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Cinema After Alain Resnais

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The so-called “new wave” of directors currently attempting to revitalize French cinema can be defined first of all by its complete and notorious lack of artistic innovation, quite simply at the stage of intention. To speak in less negative terms, it is characterized by a number of specific economic conditions whose dominant trait is without a doubt the importance in France of a certain school of cinema criticism that represents a sort of moral support — by no means insignificant — in the use of film. These critics have learnt to employ this support to their direct advantage as cinematic auteurs. This is the only thing that unifies them. The praise they heap on a production that otherwise completely escapes them is only for the benefit of their own works, which consequently become cheaper to make precisely because, for a wide section of the public, this game of praise can replace the painfully expensive attractions of the star system. Thus, this “new wave” expresses little more than the vested interests of this particular group of film critics.

In the confusion that has always surrounded them, as critics and as filmmakers, Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour* is carried along with the rest of this famous wave, and is met by the same sort of admiration. The superiority of Resnais’ film is easy to recognize, but it seems that very few people are concerned with defining its exact nature.

A talented director, Resnais has already made several impressive short films (*Nuit et Brouillard*), but it is *Hiroshima*

that represents a qualitative leap in the development both of his work and of the worldwide cinematic spectacle. If we are to put aside those cinematic experiments that remain marginal at best (for example, in terms of content, some of Jean Rouch’s films; or in terms of formal investigation, those of the lettrist group circa 1950: Isou, Wolman, Marco — interestingly enough, the resemblance of Resnais’ work to that of Isou in particular has never been mentioned), *Hiroshima* seems like the most original, most innovative film since the invention of talkies. Not discounting a mastery of the power of the image, *Hiroshima* relies on the pre-eminence of sound: the importance of the dialogue proceeds not only from an unusual quantity or even quality, but from the fact that the development of the film is determined far less what its characters do than by what they say (to the extent that they provide the images with the bulk of their meaning, as is the case with the lengthy journey through the streets that concludes the first sequence).

The conformist public knows that Resnais is okay to like, and thus likes him just as much as it does someone like Chabrol. Through a variety of declarations, Resnais has made it clear that he is traveling a well worn road through the investigation of cinema based on the autonomy of sound (by defining *Hiroshima* as a “long short film” with a commentary; by acknowledging his interest a few of Guitry’s films; and by speaking of his tendency toward cinematic opera). Nevertheless, Resnais’ modesty and personal discretion have helped obscure the problem of the meaning of the evolution that he repre-

sents, in such a way that critics are torn between equally inadequate reservation and praise.

The most typical and deluded objection involves dissociating Resnais from Marguerite Duras by hailing the director’s talent while lamenting the pretentiousness of the script. But the film is what it is precisely because of this use of language, which is precisely what Resnais wanted, and which is precisely where his scriptwriter has succeeded. Denouncing rather accurately the “retrospective revolution” led by the pseudo-modernism of the literary and cinematic “new waves” in *Arts* magazine (26-8-59), Jean-François Revel makes the mistake of lumping Resnais in with this lot because of his commentary, “a pastiche of Claudel.” Revel, who has long been appreciated for the intelligence of his attacks without ever having to point out what he was aiming at, demonstrates a sudden weakness when it comes to distinguishing what is really new about such fashionable trash. According to his article in *Arts*, he prefers the pathetically conventional cinema of Bernard-Auberts’ *Tripes au soleil*, simply because of its sympathetic content.

Resnais’ apologists speak so freely of genius because of the prestigious mystery of the term, which spares them from having to explain *Hiroshima*’s objective importance: the appearance in “commercial” cinema of the self-destruction that dominates all modern art.

The film’s admirers do their best to find admirable little details wherever they can. Everyone ends up going on about Faulkner and his sense of timing (on that point, we might add that Agnes Varda, who has absolutely no good

points, owes everything to Faulkner). In fact, the reason they insist on the fragmented rhythm of Resnais' film is so that they don't have to see any of its destructive aspects. In the same way, they talk of Faulkner as a specialist — an accidental specialist — of the dissipation of time, accidentally encountered by Resnais, so that they can forget the time that has already passed, and more generally the literary works of Proust and Joyce. The timing — the confusion — of Hiroshima is not the annexation of cinema by literature: it is the continuation in cinema of the movement of all writing, and first of all poetry, toward its own dissolution.

There is also a tendency to explain Resnais as much by his personal psychological motivations as by his exceptional talents — both of course having roles that we won't go into here — thereby leading to talk that the theme of all his films is memory, just as that of every Hawks film, for example, is male bonding. But at the same time there is a blissful ignorance of the fact that memory is the most significant theme of the appearance of the phase of immanent criticism in art, of its bringing itself into question, of its dissolving contestation. The question of the meaning of memory is always linked to the ques-

tion of the meaning of a permanence transmitted by art.

The most simple access of cinema to the method of free expression is at the same time already within the perspective of the demolition of this method. As soon as cinema enriched itself with the powers of modern art, it found itself encompassed by the total crisis of modern art. At the same time that this step brought cinema closer to its freedom, it also brought it closer to its death, to the proof of its inadequacy.

In cinema, the claim of a freedom of expression equal to that of other arts masks the general failure of expression at the end of all modern arts. Artistic expression is in no way an actual *self-expression*, a realization of its life. The proclamation of "auteur film" is already past its use-by-date before really having gone beyond pretension and pipe-dream. Cinema, whose potential is far greater than that of other traditional arts, is too heavily bound up in moral and economic chains to ever have the capacity to be free under present social conditions. And when the coming overthrow of social and cultural conditions allows the possibility of a free cinema, many other theaters of operation will necessarily have been introduced. It is

probable that at that time the freedom of cinema will largely be superseded, forgotten in the general development of a world where the spectacle is longer be dominant. The fundamental trait of the spectacle is the *mise en scène* of its own ruin. The importance of Resnais' film — conceived, of course, outside of this historical perspective — is to add a new confirmation to this.

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 Situationismus: Sinnloses Wort, missbräuchlich durch Ableitung des vorigen gebildet. Einen Situationismus gibt es nicht — was eine Doktrin zur Interpretation der vorhandenen Tatsachen bedeuten würde. Selbstverständlich haben sich die Anti-Situationisten den Begriff „Situationismus“ ausgedacht.

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