

Resnais/Derrida:Reconstructing the Subject

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What I am risking here ought to be an event. It is on the condition of not seeking to dominate his work, or not seeking to enunciate the whole of it, its general law or matrix, not even in a virtual sense, and on the condition of trying to say something very limited, modest, effaced, and singular before the Ponge thing, and letting it breathe without me, I say again without me, merely prompting you to go and see for yourselves, that, renouncing any mastery or appropriation, I will have a chance and run the risk of an event.

Jacques Derrida¹

The 'event' I am risking here, in the following article, is a parallel interrogation of a number of originally controversial texts and ideas put forward by French intellectual, philosopher and literary theorist Jacques Derrida (since the mid sixties), and the early work (mid-fifties to early sixties) of contemporary film-maker Alain Resnais.

Derrida is, of course, best known as the 'inventor' or original exponent of the now widely practised (and frequently mis-practised) approach to literary analysis, philosophical investigation, and postmodern cultural practices known as 'deconstruction'. It has become relatively common critical practice to give deconstructive readings of texts (reading against the grain, revealing unconscious or disavowed authorial intentions, highlighting gaps and internal contradictions in the work), be they literary, filmic or otherwise. However, I would argue that in the case of highly self-reflexive texts – such as the poetry of Mallarmé or Ponge, the literary fiction of the French new novelists, or here the cinema of Alain Resnais – the works themselves are at least partly decon-

structive, even auto-deconstructive, in their exposure and radical questioning of textual and socio-cultural practice and concurrent modes of subjectivity. This article will propose a sketch rather than a reading, a 'very limited, modest and effaced', if perhaps not totally 'singular' sketch of Resnais' early film practice as itself a deconstructive enterprise. And in so doing, risk yet another, more important 'event', which would, finally, consist in 'prompting you to go and see for yourselves'.

I will be drawing almost exclusively on the theoretical signature 'Derrida', on the understanding of deconstruction as a philosophical approach and as a critical and creative practice belonging to that current of postmodernity known as poststructuralism. In parallel to this theoretical framework, Resnais' film practice will be considered as constituting a sustained examination of subjectivity in its various modes and with its various ethical and political implications: a deconstructive examination of subjectivity as constituted *in*, and significantly not *by*, language, culture, history, memory, the imagination, and of course the unconscious. Self-reflexivity in Resnais will be demonstrated as equating to a conscious figuring of *différance*, Derrida's concept of meaning as produced by a process of differing and potentially infinite deferral.

First, a brief look at the extreme fragmentation and apparent breakdown of subjectivity evident in Resnais' first three fictional features (1959-1963) will reveal these film texts as reflecting, or rather *pre-figuring*, the radical anti-subjectivism which characterised French (post)structuralist thought of the mid to late sixties in works like Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Roland Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author', and particularly Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967), notorious for the phrase: *il n'y a pas de hors texte* ('there is no outside the text').² I shall come back to this phrase in more detail presently. Secondly, I argue that Derrida's works in particular (like Resnais' film-texts), far from the signalling the death of the subject, equate to a redrawing of the boundaries of subjectivity. The subject,

if indeed it ever was crucified on the cross of poststructuralist linguisticism, can be seen to rise again, albeit in a *différente* (different, differing, and deferred) form. Moreover, in Resnais, the 'ethical turn' resulting from a reconstruction of subjectivity within a poststructuralist paradigm, takes place not three days after, but in the same moment as its linguistic counterpart.

One observes a very evident breakdown of subjectivity within Resnais' early fiction work. This is clear right from the opening frames of his first feature-length film, *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), scripted by new novelist Marguerite Duras.³ A fade from black opens onto a series of haunting, stunningly beautiful close-ups of what gradually reveal themselves to be the entwined yet almost disembodied limbs and torsos of two lovers. Arms, legs, hands enfold and embrace, grasp and caress. At first the bodies appear to be covered in a thick, shimmering powder which the film's title compels to be read – or 'intuited' may be a better word here – as radio-active atomic dust.

Fragmented subjectivity is thus firstly expressed through the fragmentation of the body – to such an extent that these bodies do not immediately signify as human, as potential subjects, at all. Moreover, the de-subjectivised representation of the body is accentuated by the absence of the physical index of identity: the face and eyes, the 'mirror to the soul'. Secondly, the initially ambiguous nature of the filmic image is combined with an elliptical discontinuous editing style which was already a structural feature of Resnais' work: in *Hiroshima* there are barely half a dozen straight cuts on movement in the entire film. Iconography and montage combine and conspire to interrogate the relationship between sign and thing, constituting the image as signifier rather than referent; as deferred representation rather than immediate presence.

Moreover, Resnais' haunting images are overlaid with equally strange, haunting music which further opens the text, potentially releasing a multiplicity of signification, unintended-

ed or unconscious meanings, recalling the workings of the Derridean *trace*:

each element is constituted from the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This [signifying] chain, this fabric, is the text which is only ever produced in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither in the elements nor in the system, is ever anywhere simply present or absent. There is only ever, wherever one turns, differences and traces of traces.⁴

The music and 'semiotic' (in the Kristevan sense) musicality of the actors' voices combined with the bodily presence/absence of the image figure a sensual grounding of consciousness, a kind of Barthesian *jouissance* which takes the spectator beyond or back before the Logos, as well as signifying also the persistence of the life force going through and beyond the nuclear holocaust. Dialogues, too, as well as being elliptical, musical, and incantatory are disjunctive, and marked by internal contradiction: *Tu me tues, tu me fais du bien* ('You kill me, you're so good for me'). Similarly, the first two lines, immediately followed by concrete documentary footage of Hiroshima's hospital and war museum, express almost in a nutshell the working of *différance*:

Lui: Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima, rien (He: You saw nothing in Hiroshima, nothing).

Elle: J'ai tout vu, tout (She: I saw everything. Everything).

The perceptual certainty of the classical self-present humanist subject is eroded – exploded – from the very first. Seeing is not necessarily believing. Understanding is no longer simply hearing oneself speak.

The film consistently foregrounds and undermines the coherence of voice-over narrative and image, of linguistic and iconic signifier. To cite but one example, disturbing, painful images of mutilated victims of the Hiroshima bombing are rendered all the more poignant by the paradoxically optimistic note of the voice-over which proclaims: *Dès lequinzième jour, Hiroshima commençait à se recouvrir de fleurs. Partout, ce n'était que glaieuls et bleuets et belles-*

de-jour, qui renaissaient descendres avec une vigueur jusque-là inconnue chez les fleurs ('from the 15th day Hiroshima began once more, to be covered in flowers. A mass of gladioli and cornflowers and morning glories, reborn from the ashes, blooming with an extraordinary and unprecedented vitality').

Another way in which Rensais' mobilisation of film language can be seen as deconstructing the myth of self-presence lies in the use of the black screen: notably the fade from black, mentioned above as separating the opening credits and first sequence, and the black background which frames and almost threatens to engulf shots of the lovers' bodies. The technique, repeated a number of times throughout the film and at its conclusion, conveys a sense of images arising out of and finally returning to some pre-conscious state or mysterious other dimension. The realism and self-present evidence of the image are undermined in favour of a vision of reality as itself the product of an eerie, lyrical kind of dreamwork. In the context of the film as a whole, the black screen can thus be read as figuring aporia, gaps in consciousness, the workings of *différance*.

In the text *Khôra*, Derrida re-reads Plato's concept of originary space, the great void filled by sensible things, as being analogous to *différance*: 'The undeconstructibility of *khôra* arises from her being the very spacing of deconstruction'; 'the relation of the interval or the spacing to what is lodged in it to be received in it'.⁵ In *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, John Caputo picks up on the analogy: 'Différance, like *khôra*, is a great receptacle upon which every constituted trace or mark is imprinted, older, prior, preoriginary'.⁶ With respect to film in general and to this film in particular, as we have seen, the analogy between *khôra* and the pre-originary black screen – 'the great receptacle upon which every constituted trace or mark is imprinted' – is compelling.

Moreover, the concept of *khôra* as being 'the very spacing of deconstruction', 'the relation of the interval or the spacing to what is lodged in it to be received in it' points irresistibly to the role of montage in film. Having started his film-

making career as an editor, Resnais has always privileged montage as a major if not *the* major factor in filmic signification. Moreover, his editing practice has been consistently self-reflexive in emphasising fragmentation rather than continuity, promoting an uneasy questioning rather than passive entertainment, participating in what Walter Benjamin might have described as 'an aesthetics of shock'. I would argue that in *Hiroshima*, as in *Last Year in Marienbad* and *Muriel*, discontinuous, elliptical, often subjective montage does indeed take on a *khôric* quality, through contextualisation with the poetic strangeness of the filmic image, dialogues, and music. Conversely, classical montage can be seen as serving to camouflage, fill in, and smooth over spacings perceived as gaps, gaps perceived as lack. The principle role of continuity editing could thus be expressed as blocking out the potentially anxiety-provoking experience of *khôraldifférance*.

Différance implies the inaccessibility of objective truth. As early as 1955, more than a decade before Derrida formulates the term, Resnais expresses this (on making his landmark documentary evocation of the Nazi death camps, *Nuit et brouillard*) as *l'impossibilité de documenter* ('the impossibility of documenting'). In *Hiroshima*, too, his casting doubt on the possibility of arriving at a single Historical Truth – *j'ai tout vultu n'as rien vu* – and his questioning the limits of the process whereby personal *histoire* is transformed into the public *Histoire*, reflect the poststructuralist and postmodern view of the real.⁷ There can be no pre-existing objective reality, no 'Truth' unmediated by perception, and no perception that is not itself filtered through language and cultural experience in a particular historical context. We can have no direct access to objective reality, and thus no way to document it objectively.

It is impossible to document because, as Derrida argues subsequently, 'presence is always already the effect of the play of traces, of representations'.⁸ Resnais is far ahead of his time in realising the impossible documentary – in realising the impossibility of making 'true and objective' document-

aries, then proceeding to make them by 'realising' films which participate in a post-representational aesthetic. The year Resnais filmed *Hiroshima mon amour* saw the advent of *cinéma vérité* or direct cinema. The hospital sequence where, one after another, weary patients turn away from the tracking camera's prying, prowling gaze, can be seen as a reflexion on the potentially invasive, distorting, and deceptive nature of documentary; of *cinéma vérité* in particular, and indeed of filmic realism in general. The sequence is eloquent testimony to the manner in which observation or framing modifies the nature of the subject, a phenomenon not recognised by film theory until after 1968.⁹ This Heisenbergian problematic is further highlighted by the contradictory dialogue – *Tu n'as pas vu d'hôpital à Hiroshima ... tu n'as rien vu, rien* – which repeatedly casts doubt on the realism both of present day documentary and archival footage and of historical reconstructions which are proffered – *faute d'autre chose* ('for want of anything else') – in place of an infinitely elusive, 'deferred' historical reality. The image, like the linguistic signifier, is revealed to be subject to the unsettling workings of the *trace*.

It has been argued above that the fragmentation of subjectivity in *Hiroshima mon amour* begins with the lovers' dislocated, faceless bodies. If the face is the physical defining index of individuality in the classical humanist subject, then the proper name is its linguistic equivalent. In both *Hiroshima* and Resnais' next film, *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year in Marienbad*), it is no coincidence that the main characters are nameless. This second feature, scripted by new novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, goes even further in its exploration of radical textuality. Characters are presented, not so much as people, but as puppet-like textual constructions – *effets de personnage* ('character effects') in Robbe-Grillet's terminology. In their apparent lack of agency, such 'character effects' bear an uncanny resemblance to game pieces; dominoes, matchsticks, chess pieces, and playing cards proliferate throughout the film.

The film's narrative economy is based on the almost simultaneous creation and subversion of self-present coherence as found in classical linear narrative. On a filmic level, one way Resnais achieves this is by the self-reflexive playing off against one another of cinematic codes: once again (as in *Hiroshima*) disrupting the normally smooth relationship between linguistic and iconic signifier. The image continually undermines the narrator X's attempts at reconstructing past experience through memory. Possibly the most striking example is given by the two parallel scenes in which the 'heroine', A, flees in terror from an invisible assailant in express contradiction to the narrator's assurances: *Non! Ce n'était pas de force!* ('No! It wasn't by force!'). (In a second, similar scene this is expressed cinematically in Resnais' famous *travelling blanc* – an overexposed 'white tracking shot' – which replaces Robbe-Grillet's originally intended rape scene.) The film consistently undermines the male subject's attempt to assume control of the enunciation, to control and possess the woman as object of desire through the power of the gaze.¹⁰ Spectatorial identification with the position of X is thus rendered problematic (due to his 'enunciative impotence') and discursive power revealed as lying outside the diegetic world.

The other aspect of this process is Resnais' subversive use of continuity editing, reminiscent of the early surrealist masterpiece *Chien Andalou* (1929) in which the dislocation of subjectivity is also expressed through the conscious refusal of a global signified. As in Buñuel's and Dalí's film, the narrative coherence of the conventional reverse-shot sequence is repeatedly parodied/subverted by introducing into it elements of spatio-temporal disruption. Perfect eyeline matches and cuts on movement are used to link shots in markedly different space-time settings, producing a cinematic equivalent of Chomsky's famous phrase 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'.¹¹ For example, a brightly lit shot of X (back to camera) on the point of firing at a target in the shooting gallery cuts suddenly to a long shot of A approaching face-on from the end of a markedly different, sombrely lit hall, while the soundtrack retains the faint echo

of the gunshot. In another scene, which begins in one of the hotel's endless corridors, a close-up of the 'lovers' (looking screen-left as an unknown figure approaches) cuts abruptly to a reverse shot of the two in the hotel gardens at what is presumably a moment in the past, since A is now dressed quite differently.

The story, as in much of Robbe-Grillet's work, is a puzzle without a solution. The end result is that, on the one hand, external, objective reality disappears to the extent that all is subjective. The world is a figment of the subject's imagination. On the other hand, the subject itself seems to disappear as consciousness is construed as a creation or captive side-effect of language, of the 'infinitely open-ended play of signifiers or traces' to use Derrida's term.¹² But also – and this is yet another of the multiple paradoxes that are *Marienbad* – the iconic nature of the image insists on the presence of the object, in all its minute, baroque detail. Resnais, I think, captures this paradox perfectly, by his subversive or 'playful' use of cinematic codes, as mentioned above, infirming the notion of presence through the very presence of the camera.

In *Marienbad* – and again this is characteristic of Robbe-Grillet – there is quite literally 'no outside the text'. The paradoxical view of language as both prison-house and site of infinite unmasterable dissemination (*différance* again) is literalised in the film's geography, in the endless mirrored hallways and galleries of the composite chateau/hotel, through which the narrator 'once again, advances', through its maze-like corridors and garden in which both he and his reluctant mistress appear to be always already lost forever. As so many others have commented, *Marienbad* is a documentary on the mind. (The title clearly evokes the setting of Lacan's landmark seminar.) Of course, a question immediately arises here concerning the identity of the documentary maker. The mastermind. In other words, the author. But that is another story.

In *Muriel ou Le temps d'un retour*, which also stars Delphine Seyrig, it seems almost as if the other-worldly

textual constructions of *Marienbad* have turned up a decade or so later, this time in the mundane context of contemporary provincial France. It is also significant that the incursion into pure textuality represented by *Marienbad* remains singular. In *Muriel*, Resnais returns to a highly political subject, namely France's inability to come to terms with the Algerian crisis. As in *Hiroshima*, historical and personal trauma – and the two are revealed to be 'intimately' connected – are shown to result in extreme fragmentation, repression, displacement, loss of memory or the fabrication of false memories. In marked contrast to Resnais' previous work, *Muriel* contains but one fluid, continuous tracking shot and not a single visual flashback. As in *Marienbad*, however, character psychology is superficial, contradictory, opaque. Although, whereas in *Marienbad* Robbe-Grillet's 'character effects' were intended to be read as having no existence 'outside the text', in *Muriel* characters appear rather as cut off from their past(s), from their 'subterranean biographies'.¹³ Particularly evocative of this estrangement is a sequence near the beginning of the film, showing three of the main characters walking through the city streets. Though they are shown as moving together with apparent purpose, the film's framing and editing suddenly cut each character off from the others in a series of nine rapidly alternating close-ups in which each appears to advance blindly toward camera and fate – 'in the dark', as it were: silent, isolated, alone.

The splintering of subjectivity and self-estrangement are dispersed through *mise en scène*, acting style, dialogue, music, décor and geographical setting, as well as expressed cinematically, through discontinuous cubist-inspired montage and unconventional use of shot scale. The scene is 'unset(tled)' from the opening sequence, composed almost entirely of some twenty-six totally discontinuous close-ups (of fragmented, 'mutilated' body parts, clothing, furniture and everyday objects) lasting barely thirty seconds in total. Moreover, the opening credits: names appearing randomly, without 'rhyme or reason', from the darkness of an abyssal (khôric) black screen to the eerie strains of Hans Werner Henze's disturbing music score, anticipate the dislocated

subjectivity which will drive the formal structure of the film as a whole.

The main character is an antique dealer working from home. Thus her living space is constantly broken up, displaced as furniture is continually bought and sold. As her stepson Bernard (Jean-Baptiste Thierrée) remarks: *On ne sait jamais quand on se reveille, si c'est dans du Second Empire ou dans du rustique normand* ('you never know if you're going to wake up in the Second Empire or rustic Normandy'). As in Resnais' previous work, the fragmentation of subjectivity extends to the representation of geographical setting and spatio-temporal relationships. Scenes are frequently intercut with spatio-temporally dislocated shots of the town: night and day collide like shards of reality, present and past struggling in a vain attempt to penetrate consciousness. In *Muriel*, as a result of historical trauma (the destruction of WW II bombing and subsequent rebuilding), the town itself is fragmented beyond recognition: characters lose their way, are no longer able to recognise the centre. It is not that the centre has ceased to exist, simply that people – a considerable percentage of the film's viewers and critics included! – no longer recognise it. The centre is no longer where the subject thinks it is. Everywhere and nowhere one might say. A kaleidoscopic shot of Bernard is aptly described by Celia Britton as a *mise en abyme* of the film as a whole, in evoking the explosive, centrifugal dispersal of the unrepresentable centre which is both the torture of Muriel and the bombing of Bologne barely twenty years previous.¹⁴ If *Marienbad* is a surrealist film, *Muriel* is perhaps best described in terms of cubism. As France's most celebrated film-buff archivist Henri Langlois once remarked: '*Muriel*, c'est Braque'.

From *Hiroshima* (anticipated by *Nuit et Brouillard*) to *Muriel*, global conflict, nuclear holocaust, and colonial war double the linguistic revolution in exploding the myths of national unity and individual self-presence. The characters' struggle with external reality reflects inner loss: of memory, of self. It is characteristic of Resnais that in *Marienbad* he

remakes ('defers') Robbe-Grillet's sado-masochistic script as an allegory of exactly this: loss of memory as loss of self. The experience of *différance*, the irreducible alterity of the world and 'the self's radical ex-centricity to itself' in Freudian/Lacanian terms, is both the product and productive of deep seated anxiety and historical event alike.¹⁵ This is literalised in the madness of *Hiroshima's* heroine and echoed in the neurotic indecision of Hélène and desperate action of Bernard in *Muriel* scripted by camp survivor (and scriptwriter of *Nuit et brouillard*) Jean Cayrol.

Personal and historical trauma lead to loss of memory and loss of self. But the process at work here is, crucially, one of decentring and displacement, not one of *total* absence and death. Deconstruction does not equal destruction. *Au contraire*. In Resnais, as in Derrida, the subject may be fragmented, decentred, but it is not destroyed. Spatio-temporal fragmentation participates in a kind of dialectic. As well as figuring *différance*, self-reflexivity is employed as a Brechtian distancing device, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, with its intended ethico-political implications. As in Godard – though Resnais was 'making films politically' long before Godard's formula – Resnais' 'dialectical' film-style in turn instinctively expresses a dialectic of the subject as both 'constituted and constituting' which was only some years later articulated by Lacan.¹⁶

This clearly has major ethico-political implications. Resnais' self-reflexive dialectic approach anticipates poststructuralism's anti-essentialist exposure of the constructedness of socio-cultures and the myth of self-presence, but significantly this is achieved without falling into the anti-subjectivist trap of seeing the subject as a mere effect of language. I am arguing here that Derrida's position, originally construed as violently anti-subjectivist (and perhaps for a brief period it was), is essentially the same. The 'true' meaning of the phrase *il n'y a pas de hors texte*, if such a thing exists, is expressed by John Caputo in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*:

We are always and already, on Derrida's telling, embedded in various networks – social, historical, linguistic, political,

sexual networks (the list goes on nowadays to include electronic networks, worldwide webs) – various horizons or presuppositions, which is what Derrida means by the ‘general text’ or ‘archi-text’ or ‘textuality’ or, here, just ‘text’.

It is not that ‘referents’ and ‘objectivity’ do not exist, ‘but that the referent and objectivity are not what they pass themselves off to be, a pure transcendental signified’:

Derrida is not trying to destroy texts or the ability to read texts or turn everything – the great Greeks, Plato and Aristotle, mathematical physics and the law of gravity included – into fiction, or to deny the distinction between reality and fiction; he is trying, rather, to disrupt the distinction between reality and fiction; he is trying, rather, to disrupt ‘the tranquil assurance that leaps over the text toward its presumed content, in the direction of the pure signified’ *il n’y a pas de hors texte* means: there is no reference without difference, that is, without recourse to the differential systems – be they literary or mathematical – we have at our disposal.¹⁷

Clearly, then, Derrida does not deny the existence of ‘principles’ and ‘truth’. He merely demands that our truths and principles be reinscribed within the ‘an-arche of *différance*’, attaching to them a co-efficient of contingency. The same process we have seen to be ‘always already’ at work in Resnais. In a poststructuralist paradigm, ethics can no longer be justified by recourse to moral absolutes or knowledge. In deconstruction, responsibility to the other (or ethics) ‘must not follow knowledge, must not flow from knowledge like consequences or effects’: ‘These responsibilities ... are heterogenous to the formalizable order of knowledge’.¹⁸

Yet, the very absence of universal truth, justice, and so on, far from doing away with ethical questions, ultimately makes these *the* central questions (as attested by the increasingly ethical focus of Derrida’s work over the last two decades) and also opens the way for a deconstructive, non-normative ethics achievable through an acceptance of the wholly other. An acceptance which is itself premised on a recognition of that ‘same alterity’ seen to be the structuring principle of the self

as subject. Resnais' impossible documentary is uncannily evocative of Derrida's non-teleological approach to history and the impossible ethics of deconstruction.¹⁹ Once again, Caputo puts it in a nutshell: deconstruction 'always inhabits the distance between something impossible, justice or the gift, say, of which we dream, and all the existing actualities and foreseeable possibilities, with which we are more or less discontent'.²⁰

It is because justice and the gift are impossible, unattainable that they are so supremely important. Likewise, ethics or morality, in Resnais' work, having passed through impossibility, equates to what one might term a 'deconstructive inventionalism'. The dialectic of the subject (conceived as both constituted and constituting) enables a move through and beyond essentialism and conventionalism to invention. The subject is seen, not as an autonomous, totally self-willing agent or as a mere construct of language and culture, but as continually inventing and re-inventing itself in and through language. This stance notably enables Resnais to bypass Godard's structuralist Marxist phase grounded in Althusserian inter-pellation which sees the subject as constructed by language/discourse, thus ultimately by ideology/culture.

To reiterate: it is my contention that ethics in Resnais' early work, having passed through impossibility, equates to a 'deconstructive inventionalism' based on an underlying belief in justice and on emotional sincerity in place of blind obedience to social codes. Like the heroine of *Hiroshima mon amour*, who declares 'I'm of doubtful morals . . . that is, I'm doubtful of other people's morals', in Resnais and Derrida there is a deep mistrust of morality imposed by others, an instinctive questioning of value systems, including one's own. Thus Derrida's distinction between justice and the law: 'Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice'.²¹ The law as dominant discourses, other people's morality, must always be questioned, reviewed, revised, re-invented – that is, deconstructed – in the name of an impossible yet supremely

necessary, undeconstructible justice. Historical injustice must, somehow, be documented: nuclear holocaust, the reification of indigenous cultures (*Les statues meurent aussi* 1953), the tortured victims of the Nazi death camps and those of France's own colonies. (*Nuit et brouillard* and *Muriel* comment on and document the repression in France's national consciousness of its shame over Algeria.) As *Hiroshima's* nameless heroine warns, a voice must somehow be raised 'against inequality imposed as law by certain peoples against other peoples, against inequality imposed as law by certain races against other races, against inequality imposed as law by certain classes against other classes'.

Those attentive and sensitive to the political message of Resnais' work have not hesitated to call him a humanist. Yet – and it is hardly surprising given the innovative formal complexity of his work and the radical questioning of subjectivity which it implies – Resnais, like Derrida, has just as frequently been accused of empty formalism. As to the second charge, Pauline Kael's article on Resnais' 1977 film *Providence* is exemplary:

When you go to an Alain Resnais film, you take it for granted that the only instinct that will come into play is his film instinct – his grasp of technique. Alone among major-name directors, Resnais has little grasp of character or subject; he's an innovator who hasn't got a use for his innovations. Most of the giants of film haven't been able to find the form for everything they've got in their heads; Resnais seems to have nothing but form in his ... And when form takes over and becomes an obsession, it is not just that everything else is absent – everything else is being denied.²²

The article is entitled *Werewolf, Mon Amour*. Undoubtedly, Ms Kael must have been among those who 'saw nothing in *Hiroshima*'.

But this is half the point in Resnais. His films go so far in leaving the ultimate interpretation up to the spectator that the risks of being misread are of course greatly multiplied. The thematic content is expressed with such subtlety – through formal structure precisely – that its ethico-political implicat-

ions may not be immediately, or ever, felt. Surely though, this is a risk worth taking? Resnais has frequently expressed his views on the construction of spectatorial subjectivity:

I try to put the spectator in a critical frame of mind, even if the impact is not immediately felt. My aim is to put the spectator into such a state of mind that a week, six months, or a year later, faced with a problem, he/she is prevented from cheating, forced to react freely ... People need to be shaken out of their certainty, woken up, led to question the intangibility of conventional values.²³

Similarly, when asked whether he considered himself an influential thinker (*un maître à penser*), Resnais replied with characteristic modesty in the negative, adding however that he would be happy to be considered as someone whose work inspired *others* to think (*quelqu'un dont les films font penser*).

The promotion of active spectatorship, so crucial to Resnais' film practice, is more than anything an affirmation, a mark of faith in and respect for the subjectivity of the other. As I hope to have demonstrated from the very brief extracts presented in this article, subjectivity in Resnais is dislocated, fragmented, dispersed at the level of content/character, and must be reconstructed by the spectator.²⁴ Almost all Resnais' films could be described as puzzles, though they contain no simple or monolithic 'solutions'. *Marienbad* – where the story literally does not exist except as the viewer constructs it and in which the pieces (are there too many or too few?) seem to come from a number of different puzzles – is, of course, the classic example. The central locus of subjectivity in Resnais (as in Derrida) is not absent but displaced. It is not to be found within, in the fictional world or documentary image, but must be 'reconstructed' in the spectator. Though it must also be stressed that 'reconstruction' here clearly does *not* imply any notion of complete and unproblematic mastery or closure, since the processes at work are inherently resistant to any such mastery, any such closure. To rephrase, then: in Resnais, the central locus of subjectivity, must be kaleidoscopically – even 'collido-scopically' – re-

constructed, in that 'centreless centre' of subjectivity which is the spectator; in that 'wholly other' to whom the image is addressed in a deconstructive and supremely ethical gesture of *affirmation, responsabilité, engagement* ('affirmation, responsibility, and commitment') born not of knowledge but of faith.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1953: *Les statues meurent aussi*. text Chris Marker
 1955: *Nuit et brouillard*. scr. Jean Cayrol
 1958: *Le Chant du Styryène*. scr. Raymond Queneau
 1959: *Hiroshima mon amour*. scr. Marguerite Duras
 1961: *L'année dernière à Marienbad*. scr. Alain Robbe-Grillet
 1963: *Muriel ou Le temps d'un retour*. scr. Jean Cayrol
 1976: *Providence*. scr. David Mercer.

NOTES

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.3. Henceforth citations of Derrida's work will include a reference for the original French edition, followed by a reference for the English translation, except where the translation is my own.
- 2 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in his *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970); Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), pp.226-7 [*Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp.157-8].
- 3 It is significant that for almost all his work, particularly pre-1968, Resnais has chosen as scriptwriters literary authors already renowned for their innovative questioning of narrativity and subjectivity, including Duras, of course, Alain Robbe-Grillet (*Marienbad*, 1961), Jean Cayrol (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1955; *Muriel ou Le temps d'un retour*, 1963), and Raymond Queneau (*Le Chant du Styryène*, 1958).
- 4 Jacques Derrida and Henri Ronsse, *Positions; entretiens avec Henri Ronsse, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Louis Houdebine, Guy Scarpetta* (Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972), p.38. (My translation. Henceforth all unreferenced translations are my own.)

- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Khôra* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), pp.104; 92 [*On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 80; 125].
- 6 John Caputo [and Jacques Derrida], *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p.97.
- 7 Nancy Lane, 'The Subject in/of History: *Hiroshima mon amour*', in *Literature and Film in the Historical Dimension*, ed. D. Simons John (Gainesville, Florida University Press, 1994), pp.89-100.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), p.58 [*Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p.52].
- 9 'The basic deception of direct cinema is really its claim to transcribe truly the truth of life, to begin the position of witness in relation to that truth so that the film simply records objects and events mechanically. In reality the very fact of filming is of course already a productive intervention which modifies and transforms the material recorded. From the moment the camera intervenes a form of manipulation begins', J. L. Comolli, 'Cahiers du cinéma 209' (1969), as quoted in Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.158.
- 10 For a psychoanalytical reading of enunciative practice in *Marienbad*, see Diane Shoos, 'Sexual Difference and Enunciation: Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*', *Literature and Psychology* 34.4 (1988), pp.1-15.
- 11 As quoted in Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), p.88.
- 12 *De la grammatologie*, p.42-108 [*Of Grammatology*, pp.27-73].
- 13 I refer here to Resnais' practice of having his scriptwriters create detailed biographical charts for all main characters. Duras first referred to them as *biographies souterraines* because only very few details ever filtered up as far as the 'surface' of the narrative.
- 14 Celia Britton, 'Broken Images in Resnais's *Muriel*', *French Cultural Studies* 1 (1990), p.40.
- 15 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (London: Tavistock, 1977), p.171.
- 16 *Écrits*, p.315.

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- 17 *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, pp.77-8.
 - 18 Jacques Derrida, *Points de suspension: entretiens*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1992), p.359 [*Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.370].
 - 19 See P. Baker, *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), chapter 6.
 - 20 *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p.70.
 - 21 *Points de suspension*, pp.14-5 [*Points...*, p.35].
 - 22 *New Yorker*, 31 January 1977, as quoted in James Monaco, *Alain Resnais* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.5.
 - 23 As quoted in B. Pingaud, *Alain Resnais* (Lyon: Société d'études, recherches et de documentation cinématographiques, 1962), p.44.
 - 24 In this respect Resnais' work relates closely to Barthes' theorisation of the 'writerly text' which should be valued 'because the goal of literary work ... is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text', Roland Barthes [and Honoré de Balzac], *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p.4.