

# Questioning female subjectivity in Alain Resnais's *Muriel*

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*This snapshot will analyse Alain Resnais's 1963 film Muriel ou le temps d'un retour/Muriel or the Time of a Return, arguing that whilst deconstructing masculine patterns of spectatorship associated with hegemonic Hollywood cinema, the film nevertheless remains bound within normative notions of female identity, representing its central protagonist as a traumatised sign of national malaise as opposed to a speaking subject.*

*Keywords: Women, Spectatorship, French Cinema, Laura Mulvey, Trauma, Subjectivity*

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Within the history of French cinema, the 1960s have often been viewed as a paragon of formal iconoclasm and sexual revolution, with stars like Brigitte Bardot and Anna Karina heralding the advent of a new conception of a female identity emancipated from the shackles of tradition and convention. Nevertheless, a number of theorists have recently adopted a more critical stance towards the period, with Geneviève Sellier (2008) illustrating how many of the films exhibit an underlying misogyny that draws from Romanticism in its masculine orientated narration. This snapshot will thus cast a retrospective and perhaps comparatively critical gaze over one of the defining films of this period, that is, Alain Resnais's 1963 work *Mu-*

*riel ou le temps d'un retour/Muriel or the Time of a Return*, which remains insofar untouched by feminist criticism (including Sellier's own analysis). Drawing from the work of Sellier alongside Laura Mulvey (1975) and Kristen Ross (1996), this snapshot will ultimately argue that that whilst the film destabilises traditional masculine viewing patterns associated with hegemonic Hollywood cinema through formal technique (editing, framing and lighting), the film is nevertheless highly conservative in its representations of women, portraying its central female protagonist as a traumatised sign of national malaise as opposed to an empowered, speaking subject.

The narrative itself dramatises the metropolitan lives of H el ene

Aughain (Delphine Seyrig), a single widow, and her ex-lover Alphonse Noyard, who attempt to rekindle a previous romance during a volatile few weeks in the port-town of Boulogne-sur-Mer (located in Northern France). The film therefore begins with Alphonse's arrival and introduction to Hélène's stepson, Bernard. Bernard, like Alphonse, has just returned from his military duty in Algeria, and, although apparently preparing to marry his fiancée 'Muriel' (to whom the viewer is at no point introduced), he remains at first uncommunicative and apparently disturbed by his experience in the colonies. Thus, in line with the subtitle of the film, '*the Time of a Return*,' the basic premise of the narrative concerns the event of a return; for Hélène, in Alphonse, it signifies the return of an old love interest; for Bernard, it represents his recent return from his time spent in Algeria as a French soldier to the highly gendered space of the family's modernist apartment.

### **Deconstructing masculine viewing pleasure**

In her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Laura Mulvey famously outlines the gendered structures that underpin hegemonic Hollywood cinema, describing how female protagonists are 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1975, 837). Furthermore, Mulvey then

describes how these patterns of representation function in order to satisfy the unconscious voyeuristic-scopophilic desire of a heterosexual male spectator who is positioned as 'transcendental subject' (Metz 1982, 49), that is, in a position of scopio-epistemological and gendered privilege through the formal patterns of framing, editing and lighting. In Hollywood cinema, women are thus frequently framed in mid-shots or close-ups, allowing a (masculine) spectator to scrutinise the profile of the female figure consistently represented in the centre of on-screen (rather than off-screen) space, whilst continuity editing acts in order to construct an illusion of spatial coherence propagated through the perspectival space of Renaissance art and the 'proscenium space' of early cinema (Burch 1969, 11). Finally, classical patterns of lighting are often used in order to bathe women in a quasi-spiritual (virginal) 'white glow,' standing in direct contrast to representations of men, who are instead associated with darkness, disorder and desire (Dyer 1997, 87). In this way, the formal patterns of Hollywood cinema act both to reinforce a heteronormative conception of gendered relations and to ossify the gendered binaries inherent within patriarchal ideology, between an active, masculine spectator and a passive, feminine on-screen object.

In direct counterpoint to the formal patterns of Hollywood cinema,

*Muriel* instead draws from trends in oppositional (or ‘counterhegemonic’) cinema, including the work of the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein and the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. This shift in formal approach (from realism to modernism) is perhaps crystallised in the opening scene of the film, establishing an aesthetic paradigm frequently used from this point onwards. Set within the domestic confines of H el ene’s apartment —which functions simultaneously as a showroom and living quarters— it dramatises an interaction between H el ene (who we are later told is an antiques dealer) and a female customer, who enquires about buying a ‘chest of drawers’ and a ‘Swedish teak table.’ Nevertheless, in place of a medium or close-up shot of either of the women’s faces, punctuated by invisible and infrequent match cuts and bathed in a translucent glow as within the classical Hollywood system, the two women remain largely within the obscure realm of off-screen space. Instead, Resnais visualises a dizzyingly close montage of domestic items located inside the apartment, whilst brief multiperspectival shots of the women preclude the potential for a (masculine) viewing pleasure based upon an eroticised female image. Furthermore, the use of harsh colours can be seen to privilege verisimilitude over a reified and abstract notion of feminine identity, dispelling the myth of virginity associated with the body of the arche-

typal Hollywood star. Crucially, the whole conversation lasts no more than thirty seconds, although comprises of over twenty-three cuts (figures 1-4). During this scene, rather than eroticised objects to be seen (as in Hollywood cinema), women are thus represented as fragmented parts of an undisclosed whole. This interpretation of the film thus begs the question— can Resnais’s narrative be considered first and foremost a feminist piece of cinema simply through its formal patterns?



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

**Figures 1-4: *Hélène (above) and her customer (below) discuss a purchase in the initial, highly disorientating scene (images courtesy of Eureka Entertainment Ltd).***

### **Hélène as a sign of a national trauma**

This snapshot has insofar argued that Resnais's film potentially represents a feminist piece of filmmaking in that it destabilises masculine patterns of spectatorship associated with hegemonic Hollywood cinema. Nevertheless, another interpretation of the narrative is also possible, both in relation to Hélène's behavioural qualities and her semiotic value within the film. As numerous theorists have illustrated, many of the

characters in the film display signs of pathological behaviour, from Bernard's Lazarian tendencies (Armes 1985, 115) to Alphonse's bad faith and his mistress Françoise's frequent bouts of narcissism and egocentrism. Yet it is undoubtedly Hélène who appears most affected by patterns of behaviour that I will now argue find their origins simultaneously within Resnais's longstanding interest in psychoanalysis and contemporaneous trends in post-war European cinema.

Appearing at points anxious, nostalgic, unpredictable, capricious, depressed, forgetful, erratic and neurotic, Hélène's behaviour in the film certainly bears witness to the presence of an underlying psychic disturbance, although the origins (physical or mental) and/or perpetrators(s) of this disturbance are at no point made explicit. Yet it is perhaps precisely this absence of origin that is most revealing about Hélène's symptoms, which certain theorists have loosely associated with the trauma victim (Greene 1999, Wilson 2006). The phenomenon of trauma has been involved in a long and complex history in psychoanalytic thought. In particular, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot originally claimed that psychological trauma was the cause of the mental illness known as hysteria, a predominantly female malady (Showalter 1987), resulting in a tendency towards neurosis (delusional or hallucinatory behaviour)



and mythomania (compulsive lying). These two symptoms are both clearly applicable to H el ene's character and symptomatic of a wider trend in patriarchal discourse which equates 'female sexual pleasure with death in the archetype of the hysterical woman' (Austin 2008, 64). On the other hand, H el ene does not display the most prominent symptoms associated with hysteria, that is, sporadic attacks of physical contortion, posturing and paralysis termed *arc-de-cercle* by the psychoanalysts of the period due to the arched trajectory of the (mostly female) subjects. Rather, H el ene's behaviour subscribes to a comparatively contemporary conception of trauma, that is, the possession of a repressed memory relived repeatedly in the present through nightmarish visions and fragmented episodes (see Caruth 1995). H el ene is thus frequently dramatised as disorientated between bouts of amnesia and an-amnesia, at one point pictured lying on a divan sofa, eyes closed, whilst a male protagonist stands behind her— a particularly potent reference to Freud's famous blind 'talking cure method' of curing psychological disturbances (figures 5 and 6). Furthermore, Resnais's interest in psychoanalysis is also evident in his previous film *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), which casts the central female character (again played by Delphine Seyrig) as 'a patient under psychoanalysis circling but denying some hidden event' (Prouse 1983,

30). In both films, I would thus argue that the central female protagonist emerges as a suffering, largely silent, and above all, passive victim of trauma.



Figure 5

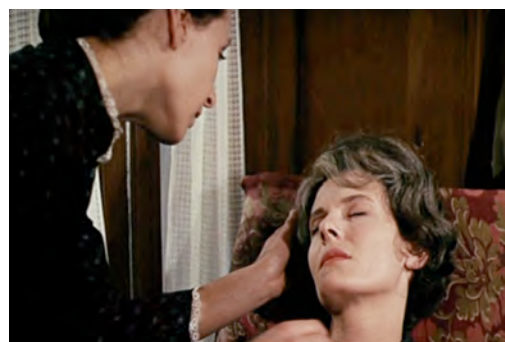


Figure 6

***Figures 5 and 6: H el ene as a sign of national trauma (images courtesy of Eureka Entertainment Ltd).***

Nevertheless, the question remains: what exactly is the origin of H el ene's trauma? This question can be approached in two ways. On the one hand, the spectator can interpret H el ene's pathological behaviour as a result of a private trauma, perhaps triggered by a past event or person within the diegesis (although

located in off-screen space). In particular, frequent, although indirect references are made within the film to Alphonse's potentially abusive tendencies, one scene focusing ominously upon his hand gripping forcefully around H el ene's wrist, before cutting to an imposing modernist monolith— a phallic symbol arguably indicative of (off-screen) sexual abuse. Yet another, potentially more persuasive reading of the narrative is also possible, especially if the figure of H el ene's semiotic— or, more precisely— synecdochic value is considered in relation to the socio-political and historic context that frames the film. In particular, as Kristen Ross (1995) has argued, 1960s French society was positioned at a somewhat fragile juncture, between the end of the bloody Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) and a dizzying period of modernization, producing a sense of 'emotional and spiritual isolation' (Betz 2009, 95) and 'alienation' (Sellier 2008, 149) within 'a traumatised nation' (Greene 1999, 105). In light of this contextualisation, is it not therefore possible that the figure of H el ene thus functions synecdochically for post-colonial France? This interpretation of the film is supported by Valerie Orpen's claim that 'the late 1950s and early 1960s seemed to be a time in film when female characters were an excellent means of conveying a general post-war societal malaise [...] adrift in society and detached from their environment

(Orpen 2007, 60).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this snapshot has illustrated how *Muriel* can be seen as ambivalent and contradictory in its representation of female identity. Thus, whilst the formal patterns used by Resnais can certainly be interpreted as a critique of the masculine spectatorship associated with hegemonic Hollywood cinema, the film nevertheless subscribes closely to patriarchal codes; depicting its central female character as a silent and passive sign of a traumatised nation rather than a speaking subject.

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