

Left Bank Cinema: Memories of Time and History

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My Ph.D project is on three French film directors Chris Marker, Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda, popularly referred to as the Left Bank Group by critics. As part of my SRA award I sought to explore the intellectual, aesthetic and political aspects of their works by looking at newspaper reports, interviews, journal articles and other similar resources apart from the films available at the Cinémathèque Française or the National Film Archive in Paris.

The Left Bank directors started making their films from the 60s and continued it right through the present decade. These directors are understood to be different from the popular French New Wave directors because of their affinity towards using cinema as a medium to discuss complex socio-cultural issues of a new post-war world order. Their films and documentaries avoided the commercial and industry oriented production logic of the New Wave, experimented across mediums such as literature, painting , photography, theatre and multimedia.

The Left Bank directors can be considered as pioneers of an essayistic documentary style capable of engaging complex socio-cultural issues through a personal and subjective approach that is refreshingly different from a more conventionally objective documentary. My project seeks to understand how the Left Bank directors used cinema as a medium of thought in trying to explore questions regarding memory, time, history and culture.

Many of their works try to explore how we in the process of negotiating with our estranged pasts fraught with injustice and violence determine the nature of a world which is yet to come. For example, Chris Marker in his travel essay film *Sans Soleil* or *Sunless* (1983) tries to explore the clash between tradition and modernity in the landscapes of modern Tokyo. Marker often describes various Japanese rituals with an anthropological curiosity and treats them at a cosmic level of cultural archetypes. Marker reworks these rituals by shifting focus from its religious environment to indicate conditions of modern existence in a clash with the traditional. Marker also seems to indicate that this clash between traditionalism and materiality to be a violent one—that many traditional cultures find it difficult to cope with. Marker says “At nightfall the megalopolis breaks down into villages, with its country cemeteries in the shadow of banks, with its stations and temples. Each district of Tokyo once again becomes a tidy ingenuous little town, nestling amongst the

skyscrapers”. Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) is also a story about negotiating the past in a post-war universe, and instead of a documentary it takes place through a love story of a couple where the woman finds it impossible to be in love with the man whom she meets in Hiroshima because she feels the burden of her past to be as violent as the death and destruction of the atomic bombs that incinerated the streets of Hiroshima.

Throughout my project I try to understand how memory relates to the art of cinema and how subjective memories tend to attain the fluidity of moving images. It is at this juncture that I try to place the works of the Left Bank directors. Thus my SRA project focussed on gathering scholarship especially in French language concerning these films. I came across a wide range of discussions in the newspapers and periodicals at the Cinematheque in the form of discussions during the release of these films, interviews and more scholarly interventions from the journals I consulted. Through my interviews at Agnès Varda’s production house, Ciné-Tamaris, I was able to get more insight into the more complex relationship between the moving image and art installations. The Left Bank, particularly Alain Resnais is famous for working with literary figures such as Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet and also for his experiments with theatre and graphic art in his films . Marker and Varda are also well known as photographers and multimedia artists, always experimenting with ideas of memory, time and the moving image which along with the intermediality of their works form the crux of my dissertation. Through my dissertation I hope to understand cinema’s crucial ability to experimentally and philosophically engage with human development and culture.

While the SRA award helped me significantly in accessing exclusive archival material crucial for my dissertation, it also most importantly helped me relate to my project with an enhanced personal commitment removing difficulties of having to work on this project from New Delhi. After my SRA trip and especially after a brief conversation with Agnès Varda, I feel I am able to better understand and personally relate with my project which was solely enabled through the mobility offered through the SRA grant.