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Author(s)	Naomi Wise
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Film as Fugue

MON ONCLE D'AMERIQUE. Directed by Alain Resnais. Written by Jean Gruault. Photography by Sacha Vierny. With Gerald Depardieu, Nicole Garcia, Roger-Pierre, Marie Dubois, Nelly Borgeaud, and the participation of Henri Laborit. At the Elmwood.

By Naomi Wise

The film is called a "comedy." The director, Alain Resnais (who made *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, and *La Guerre est Finie*, among others) is scarcely known for his humor. If anything, he's a cinematic logician, a pioneer in the search for fresh images and new modes of narrative that distinguished the early French New Wave. But *Mon Oncle D'Amerique* is indeed a "comedy"—a comedy of logic, and a tragedy of feeling.

At the beginning, four voices are talking all at once. One of them belongs to a sociobiologist, explaining his theories of human behavior. The others belong to three characters who are telling their life stories from birth onward, phrase by alternating phrase. As the stories diverge, the thread of the three narratives is lost in the alternations, and the voices briefly become mere music—a Bach fugue, perhaps, with the separate themes playing simultaneously in counterpoint. Then the filmmaker cuts, and clarity is regained, but the structure has been defined: film as baroque fugue, with the characters as disparate musical motifs to be finally united in the coda. And, like Bach, Resnais will combine a cool lucidity of structure with a half-disguised underlying passion, using intelligence as a refuge from anguish.

Mon Oncle D'Amerique is an intellectual comedy, then, shot with playful inventiveness: what happens to the characters is tragedy, but it's presented comically. Like John Huston's *Wise Blood*, it draws its humor from the irony of human hope absolutely rebuffed, and, like *Wise Blood*, it's dazzling, brilliant filmmaking, thoroughly entertaining but far from incontrovertibly "funny."

In a sense, the film is a grand teaching machine, with a wondrously designed program. As sociobiologist Henri Laborit discusses his behavioral theories—specifically, that aggression is a fundamental necessity for maintaining mental and physical health in the face of frustration, and that frustration is inevitable—three inter-related "case histories" contradict, com-

plement, and ultimately confirm his hypotheses. And yet, the three are far more than "cases"—they're among the most complex, genuine, and insistently whole characters to be met on the screen, even if they're ultimately doomed to become laboratory rats in shock-wired cages.

"Our brains are formed by others," Laborit comments. "We are those others." We see the trio as children, being shaped by their families (generally much against their wills: "Say hello to the nice lady, Jean"). We also see the influence of the wider culture, in the form of favorite movie stars.

Rene is played by Gerard Depardieu, often called "the new Jean Gabin," in a warm, vulnerable, and melancholy performance. A rather stolid, farm-born manager of an obsolete rural textile factory, at moments of crisis Rene has flash-frame visions of himself as (of course) Jean Gabin, the great "sensitive tough guy" of the '30s and '40s.

Janine is portrayed by Nicole Garcia, a new face to Americans, and an extraordinary one—intense, leonine, incandescent. Janine, born of leftist working class parents, runs away to become an actress but eventually becomes a textile designer (for the conglomerate that owns Rene's factory). She sees herself as Jean Marais, a dashing, costumed cavalier prone to rescuing fainting damsels. It's a measure of *Mon Oncle's* acuity that the heroine should choose a chivalrous male role model, rather than his passive female counterpart—this is truth in place of the expected sex-role banalities.

And Jean (Roger-Pierre), a middle-class teacher with vaunting political ambitions, and Janine's sometime lover, sees himself as Danielle Darrieux: the somewhat compromised intellectual adores the glamorous, somewhat compromised blonde (Darrieux was considered overly compliant during the Nazi occupation). Jean, however, has but few flashes of his heroine, compared to the other two—as the most pragmatic, least emotional, and most ambitious of the trio (and the one with the happiest childhood), he's the one least influenced by idols and idealism, and most influenced by his genteel upbringing.

Eventually, all three are faced with intense frustration, and each



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reacts accordingly: Jean is complaisant and passive, unwilling to risk disorder for the sake of happiness; Janine—ultimately the strongest and noblest—carries on despite her despair; Rene attempts suicide. The compromiser, the swashbuckler, and the doomed tough-guy once again, they're nothing if not consistent, because every frame of *Mon Oncle* is deliberate, like some intricately plotted Victorian novel in which every random minor character turns out to be somebody else's long-lost uncle from America.

Along with the intercut flash-images of movie stars, Resnais uses additional cut-aways to provide diversion, humor—and relief. As Laborit speaks of the biological need for movement, Resnais cuts to a cute little puppy squirming around. The desire to satisfy hunger is reflected in a wild boar snuffling around the woods (to be met again, later, as Jean hunts the boar and Janine hunts Jean). Natural creatures, beautifully photographed in the midst of their natural behaviors, eventually become proofs of the theories, and meanwhile serve to distance the viewer from the human dramas. Ultimately, like every other factor, these images are united in a surprising way: after we've seen Laborit's laboratory rats reacting to stress, we find our stressed human beings costumed as giant rodents, nosing along through their bourgeois living rooms, reduced to the status of

conditioned animals behaving in accord with the biologist's predictions.

It's indubitably tragic. It's also, in its way, quite funny, finding its odd humor in the tension between the complexity of life and the simplicity of scientific theory. Comedy relies on distance; Resnais alternates between a close-up view of human anguish, and the witty distancing device of intercut footage of old-time movie stars and amusing animals. The humor is that of a momentary relief from tragedy, with the tragic events seen from a sudden, new perspective. The showy, playful filmic style serves as a deliberate alienating device: Resnais clearly intends to present a reality free from the roseate banalities of the average fictional film, and he pulls back into wit so that his reality will be bearable.

The style is a revival of the bittersweet fun-and-misery mixture of Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (In fact, Resnais even casts *Piano Player's* Marie Dubois as Depardieu's sympathetic wife), and its piquant pleasures are similar. When there's nothing but agony left for the characters, there's still the consolation, for the viewers, of a fresh and exquisite structure, mathematical in its purity and detachment, and musical in its grace.

The title sounds deceptively humorous in French: "my uncle from America." One envisions some indulgent, awkward charac-

ter (played, perhaps, by Fernandel, or Belmondo, or Michel Simon) caught in the clash of cultures.

The real "uncle from America"? To Jean, he's an uncle who left a secret treasure buried somewhere on an island, waiting for Jean's discovery.

To Rene: "Whenever anyone would talk about change, my father would remind me of my uncle in America, who died a bum in Chicago. Or so he said."

To Janine: "I thought happiness was something I had coming to me—from an uncle in America."

And to the head of the textile conglomerate, the voice of reality (momentarily standing in for Henry Laborit):

"America doesn't exist. I know. I lived there."