, who so often concerned himself, as we are told over and over again in superficial commentaries, with “time and memory,” should be relatively unknown to a younger generation at the time of his death. If this obituary has one central aim, it is to encourage a viewing of his films, especially those made between 1955 and 1967 (and certain of those made later). An understanding of some of the tumultuous events of the mid-20th century and their psychic consequences would undoubtedly take on greater depth by watching his most important films.

To his eternal credit, in documentaries and feature films, Resnais attempted to treat, among other subjects, colonialism in Africa, the Holocaust and World War II, the atomic bombing of Japan, the Algerian War, the Spanish Civil War, the Vietnam War and (in short “Ciné-tracts”) the May-June events in France in 1968, all in an artistic fashion. These are troubling events and Resnais’ film work reflects that disturbing character. Even writing about his films and their concerns generates anxiety, but a genuine and reality-based anxiety, not an artificial or self-conscious one. To think about his films is to think about the times, and that is considerable praise.

One can criticize the different works for various artistic and intellectual shortcomings, but no major filmmaker of his generation took on these momentous events, and always with seriousness and formal rigor. By all accounts, as well, Resnais was an admirable human being, with a considerable sense of humor and an interest in life. (These brief interviews [Part 1 and Part 2] provide some sense of the man.)

Resnais was born in 1922 in Vannes, in Brittany, in northwestern France. His father was a pharmacist. At the age of 14 or 15, Resnais discovered surrealism and the poetry of André Breton. In 1939, he moved to Paris, where he worked as an assistant for a theater company. He later studied acting, but enrolled in film school in 1943 to become an editor.

Resnais began making short films in 1946. He directed a striking series of documentaries on painters, including Vincent van Gogh (1947, 1948), Max Ernst (1947), Paul Gauguin (1950) and Pablo Picasso and *Guernica* (1950) [Part 1 and Part 2]. The films, which make virtually no use of any other materials than paintings themselves, are characterized by considerable urgency and intelligence.

The short films on van Gogh and Gauguin emphasize the artists’

poverty and self-sacrifice. After van Gogh’s attempts at preaching failed, that film explains, the artist’s “love for people took another form,” painting. Van Gogh, we are told, “looks at people and objects with the same love,” which might also apply to Resnais’ best work.

In 1953, Resnais and collaborator, the leftist filmmaker Chris Marker, created a film essay on African art and the consequences of European colonialism and racism, *Les statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*). The film’s second half was censored, and the full version was not publicly shown in France until 1968.

Resnais also made a short film on the Bibliothèque nationale de France (the French national library), *Toute la mémoire du monde* [*All the Memory of the World*, 1956]. Commissioned by the Pechiney industrial group, in 1958 Resnais directed a sumptuous 13-minute color tribute to the plastics industry, *Le chant du Styrene* (*The Song of Styrene*). Fellow filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, hyperbolically of course, called it “an Olympian film, of matchless gravity,” asserting that Resnais had “definitively mastered the secret of matter.”

Resnais’ first major film accomplishment was *Night and Fog*, a documentary about Nazism and the concentration camps. At first, Resnais resisted the producers’ proposal, arguing that only someone who had experienced the camps could make such a film. Eventually, he agreed when the French writer Jean Cayrol, who had been imprisoned (as a member of the French Resistance) in the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, agreed to write the text.

The powerful 32-minute film (narrated by famed actor Michel Bouquet and scored by Hanns Eisler) cuts between shots (in color) of the present-day conditions at Auschwitz and Majdanek, where grass grows between rows of ordinary looking buildings, and black-and-white footage of the camps and their victims.

The film opens with shots of a former camp and (as the screenplay reads) the “verdant landscape ... under a blue sky filled with fluffy clouds” The narrator begins to speak: “A peaceful landscape ... An ordinary field with flights of crows, harvests, grass fires ... An ordinary road where cars and peasants and lovers pass.” He continues: “The blood has dried, the tongues are silent. The blocks are visited only by a camera. Weeds have grown where the prisoners used to walk. No footstep is heard but our own.”

Resnais’ film then turns to the rise of fascism in Germany, the rounding up of victims, the horrifying conditions at the camps. Cayrol, through Bouquet, explains: “No description, no picture can restore their true dimension: endless, uninterrupted fear.” Medical experiments, the prisons inside the camps where torture takes place, Himmler and the Final Solution, the heaps of corpses ...

Later: “1945. The camps are full and spreading. They are cities of 100,000 inhabitants. Full house everywhere. Heavy industry takes an interest in this indefinitely replenishable labor force. Factories have their own camps, forbidden to the SS, Steyr, Krupp, Heinckel, I.G. Farben, Siemens, Hermann Goering do their shopping at these markets. The Nazis

may win the war. These new towns are part of their economy.”

In its concluding section, *Night and Fog* warns that the “new executioners” are still among us. “War is napping, but with one eye always open.” Was this warning out of place?

Resnais’ film faced the censor. Scenes of the dead being bulldozed into mass graves were considered too violent. More importantly perhaps, *Night and Fog* included incriminating still photographs of French officers guarding a detention center, operated by the pro-Nazi Vichy regime, where Jews were brought together before deportation. The French government considered this “might be offensive in the eyes of the present-day military.” Moreover, remarkably, the West German embassy asked (unsuccessfully) that the film be withdrawn from the Cannes film festival (although it was screened out of competition). The fully unexpurgated version was not shown until 2003.

Resnais later told an interviewer, “I came to see that all you could do was suggest the horror, that if you tried to somehow show something very real on the screen, the horror disappeared. So I had to use every means possible to set the viewer’s imagination in motion.”

For his first feature film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Resnais chose another devastating subject, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima by the US military. Alongside that, the film recounts the personal tragedy of a Frenchwoman during World War II.

As Resnais explained in an interview, the film began as an idea for a documentary short. However, he abandoned it after some time, telling the producers they should instead see to the distribution of the documentaries already made on the subject of Hiroshima and the danger of atomic warfare. An encounter with the novelist Marguerite Duras, about another film project, eventually led to the film idea being revived.

In contemporary Hiroshima, a French actress (Emmanuelle Riva) and a Japanese architect (Eiji Okada) have a brief affair. She is only there for a few days, making a film. They are both married. The film, written by Duras, opens memorably with the couple’s bodies showered by ash, followed by documentary footage of the consequences of the August 1945 bombing.

After early scenes in her hotel room, “She” and “He” (they are never named) wander through rebuilt Hiroshima’s streets, break apart, come together again, separate. The harrowing past overwhelmingly dominates the present. His family was in Hiroshima during the murderous American bombing. She fell in love with a German soldier in a provincial French town during the occupation. After the war and her lover’s death, her head was shaved, as punishment for what was considered collaboration with the enemy. Her parents locked her in the cellar, where she nearly went mad.

There are self-conscious, even irritating elements in Duras’ script, which reveal the not terribly happy impact of the “new novel” (repetition, coldness, elliptical references, etc.). But there are very troubling and affecting aspects too, including the footage of the victims, and the scenes of everyday life in Japan in 1959. The last moments between the pair of lovers are enormously moving.

Resnais was uncertain about the reception his film would encounter. He worried, in fact, it might never be shown outside an art cinema. But *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, made only fourteen years after the end of the second imperialist slaughter and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, struck a chord with people around the world with its strongly felt anti-militarism, its grief and compassion, as well as the determination of its characters, despite everything, to go on living and not merely as ghosts.

As noted above, it is often said that “time” and “memory” are Resnais’ important themes. If that were the case, his films would not be very important. In any case, neither time nor memory by itself is a theme for artists, any more than earth or summer or mathematics is, or at least not a very interesting one. Resnais belonged to a generation that passed through life-shaping and traumatic events. How to come to terms with painful,

almost unbearable memories—of fascism, world war, nuclear incineration—is the question here.

For the individual, in fact, such thoughts can be overwhelming. The artist, by his or her efforts, assists humanity to make sense of its collective history, including its worst tragedies. And such an effort must have the element of protest and outrage, must encourage people to oppose the social order that produces such horrors. There is that element in Resnais’ early work, even if it is somewhat muted at times and confused at others.

His next film, *Last Year at Marienbad*, written by “new novelist” Alain Robbe-Grillet, was a departure for Resnais. Its enigmatic, quasi-surreal goings-on stirred up controversy. At an exclusive, old-fashioned hotel the various guests wander around silently like the dead. A man (Giorgio Albertazzi) approaches a woman (Delphine Seyrig), claiming to have met her at the hotel the year before. He says they made an arrangement to wait a year and then take off together. Her menacing lover or husband (Sacha Pitoëff) hovers around. Bits of dialogue, the narrator’s description of the hotel and its endless corridors and elaborate garden, motifs, events are repeated throughout the film.

The film was denounced by some as pretentious, incomprehensible, tedious at the time of its release. It was also praised as a masterpiece. It is probably neither. In fact, *Last Year at Marienbad* stands up relatively well. Despite the somber and ominous events, which include a possible rape and a possible murder, the film is done with a relatively light touch, especially in the performance of Delphine Seyrig, who never seems to be taking the thing entirely seriously. I would like to think that Resnais was making a little fun occasionally of Robbe-Grillet’s at times foolish script, but that is probably wishful thinking.

The dream-like film may best be enjoyed as a rather wicked satire on bourgeois European society, the society that came to such a crash in 1939. The pointless, empty lives, the dull and repetitious conversations, the creatures who act and look like zombies ... It may also be a version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice (the Greek myth about the musician who travels to the underworld in an effort to bring his wife back). Resnais described it as “an attempt ... to approach the complexity of thought, of its processes.” In any event, *Last Year at Marienbad* remains an intriguing work, although critic Andrew Sarris’ verdict in 1965 that it was a “dazzling dead end” seems just about right.

Resnais’ third feature film, *Muriel*, (full title: *Muriel, or the Time of a Return*) is perhaps his best. It is certainly his most ambitious, in its effort to confront the complexities and contradictions of postwar French society, and his most psychologically unsettling.

Hélène Aughain (Seyring again, brilliantly) is a middle-aged woman in Boulogne, a seaport, who runs an antique business out of her apartment. She lives with her stepson, Bernard (Jean-Baptiste Thiérée), recently returned from military service in Algeria. She has invited a former lover of hers, Alphonse Noyart (Jean-Pierre Kérien), who claims to have owned an exclusive club in Algeria for more than a decade, to come for a visit. He brings his “niece,” Françoise (Nita Klein), in fact, his much younger girl-friend.

The drama takes place over two weeks. Restlessness, rooted in unresolved issues in the national and personal past, afflicts every character. Somehow Hélène and Alphonse, fifteen years or more her senior, lost each other on the eve of the Second World War. But Hélène, now a compulsive gambler, has never found herself since. The war and its violence took its toll on her psyche. Alphonse, an elegant, well-spoken, well-dressed and well-coiffed, archetypal French petty bourgeois, turns out to be a liar, a racist, a bankrupt. Françoise, an actress, is something of an opportunist.

Bernard, who walks around with a movie camera and a tape recorder, is the most sympathetic, sensitive character. But who is Muriel? Bernard claims to have a fiancée, who his stepmother has never met, by that name. In fact, halfway through the film, we learn that Muriel was the name of a

girl, presumably an insurgent, tortured and killed by Bernard and a group of fellow soldiers in Algeria. Everything in the movie takes on a different character, a renewed seriousness, a tragic color, after that.

The film presents a dysfunctional society, city, social layer. Everything is makeshift, in disorder, ugly. Resnais has allowed himself to make a far less picturesque work than any of his previous films. The characters can't sit still. But when they move, they accomplish nothing. Sarris, in a 1963 review, notes that the point Resnais is making "with a plot *Hélène* herself describes as banal is the futility of lives lacking a common purpose. Boulogne is a beehive of activity devoid of accomplishment because each character is consumed by his or her own obsession and has nothing left over for anyone else."

But it's more than that. This is a society in deep crisis, and Resnais' film—not a success at the box office, interestingly—catches at something of that. A society heading for the showdown between the classes in 1968, in a pre-revolutionary crisis, although none of the intellectuals, including Resnais, had an inkling of that.

His next film, *La guerre est finie* [*The War is Over*] was an indication of that unawareness, albeit indirectly. It follows a member of the Spanish Communist Party, Diego (Yves Montand), who has for decades been carrying out illegal work in Franco's Spain. The film traces out his increasing disillusionment with the activity and his growing sense that his work is ineffective, outdated and pointless. He encounters a young woman, Nadine (Geneviève Bujold), who belongs to a group of anarchists, who plan to disrupt tourism and the Spanish economy through bombings.

The film is intelligent, more conventionally told than *Muriel*, and convincing. Montand, Ingrid Thulin, Bujold, Paul Crauchet and the rest of the performers are all excellent.

The semi-autobiographical script for *La guerre est finie* was written by Jorge Semprun, a longtime Spanish Communist Party official and activist, who, like his character, was increasingly disgruntled by the mid-1960s. A victim of the concentration camps, Semprun had shown considerable bravery and was a talented scenarist (he later wrote *Z* for Costa-Gavras).

The argument of the film, however, is not an attack on Stalinism from the left, but essentially from the right. When everything is boiled down, the film suggests that an orientation to the working class and mass struggle is a thing of the past, obsolete, unrealistic. That's the "war" that is really "over." Politically and psychologically, this is the product of Eurocommunism, that portion of the Stalinist movement in Europe that was about to make its final peace with the bourgeoisie and integrate the various national Communist Parties into the establishment apparatus.

How prescient was the film? Two years after *La guerre est finie* was released, the biggest strike in Western European history erupted and French capitalism teetered on the brink. Mass upheavals in Italy and Portugal followed. If Franco's regime did not come to an end in revolutionary upheaval that was primarily due to the role of the Spanish Communist Party, which Semprun and Resnais portray as anachronistically "hardcore."

(In the collective work, *Far from Vietnam* (1967), which included sections by Godard, Claude Lelouch, Agnès Varda, Joris Ivens and William Klein, Resnais contributed a segment about a fictional intellectual, Claude Ridder (Bernard Fresson), a stand-in for the director, who explains in a revealing monologue his own ambiguities, including about anti-Americanism, and sense of political impotence.)

The May-June 1968 events perform the role of a hinge in the history of French culture and cinema. There is "before" and "after." We know that Resnais, Godard and others produced "ciné-tracts," short documentary films on the events. I am not aware of Resnais' precise attitude to the general strike. He may well have been highly sympathetic.

That is not the same thing, however, as understanding the upheaval's historic character and implications, especially in terms of the crisis of

working class leadership and the role of Stalinism. That was not the film director's individual fault. The dominance of Stalinism in the French left and its bureaucratic grip over the working class was not of his doing.

Resnais seems to have been intrigued by Trotsky as a historical figure, if his continuing interest in Breton and surrealists, his use of Trotsky as a character in his 1974 film, *Stavisky*, and his employment of David Mercer (a sympathizer of the British Trotskyists) as a screenwriter on *Providence* (1977) mean anything. They may not, in fact, mean that much.

In any event, "after" 1968 meant a sharp turn to the right by the French intellectuals as a social layer. They had looked into the abyss of revolution in May-June, when ten million workers took to the streets, and were cured. For many, the betrayal and defeat of the working class, its political suppression for the foreseeable future, came as a reprieve.

How else, for example, is one to interpret a work as deplorable as Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* (published in 1973!), with its Nietzschean hedonism and references to Marxism as a "fiction," except as an act of celebration, as an indication that for a whole layer of the French petty bourgeoisie it came as a great relief to be free from even the ritualistic need to refer to the interests of the working class.

In any event, Resnais' films certainly become less compelling, less urgent after 1968. It is telling that the film he had just finished when the general strike erupted, and whose release was disrupted by the events, was already a far more trivial work, *Je t'aime, Je t'aime* (1968), about a man who travels back in a time machine to relive his personal past. A commentator, René Predal (*L'itinéraire d'Alain Resnais*), notes that Resnais' post-1968 films never addressed political or social issues so directly again.

His *Stavisky*, with Jean-Paul Belmondo, about the French-Jewish swindler whose death in 1934 provoked a political crisis, is well-made, but rather aimless, blunt. A subplot about Trotsky, in exile in France at the time, never amounts to much. In a typical (and not unreasonable) reaction, Richard Roud (in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*) noted that "Resnais has not succeeded in integrating this second plot; it adds little, and one is always impatient to get back to the main story."

Resnais' film based on the Mercer screenplay, *Providence*, concerns an aging or dying author who, over the course of one sleepless, tortured night, invents a fiction involving his sons, his daughter-in-law and his late wife. The work Clive Langham (John Gielgud) is creating in his head seems to take place in a country threatened by a military coup, resembling the Chilean events of 1973. Gielgud is exceptional, although he doesn't physically or emotionally resemble the terrible drunk he is supposed to be, as is Dirk Bogarde (who dominates the film) as his son Claude. Ellen Burstyn as Sonia, Claude's wife, seems out of her depth.

There are entertaining and insightful moments here, but the various pieces do not cohere. And the weakest side of Mercer's writing, a certain self-pity and the belief that cracks about alcoholism and inappropriate sexual behavior are the ultimate in dramatic daring, finds too wide an expression.

Released in 1980, *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* [*My American Uncle*] was probably the last film of Resnais that had a serious bite to it, at least in moments. It follows the ultimately intertwined lives of three individuals, a writer-politician, an aspiring actress and a textile executive from a humble rural background. The scenes of corporate ruthlessness involving the discarding and humiliation of Gérard Depardieu as René Ragueneau, in my view, are the film's most enduring. Resnais does have something to say about the new global capitalism.

Also worth noting is the transformation in the film of Janine Garnier (Nicole Garcia), who grows up in a Communist Party background, from actress to grasping, upper middle class hatchet-woman ... a nice and accurate touch. The musings of behavioral scientist Henri Laborit, however, which form a kind of commentary on the unfolding drama, are not of great interest or merit, even if Resnais seems to contradict as often

as he agrees with them.

Laborit's efforts to reduce human interactions to natural-biological phenomena, outside of history and social life, have some significance in relation to Resnais' subsequent filmmaking, or much of it. One of the responses of the artist to political or social demoralization or stagnation is to make a virtue out of necessity, to find in even the tragic side of life something amusing or quirky, to discover that even the most oppressed "love their lives and life itself!" This is a version of the time-honored worship of the accomplished fact, and it colors Resnais' later and least interesting work.

In 1999, I encountered his *The Same Old Song* at the San Francisco Film Festival and commented: "Resnais is best known for *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* (1959), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *La Guerre est finie* (1966), *Stavisky* (1974), *Providence* (1979) and *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* (1980). *The Same Old Song* is something of an homage to Dennis Potter (Resnais has consistently paid attention to English writers), whose characters lip-synch popular songs at moments of crisis. In his new film, Resnais employs the same technique with his characters—six Parisians in search of love or at least adultery. They burst into snippets of Maurice Chevalier, Johnny Hallyday, Charles Aznavour and others. The film has its charms, but it is slight to the point of nearly disappearing."

Although Resnais continued to surround himself with talented performers and undoubtedly took pride in the polished, carefully crafted look and feel of his films (*Smoking/No Smoking* [1993], *Not on the Lips* [2003], *Private Fears in Public Places* [2006], *Wild Grass* [2009] and *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet!* [2012]), they are not enduring works.

Resnais, in my view, will be remembered primarily for the courageous and independent films he made in the 1950s and 1960, works that bore honest witness to enormous human suffering and resilience. And he *should be* remembered and honored for that. I strongly urge the reader to find and view those films.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact