

Filming with Writers: Alain Resnais's Literary Cinema

Cinematic transposition – as opposed to adaptation – of literary texts, has been a recurring feature of Alain Resnais's work, and one of the most remarkable aspects of his artistic approach as a film-maker.¹ He has always been acutely conscious of the collaborative nature of the film-making process, and of the complementary nature of cinema, literature and music. Resnais's unique treatment of literary texts has formed the basis of a number of his films, and demonstrates how the images he produces (with the texts in mind) not only convey the essence of these texts, but also enhance their literariness, to a point of such perfect harmony between the two that he may be said to be creating a form of literary cinema.

The relationship between film and literature has long been a subject for critics of both artistic forms. Cinema, indeed, as well as its pictorial heritage, has also a rich literary one, which it has incorporated into its forms of expression. Janice Etzkowitz identifies as aspects of cinematic language ‘the imagery from poetry, the dramatic structure from the short story, acting skills and dramatic principles of plot development from the theater, and descriptive narrative technique from the novel’.² She also offers a definition of cinematic literature:

Cinematic literature is that form of literature which communicates through a visual language on celluloid with or without the accompaniment of sound. In its most primitive form it is pure visual expression. In its most complete form it incorporates a multiplicity of languages — visual expression, verbal expression and musical expression — which form the total polymorphic language of the cinema.³

The notion of cinematic language first appeared in 1948 with Alexandre Astruc's famous piece on '*la caméra stylo*':

[Cinema] is slowly becoming a language. That is to say a form in which and by which artists can express their thoughts, however abstract they may be, and translate their obsessions exactly as it is now possible to do in a essay or a novel. This is why I call this new age that of the *caméra stylo*. This image has a precise meaning. It means that cinema will gradually tear itself away from the tyranny of the visual, of the image for the sake of the image, of the immediate anecdote, of the concrete, to become a way of writing that is as supple and as subtle as that of the written language...⁴

Astruc's theory found its perfect illustration ten years later in the New Wave cinema. The New Wave directors (Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette) realized – in both senses of the term – the full potential of cinema as an art whose expression challenged the pre-eminence of the written language. Their theories included reflections upon film language, style, genre, and the notion of *auteur*, resulting in a cinema as a form of writing. Cinematic language was finally considered as a language proper, and it was recognised that a film had two equally important, possibly independent yet concordant, layers of narrative, namely sound (which was not purely dialogue) and image.

Alain Resnais's approach set him apart from the New Wave directors. Over the years, and from the very start of his career, he regularly worked with the original scripts of writers, leaving a large space in his films to the written text. Of the writers he selected – Paul Eluard (*Guernica*, 1950), Rémo Forlani (*Toute la mémoire du monde*, 1956), Raymond Queneau (*Le Chant du Styrène*, 1958), Jean Cayrol (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1955, and *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour*, 1963), Marguerite Duras (*Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959), Alain Robbe-Grillet (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961), Jorge Semprun (*La Guerre est finie*, 1966, and *Stavisky*, 1974), Jacques Sternberg (*Je t'aime, je t'aime*, 1968), David Mercer (*Providence*, 1977) – none was a screen-writer by profession. Jorge Semprun considers Resnais as the co-author of every scenario, not because Resnais took part in the actual writing, but because of his contribution at the level of an overall creative vision.⁵ Generally, Resnais first selects an author with some experience: Semprun, Robbe-Grillet and Sternberg had already made their mark as novelists before he approached them. Authors with experience in theatre particularly appeal to him, as Etzkowitz points out: 'In selecting a scenarist, Resnais has one principal criterion – that the writer have a sense of theater and of creating a dramatic situation so that the cinematic experience is above all spectacle.'⁶ This was the case with Mercer, Cayrol and Duras, whose play, *Le Square*, he had seen and admired before asking to work with her. Resnais requests writers to provide several outlines of the scenario, and then selects one. In order to gain insight into the characters, he asks for a complete biography of each, even though it is never used in its entirety. Later, writer and director meet at regular intervals until the latter is satisfied with the result. Semprun has stressed Resnais's precision and sensitivity, while Robbe-Grillet has found him an astute and uncompromising artist.⁷ John Michalczyk notes that:

Marguerite Duras stressed his ability to exact from the writer precisely what he 'sensed', while Sternberg insists upon the uncanny ability of the director to choose the right sequences from the myriad of possibilities, and then the correct order and duration. When this collaborative process is completed, Resnais holds in hands a true 'working script', which Semprun compares to an archaeological excavation with its numerous levels of deposit.⁸

During the transposition of the written text into a cinematic language, Resnais, without diminishing the importance of the original text, lays different layers of representation to it. Through the specific spatial and temporal qualities of film, he runs these layers sometimes logically parallel to one another and sometimes not, as, for instance, at the beginning of *La Guerre est finie*. Various elements need to be considered in order to identify the specifically narrative dimension in the first few shots of the film: first, the objective verisimilitude, second, the subjective realism, and,

third, the overt narrative intervention. The objective verisimilitude consists of the location shooting and factual account of the political situation (we see two men in a car, both anti-Franco activists, about to cross the border between Spain and France). The subjective realism is to be found in Jude, who is driving the car, as he describes how inconvenient for him this unexpected trip is. This realistic voice is then, suddenly, no longer heard. Instead, an overt narrative intervention takes place by way of the voice-over, but of a *different* voice, accompanied by shots of the passing landscape viewed from the car – a device which reinforces the meditative quality of the voice. The voice, in fact, is the inner voice of Diego (the protagonist), who is played by Yves Montand, but the voice itself is different from Montand's voice (as we find out when he finally answers Jude's comments as they reach the border). The voices are different in order to distinguish between one's inner thinking 'voice' and the objective, external sound-making voice heard on the outside. The voice heard inside is the voice of the inner self, addressing the protagonist as 'you'. The visual dimension becomes secondary to the subjective element, the voice we hear. This process is reversed when Jude's voice returns and the emphasis falls on the pictures we see, namely a series of images in Diego's mind, among them images of him running out of a train-station to catch a taxi, of an apartment door opening revealing a man and a woman, of Diego again, now queuing for a taxi, of the man already seen (who is the man he has to meet) coming into another apartment (Diego's?). In fact, we are being given the protagonist's subjective view and are being invited to share his nervous anticipation of events. This justifies the lack of chronology in the presentation of the shots, and the occasional discrepancies between image and sound (here, dialogue and interior monologue). Resnais maintains that this treatment of anticipation is realistic in showing the mind's tendency to leap ahead to a goal and only later to speculate on what might happen on the way to the realization of that goal. Here he opens a new category of psychological experience which is dramatized by both visual and oral narrations, producing a complex narrative technique out of the interweaving of literary and cinematic resources.

This technical originality may be why Resnais has sometimes been labelled difficult in the past. The complexity of his work is born out of both his incapacity to produce straightforward documentary realism and his disapproval of the standard narrative modes which dominate contemporary cinema. The latter finds expression in his disruption of chronology and narrative linearity through the use of jump cuts, flashbacks and flashforwards. Towards the end of *Hiroshima mon amour*, the characters – a woman and a man, whose relationship has been based on the telling and re-enactment of an intimate episode of the woman's life during World War II – are left with nothing to say to each other, and, realizing they cannot stay together, they separate. As the woman walks the streets of Hiroshima alone in the darkness, all that is heard is her interior monologue, addressed to both her French lover (who is dead) and her Japanese lover (who is following her from a distance). This monologue is accompanied by a succession of images of Nevers (the French town where she once was) and of Hiroshima (where she is now), not only underlining her present despair in Hiroshima but also recalling memories of a similarly painful situation many years previously in Nevers. The parallel established between the two towns, emphasised by various tracking shots, confers a unity upon completely different places, and underlines the parallel at the core of the film, that between love and war, giving it its universal quality.

Resnais has shown a real commitment to creating a modern narrative technique in his films, in particular in order to deal with humanitarian themes. He has opted out of the traditional stylised fiction in order to create his own objective account of themes like war, death, pain and loss. He has always tried to find his own particular way to communicate a specific problem to his audience. For *Nuit et Brouillard*, for instance, Resnais asked the poet Jean Cayrol to write a commentary on pictures of concentration camps, specifically of Auschwitz. Again, this commentary does not always correspond exactly to the images, consisting of a montage which alternates original black-and-white stills of the camps and a present-day colour film of Auschwitz. The narrating voice is accompanied by a musical score, and together they add to the visual representation of pain and horror: the voice is deliberately deprived of any overt emotion, whilst the music, especially when it accompanies the post-war colour pictures of Auschwitz, is at times almost cheerful, in order to express the cruel irony of the passage of time and the amnesia of nature, including human nature. This poetic treatment of very explicit visual material sits uneasily with the factual account of the narration of camp life (Cayrol had been a prisoner of the camps) delivered by a monotonous voice, and creates an overwhelming feeling of sadness. It is the centrality of the literary text in *Nuit et Brouillard*, when set against the imagery, which confers upon the film its tremendous power.

Michalczyk recognises Resnais's literary approach: 'With [Resnais's] juxtaposition and play of accents and languages in harmony and counterpoint, [a] particular situation takes on more universal proportions. [...] his cinematic technique closely approximates a literary style while still being visually oriented.'⁹ We can see this in Resnais's use of visual metaphors to accompany the story line. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, for instance, water represents the contrapuntal juxtaposition of life and death: lovers showering together or sitting together in a riverside café, dead fish from the sea, radiation brought in by the rain. Hands and hair are very much emphasised as well, as part of love imagery but also as symbols of human frailty – physical traces of nuclear reaction on the skin, hair falling off as a result of radiation or as a result of the shearing of a woman's head, inflicted as a mark of dishonour. These motifs are important to the development of the film, as expanding symbols which serve to unify its narrative structure.

Resnais's idea of cinema is at one with the aim of the *Nouveau Roman* – a literary movement with which both Duras and Robbe-Grillet were identified – namely to develop a narrative technique deprived of traditional properties and to present new ways of stimulating the imagination in order to create an active part for the reader/viewer, in part by refusing to give any totalizing explanations. *Hiroshima mon amour*, like a *nouveau roman*, does not develop in a linear fashion. Chronology is subverted, and it is the spectator's task to recreate a unity out of the temporal disorder. Just as the characters in Resnais's cinema labour to comprehend the world, so the viewers must take part in ordering the information received from the screen. Literature and film do not compete here; rather, they collaborate to represent the complex movements and unpredictable transitions of the human mind.

Resnais managed so successfully to involve the writers in the realization of his films that, in some cases, after their experience with him, they went on to make their own films. Each of his films is identifiable also as the work of his partners. His work is one of the best examples in world cinema of the possibilities of artistic cross-currents. Here *caméra* and *stylo* have joined together to create a new writing on celluloid: as

Michalczyk puts it: ‘in [Resnais’s] feature films and shorts the literary and cinematic harmoniously dovetail.’¹⁰ Duras once recalled that Resnais insisted that she should write a literary text for *Hiroshima mon amour* and forget the camera. *Hiroshima mon amour* is such a stunning example of what literature and cinema can produce together that François-Régis Bastide wrote: ‘After *Hiroshima*, what is to become of us novelists?’¹¹

Resnais certainly meant to give the literary text as much importance as its visual representation:

I dream about a kind of cinema in which the text would play a musical role. I dream of a film in which one would hear a language like that of Shakespeare or Giraudoux. I do not see why one cannot listen to a text with a literary quality simply because one is sitting in a theatre where the lights are off.¹²

The two arts, instead of following parallel and sometimes rival trajectories, have fruitfully collaborated in Resnais’s work in their representation of the world and of the human psyche. As Resnais says: ‘My films are encounters, meetings of minds, not a way of considering a literary work already completed, but a continuous creation, a friendship.’¹³

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¹ He did, however, adapt the play, *Mélo* (1986), written by Henry Bernstein. *Smoking and No Smoking* (1993) could also be seen as examples of adaptation of a theatrical work, but, as Alain Philippon argues, Alan Ayckbourn’s *Intimate Exchanges*, the original text, being composed of eight plays, could never be performed, as it would oblige the spectator to go to the theatre eight nights in a row. According to Philippon, the only feasible representation of the play, therefore, is a cinematic one – in this case, two complementary films. See Alain Philippon, ‘Vertiges du double’, *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, 474, 1994, p. 20.

² Janice Etzkowitz, *Toward a Concept of Cinematic Literature: An Analysis of ‘Hiroshima mon amour’* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), p. 7.

³ Etzkowitz, p. 8.

⁴ Alexandre Astruc, ‘Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde, la Caméra-Stylo’, *Ecran français*, 144 (mars 1948), p. 30 (my translation).

⁵ See the press dossier of *La Guerre est finie* (Paris: Cycinor Distributor, 1966), p. 7.

⁶ Etzkowitz, p. 282.

⁷ See Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘Mes romans, mes films et mes ciné-romans’, *Magazine Littéraire*, 6, avril 1967, p. 13.

⁸ John J. Michalczyk, ‘Alain Resnais: Literary Origins from Hiroshima to Providence’, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 7 (1979), pp. 16-25 (p. 20).

⁹ Michalczyk, p. 17.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jeanne-Marie Clerc, *Littérature et cinéma* (Paris: Fac Cinéma, Nathan Université, 1993), p. 63 (my translation).

¹² Guy Gauthier, ‘Entretien avec Alain Resnais’, *Image et Son*, 196 (juillet 1966), p. 83 (my translation).

¹³ Yvonne Baby, ‘Entretien avec Alain Resnais et Robbe-Grillet’, *Le Monde*, 29 août 1961, pp. 52-53 (my translation).