

Ode to the Old Left

Alain Resnais' *La Guerre est finie* embellished the 1966 New York Film Festival with its extraordinary excellence. It's a long way from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to Lincoln Center, but memory and nostalgia have a way of preserving lost causes as the conscience of history. Thus simply for its subject, *La Guerre est finie* should regain for Resnais most of the admirers he lost somewhere on the tracks between Hiroshima and Marienbad. The almost irresistible temptation to insult

director's feelings may be, Montand remains a rock of commitment, and with Montand's solidity as an actor serving as an anchor of style, a sea of images can be unified into a mental characterization. Whereas the awesome majesty of the late Nikolai Cherkasov obliterated montage in the late Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, the humanity of Montand domesticates montage in *La Guerre est finie*. We are no longer concerned with the pretentious counterpoint of Love and the Bomb, Past and



La Guerre est finie, Jean Bouise and Yves Montand.

the Idiot Left must be resisted at all costs. Who is to say that people should not admire the right films for the wrong reasons? It is for the critic to register the right reasons. The creator prefers profitable misunderstandings and confusions so that he can find the funds to continue his career.

If *La Guerre est finie* is in some ways the most satisfying movie Resnais has made, credit is due largely to the lucidity and integrity of Yves Montand's characterization of Diego, a revolutionary engulfed by fears, fantasies and futilities. However fragmented the

Present, Illusion and Reality, Society and the Individual, etc. We are obsessed instead with the doubts of Diego, the fears of Diego, the hopes of Diego, the instincts of Diego, even the fantasies of Diego. Through his mind passes what we are to know and feel about the heritage of the Old Left, that last, desperate camaraderie commemorated in kitchens and cemeteries as old comrades grapple with the old rhetoric they are doomed never to forget and the new reality they are doomed never to understand.

For Resnais, it is enough to celebrate

remembrance and mourn forgetfulness as fragments of personality and politics disintegrate in the void of time. Civilization is the process of trying to remember, and Resnais once did a documentary on the Paris Library as the supreme ornament of civilization. Cinema, however, is more than remembering and forgetting. It is also acting, doing, resolving, indeed being. Cinema, like life, is a process of creating memories for the future. Resnais has always drawn on the past without paying for the future. His cinema has been hauntingly beautiful if dramatically improvident in its ghostliness. His characters have been paralyzed by the sheer pastness of their sensibilities. Montand's Diego is no exception, but a marvelous thing has happened. Montand's dignity and bearing have broken through the formal shell of Resnais' art to dramatize the doubts and hesitations of the director. Diego has become a hero of prudence and inaction. He has shown what it is to be a man without the obvious flourishes of virility so fashionable today. (Even the stately explicitness of the love-making is a measure of the hero's stature.) To be a man, it is above all necessary to be patient as one's life dribbles away on the back streets, blind alleys and dead ends of political impotence. The at times agonizing slowness of *La Guerre est finie* achieves the pathos of patience by expressing a devotion to detail common to both Diego and Resnais. It has always seemed that Resnais was more suited to documentary than fiction because of a preoccupation with facts rather than truths. The parts in Resnais always seem superior to the whole and if *La Guerre est finie* is an exception, it is because the integral behaviorism of a performer has buttressed the analytical style of a director. It is as if Resnais were dropping things all over the screen, and Montand was walking around picking them up. That *La Guerre est finie* finally makes us weep is a tribute to Montand's tenacity.

As for what the film actually "says," Jorge Semprun's script is explicit enough for the least sophisticated audiences. The meaning is in the title. The War Is Over, and Resnais, unlike Zinnemann in the grotesquely unfeeling *Behold a Pale Horse*, makes no attempt to reconstruct the agonies of antiquity with old newsreels. The ultimate tragedy of The Spanish Civil War is that all its participants are either dead or 30 years older. Spain still exists as a geographical entity, but it has been repopulated with an indifferent generation. Tourists swarm through Madrid and Barcelona while old Bolsheviks haul pamphlets into Seville. The New Left sneers at the Old Left. But it doesn't matter as long as one man can keep the faith in the midst of uncertainty.

—Andrew SARRIS