

MURIEL, 1ST ACT: AN INTERACTIVE FILM INSTALLATION.

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In this article we will present and describe the interactive cinema project “MURIEL, 1st act” as well as the way spectators have reacted to it. Based on it, we discuss the challenges of turning a filmic narrative (Muriel ou le Temps d’un Retour, of Alain Resnais, 1963) into a participation device for spectators and its adaptability to the interactive devices created by Carlos Sena Caires.

We will also analyze some new concepts underlying to the project, namely the concept of “interactive off-screen” and describe the conditions of the reception by the public.

Keywords: Interactive Cinema, Filmic Narrative, Installation Device and Public Interaction.



Fig. 1. An example of a projection excerpt | The interactive device of the installation.

1 Introduction.

What makes someone appropriate the fragments of someone else’s work to develop a research project in the film production domain? And why has that someone identified in an Alain Resnais’s film the necessary elements to this project? It is our aim to answer these and other related questions by describing the project “MURIEL, 1st act”.

“MURIEL, 1st act” assumes as its reference the movie Muriel ou le Temps d’un Retour directed by Alain Resnais and produced in 1963. The first part of this article will describe the filmic narrative Muriel ou le Temps d’un Retour. First we will present the characters and succinctly describe the relationships they establish between one another; then we will make reference to the fragmented structure of the narrative and to the mosaic model of its *montage*. After that, we will present different artistic projects that have been inspired by cinematographic works and inspire us on our proposal. In the second part, we describe the project “MURIEL, 1st act” itself, characterizing it at the level of its installation devices, and forms of spectator participation. We will also refer to the adaptation conditions of a filmic narrative to an interactive system and to the notion of “interactive off-screen”, inherent to the project.



Finally, we will analyze the spectator participation, observed and studied on its 1st installation in the Contemporary Art Museum of Funchal (MAC - Madeira, Portugal).

2 Muriel ou le temps d'un retour, the movie.

Muriel ou le Temps d'un Retour is the third feature-length film of the French Director Alain Resnais¹. Produced in 1963 the movie relates the story of characters in despair, traumatized by their own memories. In September of 1962, H el ene Aughain (Delphine Seyrig), an independent woman and professional antiquarian working at home, lives in Boulogne-sur-Mer, a city in the north of France, with her nephew Bernard Aughain (Jean Baptiste Thierr e) recently arrived from the war front². To get over her disturbing memories, H el ene invites Alphonse (Jean Pierre K erien), a lover of hers in her youth and a war veteran, to spend some days with them. Alphonse comes to Boulogne-sur-Mer with his lover, Fran oise (Nita Klein) whom he introduces as his niece. The memories are still vivid but each character tries to escape from the past taking refuge in an unreal present. That is what Gilles Visy thinks when he states, "the filmic narrative [of "Muriel"] builds up on a past that absorbs the present and makes of *diegesis*³ a constructed memory of time that keeps obsessively coming back"⁴. This way, Muriel ou le Temps d'un Retour abandons the classic linear filmic narration turning to a *new wave* (Nouvelle Vague) of de-constructed narrative: H el ene hopes to renovate her existence in the new meeting with the man she had loved so much; Bernard is constrained by his memories of Muriel (the girl), victim of war torture; Alphonse, a compulsive liar, can't cut off with his past. The characters in the film meet each other, avoid each other, leave and enter the house; they exchange some words, they try to reconstruct a new future based on lies, equivoques and diffidence. The mix of past and present and also the narrative game in this portion of limited space-time make of Muriel ou le Temps d'un Retour a fragmented movie which develops in a broken narrative structure that avoids any logic of cinematographic production used until that time.

2.1 The filmic structure: a linear fragmented narrative.

In *Poesis* Aristotle said that all narrative always has a beginning, middle and an end⁵. In what respects the filmic discourse one can only agree with this statement; in fact, the time of linear visioning is always in accordance with the film duration. None-the-less, and in what concerns the narrated story and its *diegetic*⁶ structure, Aristotle axiom becomes refutable: the end of the story can be at the beginning, the beginning at the end, stories can intertwine, the end can be multiple, etc. There is not always a correspondence between the chronological sequence of the story and the sequence of its narration. The conditions of the filmic narrative (the same applies to the literary narrative) depend, intrinsically, on order, duration and frequency of narrative elements but also depend on the different narrative points of view, including the one who is narrating the story (see the *Form* – who sees, and the *Voice* – who speaks, Genette: *Figures III*).

¹ Hiroshima mon Amour (1959) and L'Ann e Derni re   Marienbad (1960) were his first two previous successes.

² The Algerian war, ended in June 1962, was a taboo in France : as an example, Le Petit Soldat (1963) of Jean-Luc Godard was censored for several years. "Muriel" has escaped from censorship because it is not exclusively a movie about the war.

³ By *diegesis* we mean "everything that pertains to the intelligibility of the narrated story, to the proposed world or implicit by the fiction", in SOURIAU,  t., *L'univers filmique*, Flammarion, 1953, p. 7.

⁴ VISY, G., *Muriel ou les glissements temporels comme  mergence de l'int riorit *, (2005), in: "Cadrage.net, 1 re revue en ligne universitaire fran aise de cin ma": <http://www.cadrage.net/films/muriel.htm> (consulted March 2007).

⁵ See: Simonin Michel (dir.), *Aristote, Po tique*, Coll. « Classique de Poche », Paris, s.d.

⁶ As Genette defines it: The space-time universe designated by the narrative, which refers or belongs to the story, diegetic = intradiegetic. (GENETTE, 1972:280).



Muriel ou le Temps d'un Retour is a film with a very complex dramatic construction. Resnais likes to alternate two or three stories in the same film, to alternate past and future or even reality and imagination (*vid.* *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, 1960). In a way that he never lets the spectator situate for sure the temporality or the level of reality of the story. In spite of its dramatic complexity, *Muriel ou le Temps d'un Retour* is a linear film which develops linearly from the beginning to the end: the story begins on Saturday, 29th September 1962, at night, and ends 15 days later, on Sunday, 14th October, the same year. Even if we can visualize a linear timeline, all the narrative is broken by the references to the past and to the future of the characters. As François Thomas states, if it is a line that we want as a reference, we find "a broken line, a fragmented line at the most."⁷

The script was written by Jean Cayrol in collaboration with Alain Resnais and is divided in five well-differentiated acts. In the film, Resnais has opted for dissimulating them in a temporal transposition far away from the written text but where one can still find some symmetry: the first 45 minutes of the film correspond to one Saturday, the end of the film also corresponds to a single day, a Sunday, and between both, we have 3 acts that correspond to the 15 days that separate the beginning from the end. Even with this possible symmetry, all the film is extremely fragmented and includes uncountable ellipses, analepses and prolepses (Genette, 1972). The structure of the film is characterized by the unity of its fragments, as in a mosaic, in which predominates an extremely fragmented *montage*, divided in a lot of scenes juxtaposed with a certain dramatic intentionality. Even when the characters seem to be in a certain place or a particular *diegetic* time, all the discourse is fragmented, the story is broken into a thousand scenes, the shots are multiplied and the character profiles changed.

3 From Film to Installation.

Taking the first 45 minutes of the Resnais's film that correspond to the initial part of the narrative, that is, the first act of the script, we have built an interactive and experimental project in the form of an installation and called it "MURIEL, 1st act". But before the project description (see chapter 4) we'd like to emphasize some works that we consider fundamental as inspiration and motivation antecedents to the building of this experience.

All along the time, particularly in the history of the cinema, we find numerous experiences of the appropriation of someone else's cinematic images for artistic purposes⁸. More recently, Douglas Gordon, in his *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) creates a longer version of Alfred Hitchcock's film stretching it to a 24-hour duration⁹. Gordon's proposal reflects a new critical perspective, de-constructing the filmic narrative to the limits of the impossible: "realistically, no one can watch the whole «24 Hour Psycho»" (Ferguson, 2001:16). Artists like Christof Girardet or Matthias Müller (see: *Phoenix Tapes*, 1999) also used direct images from Hitchcock movies¹⁰. But, other artists produce their own artistic movie sequences, still basing their work on previous cinematographic ones. That is the case of the cyclic images of Stan Douglas installation, *Subject to a Film: Marnie* (1989), which recreates the robbery scene of Hitchcock exploring the concepts of repetition and obsession. Another example is the work *Remake* (1995) of Pierre

⁷ In: Interview of François Thomas, author of *L'Atelier d'Alain Resnais*, ed. Flammarion, 1989, as a supplement to the DVD: *Muriel ou le temps d'un Retour*, Arte France Développement, Argos Films, 2004.

⁸ Several movies from Georges Méliès had already as inspiration source the "sets of documentaries" of the Lumière brothers (i.e. *Jeux de cartes*, 1896). Later, in 1941, Charles Ridley used the film of Leni Riefenstahl, *The Triumph of the Will* (1935) and re-edited it in one project named *Germany Calling*, with the intention of ridiculizing Hitler.

⁹ The speed of the film was reduced to two frames per second.

¹⁰ See also the works from Laurent Fiévet, *Portrait à l'écume*, *Portrait à l'Hélice* and *Lovely Memories*, as the works from Jean Breschand, *Don't they ever stop migrating?*, presented in the exhibition "Under Hitchcock", at Vila do Conde, Portugal, 2007. As well as the exhibitions around Hitchcock: *Fatal Coincidences: Hitchcock and Art* (Paini and Cogeval, 2001) and *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Art* (Basilico, 2004).



Huygues that takes the theme of voyeurism from *Rear Windows* (1954) but this time with contemporary actors¹¹. All of Huygues work, and his cinematographic references are based in memory capabilities. Another example is *The Third Memory* (1999), where Huygues recreates a bank robbery carried out by John Woytowicz in Brooklyn in 1972. With the reference of Sydney Lumet movie, *Dog Day Afternoon* produced in 1975, Huygues met Woytowicz and asks him for his own narrative of the story, *The Third Memory*. In *L'Ellipse* (1998) Huygues takes Wim Wenders's *The American Friend* (1977) to film the dislocation of a man between two places (the hotel room → the gangster's house) in Paris. In Wenders's version, the dislocation is abolished, the ellipsis meaning that the dislocation has happened but not presented to the spectator. Huygues asked the same actor, 21 years later, to walk from the hotel room to the house, and in a triple projection he brings together the places of departure and arrival. On the first screen, the hotel room scene is projected in Wenders's version; the actor leaves the room and in the second central screen we can see the actor walking from one place to the other (without cuts or interruptions) until he arrives at the gangster's house – third projection – the 1977 Wender's version continues¹².

Another artist, Christian Marclay, also proposes the use of cinematographic short excerpts to the conception of his video art works. In *Telephones* (7'30'', 1995) and *Video Quartet* (16', 2002), he reorganizes a set of sound and image material. *Telephones* consists of a sophisticated organization of a varied set of filmic excerpts of ringing telephones, of men and women answering, talking and hanging up telephones. The detailed sequence of the multiple excerpts tends to create just one narrative of a supposed telephone conversation. In *Video Quartet*, the same principle is applied: in fact Marclays uses all his ability and synchronize 4 sound tracks with sound and images excerpts in a multiple projection on a set of 4 gigantic screens placed side by side. Here, the sound guides the global work, revealing the way music is organized by sequencing and mixing sonic fragments.

Another work we would like to cite is Johan Grimonprez's *Dial H-I-S-TO-R-Y* (1997), a movie installation divided into two parts of 50 minutes each. This project describes, in an almost chronological way, the story of high jacking. According to the author, the sound track, composed of two narratives, inspired on DeLillo's two novels, *White Noise* and *Hand II*, helps to make visible the value of catastrophe in our society. *Dial H-I-S-TO-R-Y* is a composition work, mixing photographs, electronic images, film clips and cinematographic registrations. A set of video and audio elements take from their original context that Grimonprez uses to create new meanings.

4 Interactive adaptation: for a cinematographic prolongation.

Having as our basis, the first act of Alain Resnais's work, *C. Sena Caires* built the experimental cinematographic project "MURIEL, 1st act". With the 150 scenes that make up the 1st act of the film, he created a virtual tridimensional representation of H el ene Aughain's apartment. A living apartment where characters and furniture constantly move from one place to another. Each scene, placed on this virtual environment, is an element of the reconstruction of the architectonic space. Scene after scene, the spectator experiments a new arrangement of the screens position within the projection, mentally reconstructing the architectonic space of the apartment, in a free and voluntary film progression. It is his interaction that makes possible for the filmic narrative to advance and simultaneously, to move around the virtual space inhabited by the three-dimensional flat screens where we can see the image sequences. On this three-dimensional virtual space, darkened, the images are there to mirror the apartment topology and

¹¹ In this installation it is possible, thanks to a double projection, to compare the two movies almost frame-by-frame.

¹² For more details on Pierre Huyghe's projects, see also the "Marian Goodman Gallery, at:

<http://www.pierrehuyghe.com/>

consequently the hyper fragmented montage of Resnais's film. These 'spatio-temporal' objects¹³ are parts of a distancing interactive device, that, in the passage from image to image, from scene to scene, makes possible a kind of cinematographic *déjà-vu*.

4.1 The installation devices.

By device we mean the arrangement of the different components or organs of an apparatus or mechanism¹⁴. From a philosophical point of view, the term acquires several meanings depending on the author. To Michel Foucault it consists of a *subjectification* effect; to Gilles Deleuze it is a matter of *territorialization* or *de-territorialization*; and for Jean-François Lyotard the term is related to the effects of intensity or pacification, which are *pulsionnel* devices¹⁵. From the cinematographic perspective, the term appears in the 1970s with the *structuralists* Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz and Thirrey Kuntzel. In general terms, the "cinema-device" would be this singular arrangement that influences the spectator condition, which is near to the dream state and hallucination. To Baudry, in particular, these effects in the spectator don't depend as much on the discursive organization of the cinema as on the singular condition of the projection such as the obscured room, a frontal projection that has as its origin the back side of the room and a photographic animated and in movement¹⁶.

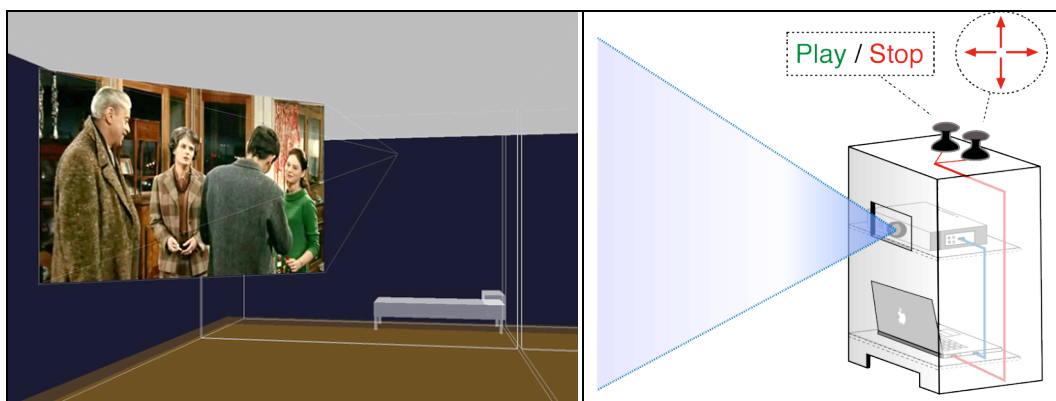


Fig. 2. An example of an excerpt of the projection | Diagram of the interaction device.

"MURIEL, 1st act" installation device is composed of two distinct but complementary areas: a real interaction territory and a non-territory constituted by the image projection area. On the one hand, we have a set of technological restrictions that regulate the projection conditions, on the other hand, the reception conditions of the spectator. The interaction area, let us call it the scenic device, is composed of a plinth with 1,10 m tall where, by means of two analogical controllers, spectators can interact with the sound and image space of the projection. Inside the plinth there

¹³ About this concept see the Tânia Ruiz Gutierrez thesis: *Étude sur le temps et l'espace dans l'image en mouvement. Tissage vidéo, objets spatio-temporels, images prédictives et cinéma infini*, Université Paris 1, 2004. As well as the works of Masaki Fujihata (Field-Works, 2000-2008), of Marion Tampon-Lajarriette (Manderley, 2007), of Dietmar Offenhuber (Wegzeit, 2002), and of Joachim Sauter and Dirk Lüsebrink (The Invisible Shape of Things Past, 1995), among others.

¹⁴ From an etymological point of view, the word has two derivations: from the Latin, *Dispositus* and *disponere* that means to make use of, or to put, to configure the different elements of a group; from the Greek, *Sustema*, that refers to the systemic side of a group, where the all it is greater than the addition of its parts.

¹⁵ See: FOUCAULT, M., *Dits et Écrits*, Tome 1, 1954-1975, Gallimard, 2001; LYOTARD, J.-F., *Des Dispositifs Pulsionnels*, "Débats", Galilée, 1994; DELEUZE, G., and GUATTARI, F., *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980. See also: AGAMBEN, G., *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?*, Paris, Payot&Rivages, 2007.

¹⁶ Usually an analogy with Plato's cavern is established here.



is the technological apparatus – computer, projector, connecting cables, a fan and two sound columns (see Fig. 2). On the same plinth, several miniature pieces of furniture were placed, which make reference to the furniture business of H el ene Aughain (we should remember that H el ene uses her apartment as a furniture deposit and as a business place (see Fig. 1)). The two manipulators, adapted from a Playstation game pad, are used as participants interaction means. One is for navigation and orientation (forward / backward / left / right) in the projection space (the apartment representation); the other one is used to stop or advance the filmic narrative (see fig. 1 and 2).

4.2 *The navigation and the interactive off-screen field.*

If the represented space is the image field, “all that the eye sees in the screen” (Burch, 1986:39) the off-screen has as its diegetic space everything that is not showed or that is absent from the image. Besides the four privileged spaces of the off-screen (left, right, superior and inferior sides of the screen) No el Burch establishes a fifth space that is located behind the camera (the space where the different elements of the film production are) and a sixth that refers to everything behind the physical elements of a scene, a character or even the horizon of the image¹⁷. In opposition to this, to Jacques Aumont it is in time that off-screen effects develop: “if the field is defined by the dimension and spatial measures of the screen, the off-screen is produced by its temporal measure”, and it is the privileged dimension of the potential and of the virtual, “place of future and past, long before it is of the present” (Aumont, 1989:30). In “MURIEL, 1st act” the off-screen is all that and much more. It is also that virtual navigation space where the spectator can move around between those “filmic objects” that compose the interactive plot. Besides all extra-diegetic possible spaces, this virtual and infinite world composes a new *profilmic* space (Souriau, 1953:8), capable of reconstruct all the narrative path of the spectator in the diegetic field. This new interactive off-screen field makes possible to the spectator a certain freedom of movements in the virtual space: going forward, going back, rotating, a number of possible dislocations in this space apparently without horizon or visible ending. Nurtured by the will to convoy the film discourse, the spectator (the *spectacteur*, Jean-Louis Weissberg, 2002) searches in this labyrinth of pre-ordered scenes a constant adjustment of the best possible location.

When Alain Resnais’s film was presented to the public, in 1963, due to his mosaic structure and to the extremely fragmented edition, many spectators felt great difficulties in apprehending the story and in situating themselves at the diegetic level. “MURIEL, 1st act” proposes a new configuration of the diegetic time and space. In a virtual apartment, suspended from the void, with no walls that support it (as in *Dogville*, Lars Vons Trier, 2003), the installation devices relates the position of each scene with the interactive path of the spectator. It is just this interactive path, free and spontaneous, that defines the originality of our proposal, hoping that the spectator can finally relate each scene with its diegetic inherent space.

5 Analysis of the spectator’s participation.

“MURIEL, 1st act” had its first installation at the Contemporary Art Museum of Funchal (MAC) in Portugal, in 2007. In order to study the public’s reception we developed an experimental study through a questionnaire. The questionnaire is composed by 19 questions, 17 with a 7 level Likert scale answer being 1 “I totally disagree” and 7 “I totally agree”. The two last questions were open ones. The research instrument was developed to diagnose 1) how comfortable spectators felt with the interactive devices, 2) the level of curiosity they felt, during their participation, about what was coming next, 3) the perceived level of control over the

¹⁷ Andr e Gaudreault and Fran ois Jost propose a seventh space, the one that emanates from extra-diegetic sound: the sound and music track as well as the voice-over of a character (GAUDREULT and JOST, 2005).

installation as well as the satisfaction produced by that control and naturally 4) the pleasure or frustration produced by the experience.

In this first application, we obtained 24 answered questionnaires, with predominant age groups between 16-25 (6) and 36-45 (9) years. The scholarship of the participants varies between postgraduate studies to primary education, being that 14 of them have completed an under graduation. The participants in the inquiry reveal to have few habits of cultural consumption. The majority (12) affirms to go sporadically to the cinema, and 7 go only 1 to 2 times by month, 15 visit exhibitions sporadically and 5 of them 1 to 2 times by month.

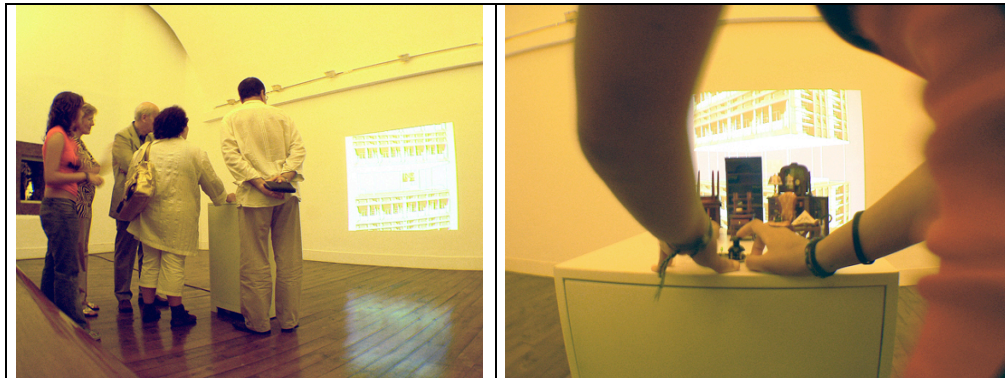


Fig. 3. Two pictures of spectators participation.

A global analysis of the results allows us to say that the general appreciation of the public to this work was clearly positive and that were created good conditions to a meaningful experience. In fact, the averages obtained to all questions were positive (13 of 17 answers presented positives average values but some with high standard deviations values). The exceptions to this rule were obtained for the two inverted questions (for example one asked for the preference to see the film in a movie theatre and average answer was 3) reinforcing these results. The specific questions give us some trends worthy of discussion.

All presents results refer to average values, except when mention different. The questions about curiosity and interest were three; the initial interest about the film (5.08), the initial interest about the installation devices (6.47) (this one is the highest value we obtained, with the smallest standard deviation calculated 0.66). The third question of this group was about interest along the installation course (4.7). In some way related to this, we had a question about attention concentration, which scored 5.22 (significantly only two answers are above point 4 of the scale and 7 respondents choose 7, the highest level).

Also positive were the results obtained with the questions about pleasantness of the experience (5.4), the enjoyment with the interaction (5.04) and even about the easiness of the experience (4.76).

About the interaction devices, specifically, the values are not so clear to interpret. A question about frustration scored 3.5, a relatively low one, which seems coherent with the one of the easiness of the experience (4.76). None-of-less, to the question about the absence of problems of the device, the answers result in an average of 4.5 (with a strong standard deviation- 2.06). All this results are near the middle point of the scale.

About spectator control over the installation course, we not only asked if was felt that he/she had control and also if he/she would like to have more control over it. The first one obtained an average of 3.69 (which seems in accordance with the author intention) and the second 5.0. The open questions had as its objective to get some more information to explicit the answers to this one but their own answers are ambiguous or vague.



So, based on these results, we find that, on the one hand, the public expresses that the participation in “MURIEL, 1st Act” was a positive experience. Moreover, two fundamental conditions for a meaningful experience were elicited: curiosity/interest and attention. Further studies must explore if it is only the overall quality of the work (in which we believe) that account for these results or, at what level, novelty is interfering here since we are facing a non-specialized public not familiarized with contemporary art. On the other hand, public reaction seems saying that on interaction devices as well as on the control conditions over the installation improvements would be welcome.

6 Conclusion.

Supported essentially in an artistic context but with a very strong cinematographic approach, we have described throughout this article the functioning conditions of “MURIEL, 1st act”, the underlying implementation devices and its theoretic framework.

With a hyper-fragmented filmic narrative, and a type of mosaic *montage*, Muriel ou le Temps d’un Retour seemed us to be the ideal movie for an adaptation to the interactive device created. Our intention was to provide to the spectator a bigger interest within the part of the story we have selected. Some time disoriented, another with difficulties on following the narrative, the spectator will be able to discover, in our proposal, an alternative reading of the film. The creations of those “spatio-temporal” filmic objects allowed to generate a virtual cartographic map where the story develops. This way, it is possible to relate, more easily, each scene with the place that it occupies in that specific virtual space. On a narrative continuity level, the Alain Resnais proposal does not suffer any changes or adaptations; therefore we use the original sequences of the film. However, it takes to the spectator the adequate use of the interactive device, if he/she does not want to lose the all story. The navigation devices assure the spectator freedom of movements around the diegetic environment that is to say to dislocate all around the virtual space. However, he/she is seen limited to following chronologically the novel, without never being able to interfere, unless to decide about the pauses or advances of the film narrative. The reception study shows that control is an issue to further developments since spectators felt little control over the installation and desire to increment it. However the overall results are very positive revealing “MURIEL, 1st act” as an interesting and motivating experience. These results encourage us to improve and mature this interactive cinematic model.

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