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# MONTAGE AND MEMORY: ARTICULATIONS OF LITERARY MODERNISM IN ALAIN RENAI'S EARLY FILMS

RIA BANERJEE

Perhaps the most successful films of Alain Resnais' long and distinguished career are intimately concerned with man's relationship to the buildings we inhabit. This essay will look closely at two of Resnais' early films, *Night and Fog* (1955) and *Muriel* (1963) with reference to the landmark *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), to examine the intense fascination with built materials displayed by the cinematic gaze therein. Through reiterative and close attention to bricks and walls, Resnais' camera presents a visual argument about the solidity of the flimsy structures which contain human life in what amounts to a testament of time past against the pressures of reconstruction in time present. Rather than confine these rooms and buildings to playing a small role in the *mise-en-scène*, Resnais' camera lingers on them as tacit actors in a human drama who are confined to mutely hear tragedy unfold: not single isolated instances of human cruelty but "humanity's never-ending cry"<sup>1</sup> that knits together all historical incidents of callousness and mal intent into one whole.

Resnais' films concentrate on built surfaces that look eerily alike, and thus refuse to differentiate between the felt pain of, say, a Jewish person in a concentration camp and an Algerian person rebelling against French colonization. This is often in direct contradiction to the dominant political rhetoric presented by diegetic elements of the film and belie efforts to condemn the pain of certain factions over that of others. In the editing room, stitching together montage sequences that heighten the sympathetic stillness of depicted buildings (often also accompanied by narration), Resnais interrupts conventional rhythms of the film text to refuse any simple understanding of the processes of remembrance and history-making in a continuation of the tradition of literary modernism. In drawing the following parallels, I suggest that as much as Resnais' work remains a part of the French New Wave in cinema studies, it also furthers an

interdisciplinary understanding of key issues facing literary modernists in their attempts to find new ways to express the almost-unrecognizable world they were confronted with.

### **Peopled Places: Literary Modernism and Resnais**

In traditional narratives of literature and film, landscape is deployed to provide setting and create a prevailing mood. Literary modernism significantly complicates such a positioning of space as secondary background material for the exigencies of plot. From T. S. Eliot's *Unreal City* (*The Waste Land*, 1922) to James Joyce's recreation of the Dublin of June 16, 1904 in *Ulysses* (1922), or D. H. Lawrence's small town-English landscapes (*Sons and Lovers*, 1913, *Women in Love*, 1920, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1928), the described spaces of literary modernism play a far more elaborate role in these texts. The human animal of literary modernism, surrounded by socio-economic forces that they cannot be controlled, finds the self facing what Joyce calls the ineluctable modality of the real. Instead of being the locus of narrative attention, the modernist protagonist is only a small part of a very large universe. Buffeted by Darwin, unsettled by Freud, and subject to two wars of astonishing scope, modernists strongly questioned the knowable nature of the Cartesian universe, and man's relationship to this perceived universe becomes increasingly fraught with fear and paranoia. Once believing implicitly in narratives of historical progress, the modernist subject must confront the ghastly truth of stasis as progress in the Hegelian sense is exposed for a lie.

Resnais' skepticism towards narratives of historical progress puts him in line with the literary modernists much more than other movements before or since. Like them, he is equally distrustful of nineteenth century ideals of love and truth and is rigorously employed in finding new, elliptical and allusive ways to depict the felt truths of lived experience. Moments of clarity and understanding—extremely rare in Resnais work—are further complicated by his distrust of spoken language, another typically modernist trait. Characters in Resnais' movies cannot communicate their meanings to each other, and speech is most often obfuscation; what does seem to “speak” are the objects caught in the cinematic gaze that seen together suggest insights that cannot be caught in language.

This method is similar to T. S. Eliot's conception of the objective correlative, as Linda Dittmar observes about Alain Robbe-Grillet's text for Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* (1962). Resnais' work offers a nuanced

exploration of trauma by using the method of montage to interrupt the expectation that images will be linked to each other in clearly causal relationships. Dittmar further notes, “Significations emanate ineluctably from the transaction involved in any articulation,” and these films show that “our universe is ‘there’ without design or significance,” without regard for human distinctions between “right” and “wrong” causes of war and suffering.<sup>2</sup> Focusing alternately on human protagonists and the scrubbed brick walls and regrown fields of the concentration camp, or the rebuilt urban landscape of post-War Bourgogne, these film texts use the solidity of structures to allude to the atrocities they have witnessed. Wary of monumentalizing trauma, Resnais moves from documentary features to fictional films and, particularly in *Muriel*, hollows out the concept of narrative itself. Reimagining the role of story-telling, Resnais attempts to leave behind traditional methods of conveying narrative argument in film. Instead, the films present audiences with elliptical fragments from which meaning emerges by circumventing the “transaction involved in any articulation.”<sup>3</sup> Dealing with murky historical issues such as World War II, Vichy France, and the French history of oppression in Algeria, Resnais’ films thus interrupt the ongoing reconstructive processes by which the past is distorted and relived.

### **The Burden of History: *Night and Fog***

Filmed a few short years after the Second World War, *Night and Fog* is engaged in trying to ethically respond to great tragedy without dishonesty or nostalgia. It resists articulating the history of the concentration camps as a separate aberration in human history, and immerses itself in the paths of suffering without allowing viewers any cathartic release. It self-consciously problematises both filmmaking and viewership/voyeurship through emphatic reiterations of the calm technicolour camp grounds from the present against the frozen horror of human remains from historical photographs. It performs the seductiveness of power by showing us bare life stripped and at the mercy of the cinematic gaze, and thus warns against articulations of the post-War period as a too-neat break from the past.

Literary modernism was acutely aware of the pitfalls of reconstructed memory and guarded against the complacency of imagining the past as a settled whole. In *Matter and Memory* (1896), Henri Bergson differentiates between pure recollection and the recollection-image which is created by the individual psyche’s need for an image to cling to from the inchoate materials of the past. Bergson is careful to note that a consciousness of time past is really “the intelligently coordinated movements which

represent the accumulated efforts of the past” so that memory actually “acts” our past out to us. It is useful, “not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment.”<sup>4</sup> The past is never unproblematically invoked; it never arises into the conscious mind without reference to present circumstances. Any memory is always already affected by the present and remembrances of time past are inevitably changed in their reiterations.

To circumvent false memory-images articulated in language by a consciousness that cannot help but fabricate, *Night and Fog* concentrates on space which is wordless and yet present, a reminder that does not need to engage with language in order to represent public history. For Pierre Nora, there are “*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.”<sup>5</sup> that create within everyday life a space that has largely been lost in modernity:

We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left... *lieux de mémoire* [are] where memory crystallizes and secretes itself... at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a historical continuity persists. (144)<sup>6</sup>

These increasingly sophisticated formulations of the relationship between past and present, remembrance and geographical sites are as crucially necessary to literary modernism as they are at the heart of Resnais’ artistic project. Even before the horror of the Second World War, modernist writers and thinkers powerfully changed memory from a passive principle into an active one. *Night and Fog* goes further and to the epicenter of trauma: the concentration camp.

Resnais uses archival footage and filmed sequences in a technique that has now become (in)famous for its visually-striking boldness. The scenes alternate between color shots (filmed in the present) and black-and-white archival footage, but what is perhaps most astonishing is the utter stillness they capture. There are no people anywhere, and the narrative voice wonders, “We go down those same tracks, but what are we looking for [à la recherche de quoi]?”<sup>7</sup> The French “recherche” highlights that this an attempt to find again what has been lost and the deserted landscape, unremarkable-looking buildings, barns, and grassy fields heighten a sense of vacancy and loss. The camera pans full frames of people frozen in black-and-white photographs, in mounds with arms thrown out, photographs of piles of skulls, and then passes seamlessly to the emptiness of the technicolored now. Each vertically dense photograph, often shot without

artistry by Allied troops and reimagined in filming by Resnais, “seems reminiscent of the patterns and experimentation of Western art, yet [is] also shockingly unrecognizable as it refers to actual human experience.”<sup>8</sup> No Bosch or Goya can contend with the piling of bones and hair that Resnais shows, and a small part of the fascination and repulsion of those scenes lies in the way that they hover at the edge of one’s recognition, an *unheimlich*, uncanny, uncomfortable site of memory (Wilson 2005, 106-7).<sup>9</sup>

*Night and Fog* demonstrates a focus on the surfaces of things but without an accompanying artistic conceit of uncovering an interior that is hidden from the outside: we can only show you the outer shell, the surface, the narrative voice explains. What is beneath, behind the craggy surface of the poured concrete walls, the rows of bricks or the cramped bunk beds, is unsayable. Not that the story is unknown; it is actually beyond the capacity of the medium to express. Words can separate experience into discrete episodes and hence offer catharsis and release from responsibility under the guise of an “objectivity” that is wholly false:

[I]f the passage of time has made us forgetful, perhaps it has also made us able to view the horror with some kind of objectivity. Can we say, even now, why it happened? No one will admit responsibility, no one feels ashamed. But is it appropriate to particularize responsibility? [Jean] Cayrol thinks not. ‘Are their faces really so different from ours?’ he asks, and ends on a typical note of utter pessimism, criticizing ‘those with hope, as if there is a cure for the scourge of these camps.’<sup>10</sup>

A measure of the film’s success at obliqueness can be found in the public outcry that followed its release over the final words of the narration: “humanity’s never-ending cry.” Rather than offer the comfort of a particularized tragedy, *Night and Fog*’s original French-language narration insists on seeing the tragedy of the war in a totalizing light. David Coury (2002) shows how Paul Celan appropriates Cayrol’s elliptical French subtitles in the German translation, turning them into more explicitly Jewish references.<sup>11</sup> In the original, there is no such complacency—tragedy is immediate and diffuse, particular but also generalized. We all remain implicated.

The slow pan, Resnais’ favored signature filmic device, shows an astonishing sensitivity to the solidity of the objects in the *mise-en-scène*. The mechanical eye of the camera slowly moves across the vista as if it really sees beyond the human eye; it slows down the restlessly mobile gaze and forces us to watch as it takes the time to see. Emma Wilson suggests that Resnais’ focus on material and human remains “asks viewers to think contrarily about the malleability of proof and the impossibility of

grasping the past, and in particular about the incomprehensibility of mass trauma.”<sup>12</sup> Her discussion shows in painstaking detail how these images take up the entire screen, spilling over and beyond their frame, refusing to be tamed by the restrictions of the cinematic mode. They show “the incommensurability of these images in relation to perceptions of human identity and experience... In their move toward abstraction, they challenge the viewer to suspend the desire to make sense and to respond with the senses.”<sup>13</sup> Since any attempt to “make sense” of such horror within language leads inevitably to a distancing of the audience, Resnais chooses to engage with the senses directly and refuse the comfort of distance. In its call to “respond with the senses,”<sup>14</sup> *Night and Fog* engages in a vicious criticism of the cultural context from which it emerges, a repudiation of what we call modernity.

Jean-Luc Godard, who was particularly concerned with a new grammar of cinema, was quick to notice Resnais’ documentary work: “Alain Resnais is the second greatest editor [of film] in the world after Eisenstein. Editing, to them, means organizing cinematographically.”<sup>15</sup> It is no accident that Godard speaks so highly of the Resnais montage. Wilson also notes the use of montage defined as “the very construction (and questioning) of meaning through the editing process.”<sup>16</sup> She convincingly argues that it is a function of the montage that creates, in post-production,

[A] fearsome restlessness... an insistence that the viewing process will be unsettled, unresolved, far from complacent... *Whether or not the images captured are authentic or staged*, Resnais edits those images together in a bid to unsettle how and what we see, to make the visceral shudder of the indeterminacy of living and dead matter, a moment of unknowing and undoing of the viewer, key to the viewing of the film.<sup>17</sup>

There can be no doubt that the images are unsettling in the extreme, and are an effective barrier against voyeuristic pleasure. As in *Muriel*, *Night and Fog* provides no direct access to a body experiencing pain; in switching between the real and staged images, it shows an unconcern for authentic or inauthentic source material but an intense concentration on the audience’s authentic felt experience.

Where *Night and Fog* is a documentary that defies viewers’ expectation of a master narrative, *Hiroshima* and *Muriel* are fictional stories of failed affairs that similarly defy viewers’ expectations of resolution or closure. Readers will recognize these movies’ explicit use of fragmentation as a stylistic device as typically modernist, as also their search for the truth through a new way of fiction. Traditional narrative structures which divide

neatly into beginning, middle and end have become unsatisfactory; montage emerges as a new way to approach plot, perhaps more truthful than linear narratives. The slow pans of *Night and Fog* metamorphose into the disjointed, fragmented, commodity-fetishizing gaze of the camera in *Muriel* as if this is the only way to see—between the gaps in the air left by objects, eyes averted, ears pricked for the stray words of strangers. *Night and Fog* manipulates action and dialogue so that narrative is turned into montage, sequential causal history into fragmented bullet-points of events. *Hiroshima* and *Muriel* take these ideas one step further: What is barbarism in Japan or Algeria after that of Auschwitz, and does the one atrocity overshadow another?

### **The Void of Memory: *Hiroshima Mon Amour***

Between *Night and Fog* and *Muriel*, Resnais made *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *Last Year at Marienbad*, both of which posit memory as a mediated act of repetition. Drawing on Bergson (among others), acts of remembering and forgetting in *Hiroshima* are violent and disruptive so that protagonists are trapped at the mercy of their memories. The psychic and physical violence done to Elle (played by Emmanuelle Riva)—the months spent locked in the cellar after the death of her German soldier lover—are a segment of narrative that she has not spoken of in her adult life. She distances herself from the memory by creating a geographical distance between herself and the town she grew up in, as if in the long bicycle ride from Nevers to Paris under cover of darkness she recreated herself into another version of the person she was. It is only under the shock of the sympathy from the massive trauma of Hiroshima that her defenses break down and she is revealed as being totally at the mercy of her remembered past.

Pierre Nora is particularly apt here when he claims that “[t]he moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history.”<sup>18</sup> Elle’s personal history has indeed “disappeared” in an act of self-conscious forgetting, but arriving in Hiroshima without family or friends and confronted by the destroyed city reconstructing itself, she is forced to confront her own long-ago erasure and reconstruction. She is left unmoved by state-organized *lieux de mémoire* such as museums and public marches. The crowds in Hiroshima are like the furniture in *Marienbad*, obstacles that Elle darts among while lost in her private reverie. She has seen everything, as she claims, and yet she has seen nothing, as the male protagonist, Lui (played by Eiji Okada)



asserts—her *lieu* is not in the public sites of mourning and remembrance, but in the private space of the relationship with Lui.

Drunk with this stranger in an unknown cafe, the thought of Nevers arises in her tortured psyche, but what comes back more strongly than the faces of her parents or friends, details of her childhood, or even particulars about the German soldier, is a vivid sense of geographical space. The view of the river Loire in soft light, beautiful but completely unnavigable, arises like a picture postcard in her mind. The sight is useless in commercial terms: it is not a juncture for trade vessels because no ships can use the bay, and she values the spot for that and also for its solitude. The walls of her room come back to her, the cold and damp basement she was locked in, and the road to Paris when she cycled away one spring evening. This self-identification with the geographic has important resonances, perhaps most importantly for our purpose because it links Resnais' body of work closely to a common modernist trope where the incomplete and amorphous individual looks for a semblance of cohesion through intimate identification with a stable geographical space. Modernist literature repeatedly makes the point that *Hiroshima* also makes crucial—that the individual is and remains a discrete mix of parts striving to find coherence through any means possible. Often, the only tenuous links between these parts are in the geographical spaces that remain, emotional triggers that Elle identifies with even though she can no longer recognize her own younger self.

Further, this section powerfully recalls Resnais use of the slow pan technique to create his signature montages from *Night and Fog*. It thus reintroduces in fiction the idea that trauma and guilt are all-encompassing, affecting even those who remained sheltered during the brunt of the Vichy occupation and the War. It is tempting in the post-War climate and under the heady influence of the “Vichy syndrome”—a time in which French public sentiments tended to ignore any collusion with German occupation and perpetuated the myth of a unified resistance to Nazism.<sup>19</sup>—to minimize the responsibility of each citizen to combat atrocity. It is a temptation to which Elle herself succumbed in her youth, and one that she even now only confronts through these acts of circumvention. Yet it remains, emblemized in the commercially-unproductive river bay where water circulates and yet remains still, caught up in its own currents and eddies.

Ultimately, this lure of the geographic is so strong that even Elle's lover finds himself pulled in: “Hi-ro-shi-ma. That's your name,” she says, and he responds, “That's my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers-in-France.” Deleuze sees this as “a way for each of them to forget his or her own memory, and make a memory for two, as if memory was now

becoming a world, detaching itself from their persons.’<sup>20</sup> The lovers remain solitary; they never forget that their meeting was by chance and their time together limited. By the end of Elle’s stay, their affair sours and there is the pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and end. Their memory has become world indeed, but it detaches from them and leaves them behind relatively unchanged, still incomplete, still searching. There is the desperate and unvoiced hope behind these statements that if Elle were to *become* Nevers, she would perhaps be able to hold on to the stable selfhood that is denied in her present fallible human condition.

This erasure of personal identity is not satisfactory in the long run, as Resnais’ return to the same topic in *Muriel* clearly shows. When the woman in *Hiroshima* sees her lover as the epitome of his city, and he reciprocates by identifying her completely with the place where she was born, they indulge in a nostalgic, rather melodramatic reification of the past. The truth that *Muriel* tries to face is one that Elle shies away from—that Nevers as she remembers it no longer exists, her memory of it is a lie, and a deeper engagement with her past would require that she confront the space as is instead of the fantastic “recollection-image” that was. In this, the film implicitly critiques Nora’s eulogistic understanding of personal memory and public historical spaces.<sup>21</sup> It is adamant in dismissing Nora as too sentimental; *Muriel* instead offers a more nuanced reading of the relationship between remembered and actual spaces and the possibility of certain *lieux* which hold on to lived time.

### **Resistance and Montage: Cinematic Purpose in *Muriel***

When we are first introduced to Hélène and Bernard in *Muriel*, both are engaged in a project of reclamation and rebuilding: she in calling for an old lover and he with his video camera. Intimations of mortality prompt Hélène to recall her old relationship with Alphonse. A chance phrase he had uttered—that he would come if ever she called—arises in her mind and, bolstered in her resolve by chance (someone’s voice, someone else’s hands remind her of Alphonse’s), she sends him a note. When he arrives, Hélène tries her best to find in him what she remembered: like Elle imagining Nevers, Hélène tries to see the man she first loved inside the graying old conman who arrives. Their time at the Folkestone Hotel is like a talisman which allows her to speak familiarly with this stranger. It is not until after dinner that she can bring herself to admit to her current lover, Roland du Smoke, that “he is like I remembered him. Although his eyes...” The person who looks back at her is not the same as the one she

remembered, and H el ene realizes the unfortunate truth of Heraclitus' observation that one can never step in the same river twice.

In Alphonse's constant refrain of "pauvre H el ene" she begins to see the tyranny of the "recollection-image" overtaking the original "pure recollection," and a tired refrain of the sexual power-play from the commonplace love story plot. H el ene increasingly has to resist Alphonse's attempts to impose a story on her, and this effort makes her realize how banal and tired their story really is: "Alphonse, can we be finished with the past?" she says, to which he replies with a flourish, "It's already gone." But she breaks the thread of their conversation to say, as if to herself, "It's nice to think it's a common enough story [*une histoire banale*], really." What began as something new and exciting becomes just another run-of-the-mill occurrence. The narrative of grand romantic passion is revealed for what it is: a tedious imposition on her life in Boulogne.

As the film follows her through the twisted, disorienting streets of Boulogne, H el ene sees that what she had thought to be a formative moment, a first love and first deception, is the smallest in a full life that includes a mysterious feud with the tailor to whose house she rushes at the end. The film drops viewers into the middle of that plot-line without any introduction or explanation, nor does it offer any conclusion to the episode; thus, at the very end of H el ene's story, we are shown the impossibility of coherent narrative, and the foolishness of any attempt to live life as if it follows rigid, arbitrary conventions of storytelling. Turning conventional filmmaking wisdom about form on its head as well, a film that contains so many disorienting fragmented shots of H el ene's apartment ends, finally, with an establishing shot seen through the eyes of another stranger who has just arrived in town.

Living daily with the truth and fiction(s) of Muriel, Bernard too is faced with the awareness that sequentiality, causation, even reason, are an order imposed from without, forms trying to pigeonhole content. *Night and Fog* shows the reality of concentration camps but its most powerful images are the ones that spill out and overflow the neatness of the frame. *Muriel* goes further in pursuit of overflowing images until it emerges at the other extreme to offer "no spectacle of violence [at all]... and thus refuses to address its viewer as a voyeur."<sup>22</sup> We hear Bernard relating the story of an Algerian woman whose real name is lost forever over images of training drills. All other information about "Muriel" comes from spied pages of a diary (the camera watches over the snoop Alphonse's shoulder), the torn edges of old telegrams, a snatch of laughter on a tape recorder. Despite the central mystery of the film, *Muriel* refuses to become a detective story. Neither the torture of the girl nor the devastation of the

bombing during the War are explored fully, because to explore in the cinematic medium is perhaps inevitably to explain, to impose a narrative. *Night and Fog* was willing to engage with cinematic convention to some extent in showing the remnants of perpetrated evil, but in this film, “it is the very place of the cinema goer as an inveterate consumer of images of violence that is challenged, and thereby the viewer’s own complicity with violence that is thrown into high relief.”<sup>23</sup>

Bernard is faced with what he sees as unforgivable evil: what was done to “Muriel” was bad enough, but the ultimate horror lies in the mass desire to move forward, to rebuild, paper over, and continue as if neither French collusion with the Vichy regime nor the war on Algeria have occurred. Michael Rothberg notes that Eichmann’s trial in 1961 (two years before *Muriel* was released) was a watershed moment:

Europe’s contemporaneous experience of the limits of its colonial project—here represented especially by the Algerian War of Independence and the autonomy of African nations—also served to catalyze Holocaust memory, while that memory in turn expressed a displaced recognition of the violence of the late colonial state... [H]owever, this vision would soon be obscured by the increasing institutionalization of a more monolithic understanding of the Nazi genocide as radically unlike any other historical event.<sup>24</sup>

Bernard finds that all his time is taken up by riding through the streets of a rapidly-rebuilt Boulogne in a silent act of testimonial against the rapid monolithification he witnesses. He has already moved beyond the need to fit his work into a master narrative: he tells H el ene, “I don’t want to be a filmmaker, I’m only gathering proofs.” In a metatextual parallel, Bernard’s film does what *Muriel* as a whole intends: problematizes the idea of narration, refuses the easy harmonies of story, and therefore renders uncomfortable both the filmmaker’s and the viewer’s complacencies about their collusive roles vis- -vis everyday atrocities and war.<sup>25</sup>

In one scene in particular, the past rears its head memorialized into irreality. Bernard overhears patrons in a caf e reconstructing their old streets, trying to recall store fronts and the location of buildings. “I haven’t forgotten my street just because it was bombed,” one of them proudly declares—and meanwhile, we see a montage made up of a series of disjointed images of construction around Boulogne. Neither the time of day nor the subject matter match the voiceover, and here is perhaps the most striking instance of the film turning a dialogic sequence into montage through masterful editing so that it requires all of the viewer’s inferential capacities to connect what is shown and said.

Bernard's recordings are, in one sense, the metaphorical fidgeting of a man who does not know what else to do. He cannot pretend that nothing has happened like so many others, nor does he have Hélène's equanimity in the face of complete collapse. A third option is indicated by the character credited only as "L'homme à la chèvre" or "Goat-man," who has made his house on an isolated cliff on the outskirts of Boulogne where he tends his livestock and lives his life cut off from almost all contact with humanity. This man appears twice, both times demanding that Bernard find a "wife" for his goat. However, Bernard finds the Goat-man's withdrawal from history unsatisfactory as well. He cannot forget what he has seen in Algeria and his need to do something about it verges on madness. When he shoots his friend and fellow soldier Robert, it is an act born out of frustration not logical reasoning, the response of a man who refuses the apathy of withdrawal.

It then becomes clear that the fragmentary, montage-heavy form that Resnais uses in the film is deeply enmeshed with its political intent. Consider: if Bernard were able to set out his objections to the status quo clearly and coherently, he would find himself once again co-opted into a dominant master narrative—whether of the right or the left is immaterial. If Bernard withdraws from the world, that would mean the privileging his personal needs over ethical responsibilities. Instead, he remains in an uncomfortable middle-ground, caught indecisively between action and inaction, repeatedly playing in his mind the scene of his past hesitation so that "[w]hat is represented on screen by the film is made unstable and fragmentary by *that which the camera cannot represent...* [Muriel's] silence is not merely a chance circumstance as far as the film is concerned, for it is constitutive of its very possibility as a fiction."<sup>26</sup> There are Joycean echoes in Resnais' insistence that lived experience cannot and should not be reduced to political sloganeering, and it is the duty of fiction to resist the false certainties of rhetorical assertions.

"No author is less bound up in the past," Deleuze says of Resnais. "It is a cinema which, in an endeavor to sketch the present, prevents the past from being debased into recollection."<sup>27</sup> In a town where people proclaim they "haven't forgotten [their] street just because it was bombed" even as they scramble to rebuild and efface, only the earth holds on to the life that has been lost. In one of the final sequences, Alphonse's exposé as a crook is represented by a series of quick cross-cuts between the scene in Hélène's dining room (where all the main characters are assembled) and "the subsiding house," an enormous modern apartment building that was constructed too hastily after the end of the War and has faulty foundations. The building is brand new but no one has lived in it, and is rapidly sinking

into the surrounding clay. Architecturally, there is nothing to do about the subsiding house on its slipping cliff face and the town has abandoned it to its own end. “It will be an ugly ruin,” Roland de Smoke says, “Not even a window latch for me to salvage.” This line of dialogue recalls Elle’s pleasure in the “uselessness” of her clearing on the Loire. The enormous building with its empty windows finally appears as a monolith within the cinematic text to counter the ongoing reappropriation of the past. Even if the human gaze is enmeshed by the commodity fetish, colored by its own chameleon-like changeability, and although the modern condition seems to have robbed man of any clarity of vision—the mechanical eye can hold still and see what man simply glosses over. It is the genius of Resnais’ conception that puts the void of “Muriel” at the centre of this complex web and ends the film in irresolution. This refusal to provide an answer, even when it is clearly a failed answer, is what renders Resnais’ work so quintessentially modernist.