
MÉLO

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CAST

Sabine Azéma Romaine Belcroix
Fanny Ardant Christiane Levesque
Pierre Arditi Pierre Belcroix
André Dussollier Marcel Blanc
Jacques Dacqmine Dr. Remy
Hubert Gignoux Le Prêtre
Catherine Arditi Yvonne

CREW

Directed by **Alain Resnais**
Screenplay by **Alain Resnais**
Adapted from the play by **Henri Bernstein**
Produced by **Marin Karmitz**
Music by **Philippe-Gérard**
Cinematography by **Charles Van Damme** (as **Charlie Van Damme**)
Film Editor **Albert Jurgenson**
Production Design by **Jacques Saulnier**

A WORLD WHERE ONE CAN DIE OF LOVE:
THE RADICAL GRACE OF ALAIN RESNAIS' *MÉLO*

by Bilge Ebiri

Echoing against the painting of a resplendent red curtain, the series of sharp knocks that begin Alain Resnais' *Mélo* are a French theatrical tradition, an announcement from the dramaturg that a play is about to begin. That the first thing we see following these raps is Pierre Belcroix (Pierre Arditi) knocking his pipe against a garden wall is a clever, offhand way of blending that external sound with the action of the story – and a hint that what we're about to see will itself be a riff on theatrical conventions. *Mélo*'s opening moments make it clear that Resnais intends to lean into artifice – for what we're watching is obviously unfolding on a stage set, complete with a painted moon in the background and a fake house front looming behind the characters.

To call *Mélo* "filmed theater," however, would be to deny the considerable cinematic subtlety that Resnais brings to Henry Bernstein's emotionally florid 1929 melodrama, a "Boulevard play" that was quite successful in its time but feels defiantly old-fashioned today (and did so in 1986 as well). Even so, the director never quite lets us forget that we are watching something staged: The performances are kept at a remove; the sets are basic; one can at times even detect a slight echo behind the voices, as if all this might be taking place inside a quiet, cavernous hall.

Some of these elements were a necessity of production, it seems. Producer Marin Karmitz had only seven million francs to invest, and the production had three weeks to finish. Resnais also had to cut out a significant chunk of Bernstein's play, which was originally considerably longer; Karmitz told Resnais that given their budget and time constraints, the picture could be no longer than 105 minutes. Shooting on a spare, minimalist set in quick fashion was thus a financial and artistic necessity.

Looking back at *Mélo* today, it perhaps doesn't feel like such a departure for Resnais, who would go on in subsequent years to film a number of stage works for the screen in ways that both evoked and deconstructed theatrical conventions. (Most notably, his Alan

Ayckbourn adaptations such as *Smoking/No Smoking* [1993], *Private Fears in Public Places* [2006], and *Life of Riley* [2014] are lovely, nimble translations that admirably refuse to try and "open up" the material.) But back in 1986, *Mélo* felt like a significant detour for Resnais – especially since he was then still known for his intricate, non-linear treatment of memory and his deft, experimental editing techniques. In some ways, this was a reputation borne largely of the one-two punch of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) earlier in his career. But later titles like *Providence* (1977) or *My American Uncle* (*Mon Oncle d'Amerique*, 1980), while perhaps less aggressively experimental, did little to detract from his notoriety as a master of ornate structuring devices.

And so, *Mélo*'s spare cinematic style, its relentlessly linear plot and almost confrontational simplicity, came as a surprise to some, even though Resnais had begun a turn towards a fascination with classicism in the 1980s, with works such as *Life is a Bed of Roses* (*La vie est un roman*, 1983) and *Love Unto Death* (*L'amour à mort*, 1984). In truth, Resnais was doing what he'd always done – playing with time, and portraying our attempts to deal with the emotional fallout of our relationships – but finding new ways to do it. Resnais himself often refuted the notion that he was "a filmmaker of memory". He insisted that he wanted "to make films that describe the imaginary". His camera was always turned inward: He tried to think and see through his characters, and his techniques were first and foremost efforts to provoke the viewer into conjuring a new reality. *Mélo* is a transporting movie in that regard.

That opening scene, with that curious, rickety set, offers a perfect example of the director's artful methods. The elegant, commanding André Dussollier plays Marcel Blanc, an internationally renowned violinist visiting his old friend and fellow musician Pierre and his young wife Romaine (Sabine Azéma) in their modest, suburban home. Marcel and Pierre, we are told, studied together and were once inseparable, but Pierre remained a modest first violin in a local orchestra while Marcel became something of a celebrity. During dinner, Marcel recalls a still-raw heartbreak from two years ago: While performing Bach's Third Sonata on stage in Havana, he caught his beloved Helene making eye contact with another man in the audience, and knew, right then and there, that his great romance was doomed. And Helene's lies afterwards, insisting that there was no man there, wounded him even more.

As Marcel relates his tale, Resnais quietly, slowly moves in on him, allowing the gentle force of his monologue to play out in intimate close-up on the screen. One might expect a flashback here, but it never comes. The camera remains fixed on Marcel. And yet, in some way, a flashback still occurs: As he relates his memory, Marcel's facial gestures quietly

mimic the gestures mentioned in his story. When he talks about how Helene and her suitor's glances met, his eyes casually drift from side to side, then fix on a central point. Meanwhile, a shift in the light behind Marcel plunges a back wall into darkness just as he reflects, "You know how I am when I play. My eyes are open but unseeing." In other words, the flashback occurs not through editing, but in the viewer's mind, through the gentle coaxing of Resnais's camera and his subtle lighting effects.

Mélo is a shortened term for *melodrama*. It also suggests music, since *melodrama* itself is a compound of *melos* (song) and *drama*. In that sense, it's notable that music is particularly absent throughout this opening sequence, which involves a musician telling another musician about the time he was performing a piece of music. Perhaps more importantly, Marcel claims his agony made him a better performer, turning the sonata into a kind of lifeline: "I plunged into the music as into the sea…I no longer existed, nor did the violin, nor did Bach. Just a single substance in fusion, leaving only the music." Resnais' film remains silent at this moment – though *Mélo*'s most eloquent American supporter, Jonathan Rosenbaum, has written convincingly of the musical cadences of Resnais' compositions and camera moves in this sequence. Indeed, do not be surprised if you later recall this scene having a musical theme playing gently in the background. Such are the tricks that *Mélo* works on our minds; by stripping everything to its essence, Resnais produces even more layers and textures.

That bravura opening scene, which takes up more than a quarter of the running time, is crucial both narratively and formally to *Mélo*, for it is there that the vivacious Romaine falls for Marcel. Indeed, as the latter recounts his own tale of thwarted love and longing glances, we may notice that Romaine is directing her own adoring glances in his direction. She is captivated, much like us – not by Marcel's charisma but by the melancholy, romantic power of his story. The film has to ground itself in the irrational, destructive pull of this instant, because in subsequent scenes, the narrative will take some wild turns.

The affair that now starts between Marcel and Romaine is, as might be expected, a catastrophic one. She comes to visit him at his studio the next day. He accuses her of being a serial adulterer, and claims to be sticking up for his good friend Pierre by refusing her advances. But when she insists that she's never been unfaithful to her husband, his mood changes; it seems that the one thing Marcel cannot stand in the world are lies, and the idea that Romaine might be scrupulously honest charms him. Before we know it, they are in the midst of a fully-fledged affair.

We see little happiness in their scenes together, however: Amid all their sensuous caresses and heated embraces, the prevailing mood is one of hopelessness, predicated on the clash between their passion for each other and their concern for Pierre. In fact, Romaine soon begins to slowly poison her husband, to save him the heartbreak of a break-up – right before she takes her own life, a result it seems of both her shame and her impossible, illicit romance.

In these scenes, we see another benefit to Resnais' slightly distanced approach to the material: In an ostensibly realistic context, these developments would seem absurd and unconvincing, perhaps even campy. By preserving the theatrical quality of the setting and the performances, Resnais preserves the melodrama's integrity. All this is happening not so much in the real world as in one slightly removed from ours, a constructed one where grand, doomed romantic gestures are still possible – a world where people can still die of love.

That notion also informs the angular verve of Azéma's César-winning performance as Romaine, which thumbs its nose at anything resembling naturalism and instead veers between extremes of fevered passion and quaking despair. It's a physically demanding role – in one scene, she has to angrily and hysterically perform a series of somersaults – which strikes a sharp contrast to the swooning, brooding energies of the two men who adore her, who are usually quite still, paralyzed either with regret or actual illness. Romaine thus becomes the beautiful spirit zig-zagging between these two poles of sombre tranquility.

And Romaine feels very much like a defining absence in the final scene, a lengthy, melancholy conversation between Pierre and Marcel in the latter's apartment, which takes place several years after she has taken her own life. The scene is dominated by artifacts from her – a notebook, a flower petal, and a final letter that is never produced but recited from memory by Pierre. Again, we see the way that Resnais has sublimated structure into his mise en scene. Echoing the memory play of the film's extended opening sequence, this scene revolves around Pierre and Marcel trading reminiscences of Romaine, as they have a tense debate about her fidelity.

Now, the precision of that opening scene, as well as its clear emotions, has been replaced by something altogether more uncertain, and uneasy. Pierre, who suspects something, says he wants to hear from Marcel that Romaine was unfaithful. Marcel – the same Marcel who detested lies earlier in the movie – finds himself deceiving his friend, preserving the charade of Romaine's devotion to her husband as a way of making sure that Pierre will one day be able to get over his grief. (As a priest says in an earlier scene, "It's a clean wound. His mourning will fade over time…[whereas] disappointment, humiliation, jealousy would soon bring the dead alive to him.")

To reflect the nature of this conversation, Resnais' camera is a bit busier this time. Instead of elegantly settling on lengthy close-ups and two-shots, it drifts between the two men, never quite seeming to settle into a balanced shot. At one point, Resnais presents Pierre on one side of the frame and Marcel's reflection in the other – only the latter has been fragmented via a mirrored closet that seems to divide him into a dozen, blurry pieces. "Guys are idolized for supposedly having a nerve that lets them hear so-called harmonies and dissonances," Pierre recalls bitterly at this very moment. It may occur to us that he's (consciously or not) speaking of Marcel himself, whose ability to notice the dissonance in a woman's glances was what got us here in the first place. Marcel is an artist, and as such has to live with pain, loneliness, and uncertainty; indeed, as he suggested in that opening scene, he may even thrive on this type of agony, using it to fuel his art. Pierre, however, is now a father and a husband again, headed to a new job in Tunis; he needs to be able to move on, find happiness, and survive.

Resnais, too, has to live with uncertainty, and makes sure that we do as well. When Pierre recites (from memory) the text of Romaine's latter – the despairing, self-loathing one she wrote him before she took her own life – the camera drifts to a middle ground between the two men, and everything goes out of focus. Suddenly, we are presented with an image of pure abstraction, and then the screen plunges into blackness for a few seconds as Pierre continues to read. At this point, Romaine effectively becomes the third person in the room. We never see her, but this darkly expressive, atonal reverie feels like an attempt to conjure her, as Resnais explores the negative space between the two men who loved her. It's a moment of radical grace, in a film whose deceptive simplicity hides a churning ocean of feelings.

Bilge Ebiri has written for **The Village Voice, New York Magazine, Vulture, Rolling Stone, Bookforum,** ***and other publications.***

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Mélo is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with 1.0 mono audio. The master was restored in 2K by MK2 and delivered to Arrow Films.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by **Francesco Simeoni**, **James Flower**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert**, **Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni**, **Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Nick Mastrini**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

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