

Jorge Semprún on working with Alain Resnais.

First English translation by Nicholas Elliott.

I worked with Alain Resnais for several months and it was such a rigorous, rich experience that it must undoubtedly be very difficult to adapt to someone else after that. When Alain came to ask me to work with him, I had the preconceived notion circulating in certain critical milieux of Resnais as an “image-maker” or an “illustrator.” Yet as my experience has proved this is a radically false idea.

I don't know how he worked with Marguerite Duras, Robbe-Grillet, and Jean Cayrol. I think that each of his films poses particular problems and that each film has its particular working method. While it is true that Resnais does not write a single word or place a single comma in the text, it must be emphasized that not a single comma has been placed in the script without prior discussion. One writes WITH him from the first day. Then the working rhythm gradually takes shape, but basically every three days we would review everything that had been written and discuss everything that was going to be written. We would often go back over a text that seemed entirely satisfactory and throw it in the wastepaper basket because Resnais had stumbled over a term or a kind of demagoguery in an expression or an emotion and once again we rediscussed the scene.

(...) I was very young at the time of the civil war, but the entire Spanish people tragically lived through this period. At the start, Alain and I had said we wouldn't deal with Spain. But the initial idea, the reason for the whole undertaking, which Alain had proposed to me, was to make a POLITICAL film. Based on that, we discussed and put aside, about two years ago, a certain number of scenarios to ultimately arrive at Spain. But, from the outset, the idea was to make a political film, on the organization, struggle, and problems of activists. Resnais had thought of the actions of a “Committee against war” or a “Committee for prisoners in Greece,” featuring a journey by someone trying to stir people up, to agitate around this issue; there was a whole series of ideas around this political option. So really we foregrounded a universal theme from the very beginning, rather than a place and a historical moment. Anyhow, it had to be a current contemporary story, it was out of the question to do a reenactment or something retrospective... We came back to Spain for various reasons, first probably because I'm Spanish and that since I have a better knowledge of some of the issues there it was easier for me. But also, Alain himself considered that Spain was not only a current, living issue, but that it carried the weight of thirty years of mixed French and Spanish history, as well as this new knowledge through the millions of tourists who have an impact of a political nature. So, Resnais himself came to choose Spain in a normal, spontaneous fashion.

(...) The initial starting point we worked on from this idea was a man like Diego returning to France, where he had lived for a long time, after twelve years in prison. From Spain, he returns to France, which he had left on the trip during which he was arrested, and he rediscovers the world twelve years later. But he was a passive hero. And one day Alain said: “No, that's over, we need a goal, this man has no undertaking other than breathing, living, or finding a woman and friends.” Ultimately, we used the same framework of a journey to construct that storyline, which also developed a great deal. But we needed an action, and it was more interesting to show politics through an undertaking than through a passion, a passive page of literature. We needed to show action itself and not its potential dramatic consequences.

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