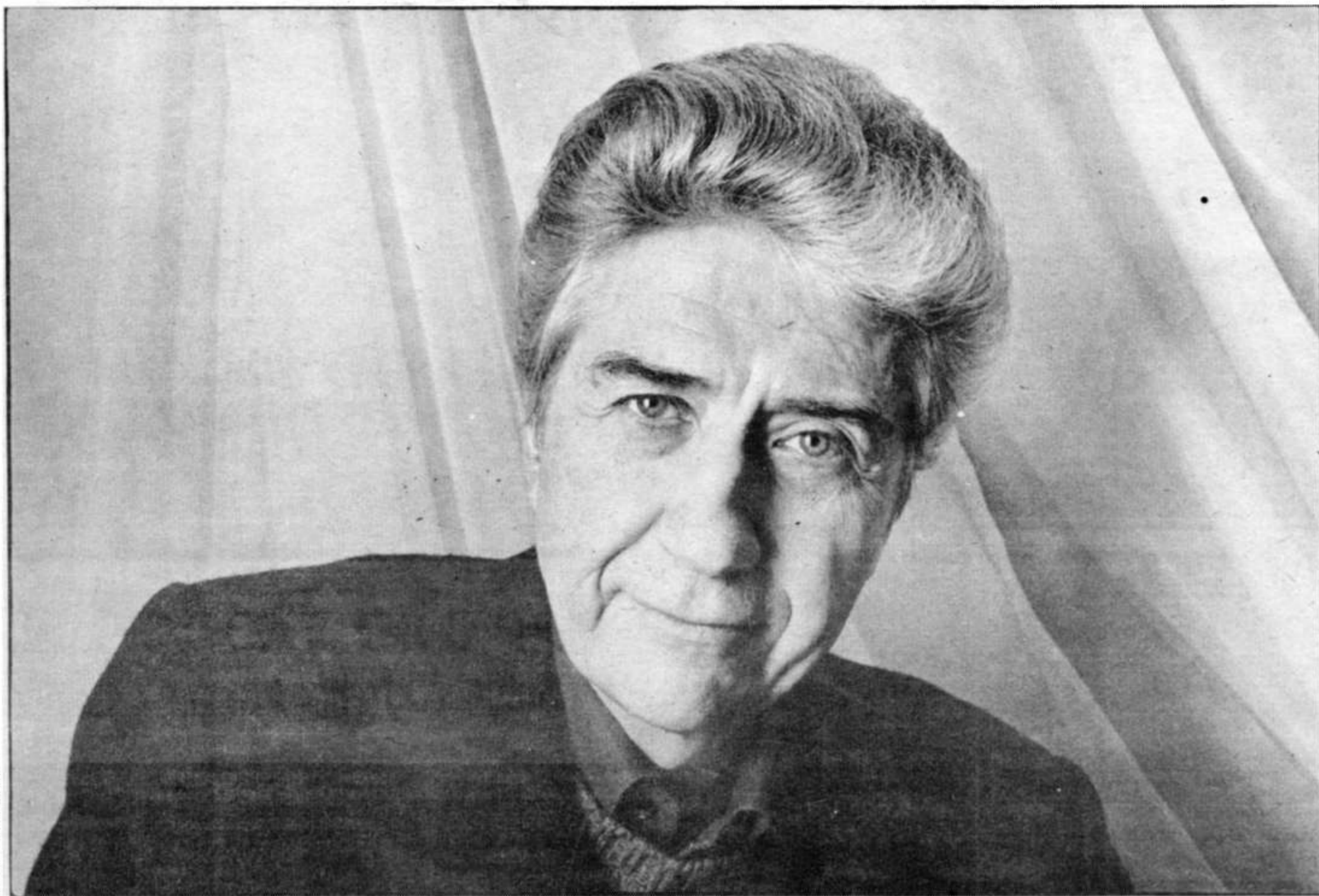


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Alain Resnais: Mon Auteur Francais

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By Andrew Sarris

MON ONCLE D'AMERIQUE. Directed by Alain Resnais. Written by Jean Gruault. Based on the works of Henri Laborit. Produced by Philippe Dussart. Released by New World Pictures.

POPEYE. Directed by Robert Altman. Written by Jules Feiffer. Music and Lyrics by Harry Nilsson. Produced by Robert Evans. Released by Paramount.

Alain Resnais's *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* stands out among most of the current crop of Christmas releases as if it were a *nouvelle cuisine* meal served at a special gourmet counter in McDonald's. It is a French film with English subtitles. It is thoughtful, complex, at times grimly hilarious, at times hauntingly beautiful. I wrote last summer that it may be the funniest movie on the horror of working since Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times*, and nothing else I have seen this year—least of all the numbing *Nine to Five*—has caused me to alter this judgment. This is not to say that *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* quite qualifies as socko entertainment. The ending strikes a note of frenzied disenchantment, with each of the three protagonists trapped like white mice in a maze, one partly of their own making and partly of the system's. Holiday audiences may be thrown off balance by the film's disconcerting mixture of the dramatic and the didactic. The spectator is more likely to wind up with a furrow in the brow than with a lump in the throat. Nonetheless, *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* remains one of the very few contemporary movies to pertain even more to the art of cinema than to the art of cinematography, and that is reason enough to drop everything and see it.

Resnais himself was in town for the usual round of interviews to help promote the picture, and I was slotted in for my hour at his temporary digs in the Park Lane Hotel. I have never been much of an interviewer. I get nervous and talk too much, and with beautiful actresses, par-

ticularly, my infatuation gushes over my intended inquisition. I love to read interviews, however, and I admire the more intrepid practitioners of this form. The trick is to read between the lines of this forced encounter between the journalist and the artist, an encounter in which publicity is cynically exchanged for celebrity. Unfortunately, the sheer repetitiousness of interviews eventually destroys any semblance of spontaneity, as the same questions elicit the same answers over and over and over again. Consequently, I have always preferred to deduce the "personality" of a director from his work on the screen, rather than from his largely ritualized responses to questions asked at interviews and press conferences.

Alain Resnais presents special problems to the interviewer in that his seeming affability masks a subtle aloofness. He answers every question agreeably enough, but the answers never spill over into provocative digressions. His conversation is as rigorous and as precise as the editing of his films, and yet there is always a hint of playfulness in his eyes. Back in the early '60s when the *nouvelle vague* was somewhat mistakenly perceived as an aesthetically unified movement, it was customary to speak of Resnais, Truffaut, and Godard in the same breath because of the virtually simultaneous explosions of *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour*, *The Four Hundred Blows*, and *Breathless*. From the very beginning, however, Truffaut and Godard were much more accessible as personalities than was Resnais. Their faces became more familiar, partly because they occasionally acted in their own films and partly because their prior experience as critics and journalists had taught them many of the stratagems of self-promotion. Much of the content of their films was emotionally and even clinically autobiographical. By contrast, Resnais's films seemed to function as collaborative col-

lages of other people's words and his own images. His own voice, when it was heard at all, was faint and oblique and mysteriously meditative. Ironically, *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* acquired an unjustified reputation with the idiot left simply because the subject itself tended to obscure the extreme formalism of both Resnais's direction and Marguerite Duras's dialogue. Though both Truffaut (*Shoot the Piano Player*) and Godard (*The Little Soldier*) were less successful critically and commercially with their second features than with their spectacular debut films, neither aroused such a strong feeling of ideological betrayal as Resnais did with the voluptuously ornate ambiguities of *Last Year at Marienbad*, an exercise in style dismissed by the funkier humanists of that era as poisonously chic. *Muriel* referred very elliptically to the traumatic effects of the Algerian War, but the film as a whole was enshrouded by a mystifyingly fragmented contemplation of the banality of bourgeois existence. Resnais's comeback in 1966 with *La Guerre est finie* disappointed the steadfast admirers of *Marienbad* and *Muriel* for alleged compromises with the more conventionally romantic expectations of audiences. In the episode Resnais contributed to the omnibus *Far From Vietnam*, an actor-narrator made, to my mind, the most moderate and most sophisticated appraisal of America's involvement in Vietnam in what was, in the remaining episodes, a hysterical diatribe against America. In less than eight years Resnais had made pointed comments on the screen about *Hiroshima*, Algeria, Spain, and Vietnam, and yet he could not be reckoned a conspicuously "committed" filmmaker. His heart may have been in the right place for the more rigid ideologues of the left, but his art was not. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that since 1968 his work has become increasingly apolitical in content

as well as in form. As Resnais has gotten older—and he is now 58—a shadow of morbid melancholy has crept into his films (*Je t'aime, je t'aime*; *Stavisky*; and *Providence*). Though he has continued to be faithful to the screenplays of his writers, his own bemused fatalism has begun to emerge more clearly.

Godard's problem has always been that he lacked the ability and energy to transform ironic anecdotes into full-bodied narratives. Truffaut's problem has been that he does not fully believe the stories he would like to tell. Resnais's problem is that he lacks the will to intervene strongly enough in his stories. Hence, he often merely documents an impasse without resolving it. No director I have ever known has conveyed so strong an impression of drift with so much poise and grace. I have met few men who have tread so lightly on the earth, or who have shown so few marks of the travails of existence. Certainly no one approaching Resnais's high level of sensibility and artistry.

In some ways Resnais has made explicit in *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* what had always been implicit since *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour*, and even before in his extraordinarily accomplished '50s documentaries—and that is that we are all inhibited from taking effective action to end our troubles by the emotional power of our memories. What had always moved me most about *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* was neither *Hiroshima*, nor the amour shared by the French actress (Emmanuelle Riva) and the Japanese architect (Eiji Okada), but, rather, the actress's flash-memories of her dead German lover during the Occupation. Quite by accident, I happened to see *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* right after my brother had died, and the bearlike walk of the German soldier reminded me of my brother's walk. Through Resnais and Duras, I was compelled to speculate on how the living mind would continue to function with memories of the loss of the living, and how guilt would accumulate proportionally with forgetfulness.

Already in *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* Resnais was confronting a potential collision between the inescapably individualistic concerns of human memory, and the collective concerns of Marxist theory. Indeed, there was already a dialectical conflict of sorts at work in the title between *Hiroshima* (*notre*) and *amour* (*mon*). What makes *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* a complex work of art is the triple perspective through which every incident and every characterization is interpreted. Most of the details and structure of the narrative can be credited to Jean Gruault, and whatever theory of character is presented must be attributed to Henri Laborit, who is often laboriously literal in his explications. Resnais guides Gruault's characters through the maze postulated by Laborit, but, in the process, lyrical feelings emerge from the ironic interplay of chance and self-deception.

That the three major protagonists traverse such an enormous distance in geography, sociology, ideology, heredity, and aspiration so that their paths may cross provides the film with such a dynamic impetus that the downward trajectory of these same characters in their quests for success and happiness is not nearly as depressing as it might be. Curiously, the most pathetic character—Rene Rague-neau (Gerard Depardieu), the unimaginative supervisor of a textile factory—emerges after a suicide attempt as the most spiritually integrated of the three. Jean Le Gall (Roger-Pierre), the media-literary-political idealist turned opportunist, achieves success at the price of projecting a hideously ignoble image. And Janine Garnier (Nicole Garcia) escapes first from a constricting left-wing working-class family into the avant-garde theatre, from which she escapes in turn to the more lucrative realm of fashion, but, in the process, she finds frustration and disillusion in her personal life. Each of the protagonists has a guiding star from French movie mythology. Depardieu's is Jean Gabin, Roger-Pierre's Danielle Darrieux, and Garcia's Jean Marais. The per-

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mutations of psychology, sociology, mythology, and pure romance set off so many sparks of thought and feeling that one is bound to be electrified at some point or other with the affinity of *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* to life as it is lived today in even the more affluent sectors of the increasingly self-pitying Western World. When I tried to pin down Resnais on his feelings about Laborit's diagnosis of an ingrained aggressiveness and competitiveness in people as a primary factor in social pathology, I found myself stymied, perhaps by the language barrier, but, quite possibly, by the verbal equivalent of a Gallic shrug of the shoulders. I nonetheless find it quite curious that in 1980 the first bright flames of the nouvelle vague—Resnais, Truffaut, and Godard—should take very different routes toward the message that women may be more adaptable to new, chaotic situations than are men. As it is, Nicole Garcia's Janine Garnier is the most vital and most vigorous character in the predominantly reflective and reminiscent oeuvre of the cinema's most profound meditator on the human mind: Alain Resnais.