

Curiouser and Curiouser: The Films of Alain Resnais



Throughout July, BFI Southbank celebrates **Alain Resnais**, one of France's most distinguished directors, with a complete retrospective of his work to date. With a career that has spanned over 60 years, his body of work has moved from groundbreaking, short documentaries during the 1940s and 50s, to the stylish and stunning **Last Year in Marienbad** (1961) – a landmark in French cinema - and to his more recent period of 'theatricality', starting with **Mélo** (1986). *Marienbad* will be screening in an Extended Run and released nationwide by **BFI Distribution**. The season concludes with the more musical **Not on the Lips** (*Pas sur la bouche*, 2003) and **Private Fears in Public Places** (*Coeurs*, 2006), adapted from a play by **Alan Ayckbourn**, and **Wild Grass** (*Les Herbes folles*, 2009), which demonstrates that even at the age of 87 Resnais continues to challenge audience perceptions.

Although Alain Resnais began his feature film career at the same time as Goddard and Truffaut and shared some similarities in approach and style, he was not deemed a member of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Rather, his peers included **Agnes Varda** and **Chris Marker** who all formed part of the *Rive Gauche* or Left Bank cinema movement. While some have suggested he is not an intellectual director he is a filmmaker of great intelligence producing films which are easy to understand and entice the viewer. Making an average of one film every three years, Resnais evinces an enduring curiosity about the entire process of filmmaking, from subject matter via performance and editing through to the moment when an audience encounters the finished film.

He began his career with short documentaries: his first short **Van Gough** (1948) was followed by **Guernica** (1950) and **Les statues meurent aussi** (1953) – a collaboration with **Chris Marker** which was banned in France for its focus on how colonialism all but destroyed African Art. Further projects included the subject matter of Nazi death camps or the Bibliothèque Nationale, featuring his co-workers **Agnès Varda** and **Maurice Jarre**. The breathtaking **Hiroshima mon amour** (1959) would be his first feature, also examining the effects of World War II, and the aftermath of recent wars also provided a backdrop to **Muriel** (*Muriel, ou le temps d'un retour*, 1963) and **The War is Over** (*La Guerre est finie*, 1966), starring **Yves Montand**.

By the 1970s Resnais embarked on a number of collaborations with British playwrights: **David Mercer** for **Providence** (1977) and, later, **Smoking / No Smoking** (1993) as well as *Private Fears in Public Places* with Alan Ayckbourn. He also diversified with a number of social themes

and personal interests, such as the theories of Henri Laborit in **My American Uncle** (*Mon oncle d'Amerique*, 1980), comic books for **I Want to Go Home** (1989) and musicals in **Same Old Song** (*On connaît la chanson*, 1997). During this latter period he has also collaborated with the same actors; **Fanny Ardant** and **Sabine Azéma** both star in **Life is a Bed of Roses** (*La vie est un roman*, 1983), with Azéma having appeared in almost all of his films since, with the inclusion of his latest film, *Vous n'avez encore rien vu*, which wrapped in March 2011.

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Programme:

Key Scholars in Film Studies: Emma Wilson on Resnais' Women

For the sixth in our lecture series co-presented with Kings College, we welcome Emma Wilson, Professor of French Literature and the Visual Arts at the University of Cambridge and Course Director of the MPhil in Screen Media and Cultures. A leading scholar of contemporary French film, literature and theory, she is the author of *Alain Resnais* (2006), with other publications on film including *Cinema's Missing Children* (2003), *Atom Egoyan* (2009), and *Love, Mortality and the Moving Image* (forthcoming). Resnais' filming of women, in particular in his collaboration with stage actresses Emmanuelleiva in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Delphine Seyrig in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), opens questions about consent, the body, and performance. Drawing on recent work on the senses and cinema, the lecture considers how Resnais' attention to the living flesh and skin of Riva and Seyrig, to gestures, to material surfaces and substances, deepens his ethical engagement with eroticism, vulnerability, and the love relation.

Tue 19 July 18:10 NFT3 Tickets £5



Extended Run & National Release: Last Year in Marienbad *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*

Defining the words 'art film' for a generation, *Marienbad* is every bit as extraordinary today as when it was premiered in Venice, 50 years ago next month. The plot is banal and, as in *Hiroshima*, the characters have no names. X (Albertazzi) pursues A (Seyrig) through the endless corridors of a luxury hotel, trying to persuade her that they met last year, while M (Pitoëff), who may be A's husband, looks on. But, in the eternal present of Robbe-Grillet's screenplay, drenched in the organ score by Francis Seyrig (brother of Delphine), there can be no 'last year' (and probably no future either). Don't miss the chance to see this timeless masterpiece on the big screen, for which the inky blacks and flaring whites of Sacha Vierny's cinematography were made. There is, quite simply, no other movie like it.

France-Italy 1961. Dir Alain Resnais. With Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi 94min Digital EST U

A BFI release

Fri 8 – Sun 31 July (continues in August)

Shorts 1948-1953

Van Gogh (1948, 20min); *Guernica* (1950, 13min); *Gauguin* (1950, 11min); *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953, 30min). EST

Resnais' early documentaries reveal a filmmaker already breaking with cinematic convention. In *Van Gogh*, the camera prowls through the painter's claustrophobic universe much as it does through *Marienbad's* corridors. In *Guernica*, Picasso's monumental canvas is fragmented into a series of themes and moments. And *Les statues meurent aussi*, made in collaboration with Chris Marker, was long banned in France for its focus on how colonialism all but destroyed African art.

Sun 10 July 18:20 NFT2, Fri 15 July 20:40 NFT2

Shorts 1955-1958

Nuit et brouillard (*Night and Fog*, 1955, 30min); *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956, 22min); *Le mystère de l'atelier quinze* (1957; 18min); *Le chant du Styrene* (1958, 19min). EST

Night and Fog, Resnais' film about the Nazi death camps, remains unequalled. Set to a score by regular Brecht collaborator Hanns Eisler, it is calm, elegant and utterly devastating for the way it reveals the workings of everyday evil (while, despite being officially commissioned, not sparing France's collaboration). Also showing: *Toute la mémoire du monde*, an intriguing documentary about the Bibliothèque Nationale, on which Resnais's co-workers included Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, Georges Delerue and Maurice Jarre. Now there's a team.

Wed 20 July 20:45 NFT2, Sat 23 July 16:10 NFT2

Hiroshima mon amour

France-Japan 1959. With Emmanuelle Riva, Eiji Okada, Bernard Fresson. 91min. EST. PG

No comma in that title, just two nouns, 'Hiroshima' and 'love' - irreconcilable, but then that's the point. A French actress (Riva) and a Japanese man (Okada) spend the night together before she returns to Paris. The dialogue is more like voice-over and the story a complex intermingling of what is, was, might have been and might be, paralleling Hiroshima's own attempt to forget the unforgettable and rebuild. The result is a deceptively simple film made up of intricately composed shots and gestures.

Fri 1 July 20:50 NFT1, Sat 2 July 18:30 NFT1, Thu 7 July 21:00 NFT1

Muriel *Muriel, ou le temps d'un retour*

France-Italy 1963. With Delphine Seyrig, Jean-Pierre Kérien, Jean-Baptiste Thierrée 116min. EST. 12A

As if abjuring the stateliness of *Marienbad*, Resnais' third feature begins with a blizzard of short shots and a wildly swinging camera. At the centre is Bernard (Thierée), an ex-soldier traumatised by the Algerian war. But Resnais abandons chronology and conventional narrative, distancing us from Bernard, his mother (Seyrig), her lover (Kerien) and the other characters, whose everyday tragedies play out as a kind of black farce against the backdrop of another town (here Boulogne) undergoing postwar reconstruction.

Sat 2 July 16:00 NFT1, Sun 3 July 17:20 NFT1, Wed 13 July 18:10 NFT1

The War Is Over *La Guerre est finie*

France-Sweden 1966. With Yves Montand, Ingrid Thulin, Geneviève Bujold. 122min. EST. 15

Resnais plays a finely nuanced script by Jorge Semprun fairly straight in this powerful portrait of a Spanish political activist still on the run almost 30 years after the end of the Civil War. The younger generation want bombs, while the elderly leftist exiles cling to the belief that the Spanish working class will soon rise against Franco. Montand is superb as Diego (aka Fernando, Rafael, Carlos or Domingo), adrift in a world that has passed him by.

Sat 2 July 20:20 NFT3, Fri 8 July 18:00 NFT3

Je t'aime, je t'aime

France 1968. With Claude Rich, Olga Georges-Picot. 94min. EST

Resnais originally asked Chris Marker for a script, but Marker referred him to Jacques Sternberg who came up with the story of Claude Ridder (Rich), a failed suicide who participates in an experiment to travel back in time. Entering what looks like a giant pumpkin, Ridder revisits his life with Catrine (Picot) as it unrolls unreliably and deliriously out of sequence. Resnais's most neglected masterpiece and his definitive film about the unreliability of memory. Playing with Resnais' contribution to the compilation movie *Loin du Vietnam* (1967, c15min), about the powerlessness (and irrelevance) of the French intellectual in the face of America's war.

Sun 3 July 15:00 NFT1, Mon 11 July 20:50 NFT1

Stavisky

France-Italy 1974. With Jean-Paul Belmondo, François Périer, Anny Duperey. 117min. EST. PG

The commercial failure of *Je t'aime, je t'aime* brought a six-year break in Resnais' career, ending with this second collaboration with Semprun on a lavish, star-driven costume drama. Jewish financier Serge Alexandre, aka Stavisky (Belmondo), was a kind of French Bernard Madoff whose pyramid scheme was the talk of 1930s France. For Resnais, the interest seems to lie in the way such a human being can hide behind the shield of his public persona.

Sat 2 July 20:30 NFT1, Mon 4 July 18:20 NFT1

Providence

France-Switzerland 1977. With John Gielgud, Dirk Bogarde, David Warner, Ellen Burstyn, Elaine Stritch. 107min

Resnais' first collaboration with an English playwright (the scandalously neglected David Mercer) is an elegant, playful – indeed borderline camp – exploration of the art of creation as dying writer Clive Langham (Gielgud) imagines his final novel, which is based on the lives of his unlovely family. The dialogue sparkles and Miklos Rozsa's score grows eerily away. Above all, though, three generations of British greats – Gielgud, Bogarde and Warner – supply a bravura display of screen acting.

Fri 8 July 20:40 NFT2, Sun 10 July 15:30 NFT1

My American Uncle *Mon oncle d'Amérique*

France 1980. With Gérard Depardieu, Nicole Garcia, Roger Pierre. 126min. EST. 12A

Behaviour modification was all the rage in the 1970s, and Resnais builds his film around the behaviourist theories of Henri Laborit. But the three stories – Depardieu as a manager short on entrepreneurship; Garcia as a failed actress; and Pierre as a smug politician-turned-writer – could as easily refute as illustrate Laborit's theories. The film starts as a mock documentary but develops, via virtuoso editing, into an intriguing, emotional and often very funny film.

Sat 9 July 15:40 NFT2, Sun 17 July 20:30 NFT1

Life Is a Bed of Roses *La Vie est un roman*

France 1983. With Vittorio Gassman, Ruggero Raimondi, Sabine Azéma, Fanny Ardant. 111min. EST. 12A

Misquoting Napoleon – who said life was not a novel (and certainly not a bed of roses) – Resnais' unusually antic film is set in a chateau quite unlike Marienbad: all candyfloss and bright colours. There are three time-frames – just after WWII; the present; and an unspecified medieval past – and the subject is utopian ideas. There's even a hint of Shakespeare: the chateau is in the Arden(nes) and *As You Like It* is directly referenced.

Sat 16 July 20:45 NFT1, Thu 21 July 20:40 NFT2

Love Unto Death *L'Amour à mort*

France 1984. With Pierre Arditi, Sabine Azéma, Fanny Ardant, André Dussollier. 93min. EST. 15

Originally dismissed as 'difficult', *Love Unto Death* is blindingly simple on the emotional level at which, if you let it, it operates. Writer Jean Gruault returns to the 'Lazarus' theme (the impetus for *Muriel*) in the story of Simon (Arditi) who is pronounced dead, then somehow resurrected but never again at ease with the world. A rare chance to see this neglected masterpiece featuring the director's first full-on collaboration with subsequent regulars Azéma and Arditi.

Mon 18 July 21:00 NFT1, Wed 20 July 18:20 NFT2

Mélo

France 1986. With Sabine Azéma, Pierre Arditi, André Dussollier, Fanny Ardant. 110min. EST. PG

The first of Resnais' films to deal directly with theatricality (a red plush curtain is much in evidence), *Mélo* is based on a 1929 play about a flapper (Azéma) who cheats on her devoted husband (Arditi) with his best friend (Dussollier). Resnais takes it on its own terms but exquisitely so, with immaculate lighting and set design, traditional framing and editing (apart from two bravura semi-circular pans). Above all, he lets Azéma play it to the hilt. Delightful.

Sat 23 July 18:30 NFT2, Thu 28 July 20:40 NFT2

I Want to Go Home

France 1989. With Adolph Green, Laura Benson, Linda Lavin, Gérard Depardieu. 105min. EST. 15

After 30 years of trying, Resnais finally gets to make a movie about his beloved comic books in this picaresque tale of a cantankerous cartoonist from Cleveland, played by legendary Broadway lyricist Green (*On the Town*), who is invited to an exhibition in Paris. The result is a broad comedy based around national stereotypes with animated inserts, an over-the-top masked ball and a thoroughly sentimental ending – not to mention a script by Jules Feiffer and a score by John Kander (*Cabaret*). Yikes.

Sat 23 July 20:45 NFT2, Fri 29 July 18:20 NFT2

Smoking / No Smoking

France-Italy-Switzerland 1993. With Sabine Azéma, Pierre Arditi. 146min + 147min. EST. PG

Adapted from two plays by Alan Ayckbourn, this diptych revolves around Yorkshire schoolmaster Toby Teasdale and his wife, their friends, relations and the people who work for them. All parts are played by Azéma and Arditi, with Smoking differing from No Smoking according to whether or not Azéma has a calming cigarette (Player's, naturally). But from those two starting points, the story develops an enormous number of further variations, each signalled by the onscreen title 'Or else', as the action moves forward five days or five years. Watching the films in sequence reveals slight changes in style (continuous takes in the first, more traditional decoupage in the second) and the shifts in tone from Smoking, where the performances quickly move outwards from comedy and drama into farce and melodrama, to No Smoking, with its much darker set of variations, including a couple of deaths. What the French call a *divertissement*, albeit a very long one.

Joint ticket available £13, concs £9.75 (Members pay £1.50 less)

Smoking: Fri 22 July 17:20 NFT1, Sun 24 July 14:00 NFT3

No Smoking: Fri 22 July 20:10 NFT1, Sun 24 July 17:20 NFT3

Same Old Song *On connaît la chanson*

France-Switzerland-UK-Italy, 1997. With Pierre Arditi, Sabine Azéma, Jean-Pierre Bacri 122min EST PG

Inspired by Dennis Potter's experiments with getting actors to lip-sync to popular songs, Resnais goes for an altogether lighter touch, setting a tale of thwarted love and Parisian loneliness to French songs from six decades. His biggest hit in France, the film provides a bright, ironic and highly entertaining bridge between the style of Smoking/ No Smoking and the tone of Private Fears in Public Places.

Sat 23 July 18:10 NFT1, Tue 26 July 20:40 NFT1

Not on the Lips *Pas sur la bouche*

France-Switzerland 2003. With Sabine Azéma, Audrey Tautou, Pierre Arditi 117min EST PG

If Same Old Song was lightweight, this is almost entirely weightless: a flagrantly artificial adaptation of a 1925 operetta by André Barde about a French society hostess (Azéma) who loves to flirt, but whose spun-sugar world threatens to unravel when her American ex-husband (Wilson) shows up. A film, as André Dussollier's deadpan spoken credits put it, with sound, talking and singing...

Wed 27 July 20:40 NFT3, Sat 30 July 15:40 NFT2

Private Fears in Public Places *Coeurs*

France-Italy 2006. With Sabine Azéma, Pierre Arditi, Laura Morante, André Dussollier 125min EST 12A

Another Ayckbourn adaptation, this time the exquisitely observed portrait is of six (seven if you count Claude Rich's lascivious offscreen oldster) lonely people putting a (mostly) brave face on things in a snowbound Paris. The attention to detail is remarkable and, in a top-notch cast, Dussollier gives a masterclass in the facial and bodily gestures of great screen acting.

Thu 28 July 18:10 NFT1, Sun 31 July 20:30 NFT3

Wild Grass *Les Herbes folles*

France-Italy 2009. With André Dussollier, Sabine Azéma, Emmanuelle Devos 104min. EST. 12A

Marguerite (Azéma) has her purse stolen, Georges (Dussollier) finds it, and a series of ever more extravagant events unfolds. Discovering, at the age of 87, a whole new cinematic vocabulary – whip pans, crane shots, slow-mo, strange angles and bizarre, lawn-level tracking shots – Resnais plunges us into this off-kilter tale of the obsessions that spring up, Patricia Highsmith-like, between the cracks of the most regulated of lives.

Sat 30 July 18:10 NFT2, Sun 31 July 15:00 NFT3

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- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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