The National Library of France: all the Memory in the World
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Through a short documentary film made by Alain Resnais in 1956, titled Toute la mémoire du monde, we discover the National Library of France. In the synopsis, the documentary is described as an essay film, while critics hold it up as a lesson in cinema due to its use of tracking shots and its "systematic exploration of the site" in particular. The topic of this essay film is the library as a technique to prevent forgetting, as a repository of "all the memory in the world" and as a mechanism for accessing this memory. This article, meanwhile, reflects on the role of the building itself in this endeavour: how does it convey a specific idea of the library? What is the role of objects, devices and spaces in the life of the library, which revolves around the accumulation, organisation and operation of knowledge? With reference to Toute la mémoire du monde, this article not only describes how we know the building designed by Henri Labrouste for the first Imperial Library and for the National Library in the mid-20th century (which welcomed Resnais almost 100 years after Labrouste’s important intervention), but also suggests how we can interpret the relationship between institution and building and the crucial role of architecture in shaping this relationship.

Toute la mémoire du monde is a twenty-minute documentary film in black and white about the Richelieu site of the National Library of France, which occupies a building that was largely designed by Henri Labrouste between 1858 and 1868. The short film was directed by Alain Resnais in 1956. Alain Resnais is better known for his subsequent film, Hiroshima Mon Amour (with a script by Marguerite Duras), which was awarded the International Critics’ Prize at Cannes in 1959, making him a prominent figure in the independent film world. Toute la mémoire du monde was commissioned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is the fifth part in a series titled ‘The Encyclopaedia of Paris’, which was co-produced by the French national public broadcaster RTF. Resnais was named director after Films de la Pléiade had agreed to partially fund the project and the participating institutions (the Ministry, RTF and Julien Cazin, director of the National Library of France) had agreed on a documentary format for the film. Resnais based his work on two synopses written by Remo Forlani in 1955, which presented the National Library through the notions of universal memory and quick access to it via information systems, and of the fortress or prison guarding this memory. At the time when Alain Resnais was filming Toute la mémoire du monde, his most well-known, controversial short film was Nuit et brume (1956), which explored the German concentration camps, combining devastating black-and-white archive material with new, colour shots of the ruins of the camps. Memory is a recurring theme in Resnais’s work.

In Toute la mémoire du monde, there is only one shot of the entirety of the National Library of France. A fleeting bird’s eye view captures the elongated block that is home to the library. The narrator exclaims: “The library is a model memory, a store for everything printed in France”. The block containing the library is foreshortened, rectangular and divided into six parts, three of which are voids (the Cour d’Honneur, the Jardin —or Carré— Vivienne and the Cour Tubéuf) and three solids: the Oval Room by architect Jean-Louis Pascal and the building by Henri Labrouste, which features two parts: a reading room and a repository. In Resnais’s shot, the latter are situated in the nearest corner. The image of the building as a whole is passing and largely irrelevant to the short film. In Toute la mémoire du monde, Resnais focuses on everything else instead: fragmented interiors, convoluted passageways and unexpected juxtapositions.

The fragility of human memory, says the narrator, forced people to develop aides-mémoires to counter it. For Resnais, these memory aids are specific objects: papers, files, books, medals, cloths, pitchers, games, stones, maps and even records like his documentary (hence the camera and microphone at the start). A documentary must be specific rather than general; it must film something. As such, when the narrator reveals the treasures hidden within this “silent citadel”, he shows us the manuscript of the Goncourt Journal, the Codex Persesianus, lost editions of Harry Dickson, the manuscript of Pascal’s Pensées, the collection of Émile Zola’s writings, the Rock of Baghdad, drawings by Villard de Honnecourt, royal medals, a lengthy manuscript by Victor Hugo and Cabot’s mapamundi, among other items. Humans poured ideas into these aides-mémoires —some good, others bad; some true, others invented. Together, this is how knowledge is formed: something was thought of and recorded, to be revisited and expanded upon or instead refuted. Accumulated objects, ideas and knowledge need a fortress to protect them and mots-clés or keywords to allow them to be accessed.

The library is the sum of a series of isolated, repetitive processes: prints are transported, stamped, labelled, classified and catalogued, before being distributed and moved around the library space. These actions can be seen on several occasions in Toute la mémoire du monde. Each of these processes gains meaning when they are understood to be connected to others, when they form part of a system. The system for adding newspapers to the library is based on a repetitive process whereby three men carry sacks from outside the building into the basement, transporting a total of 200 kilos of paper each day; a library employee receives the sacks; another places each newspaper into an envelope; each item is stamped by a library employee; and another three people place the envelopes onto the shelves. Each individual carries out a single part of the process. The sequence must be meticulously followed because “a collection loses value if it is incomplete” and everything is important “even if an item is only requested once”.

Meanwhile, the system for expanding the collection (via gifts, purchases, exchanges and, above all, legal deposits) means that every print that enters the library must be stamped, its index card must be completed, it must be assigned a place according to its thematic field, its position within this field must be indexed, it must be added to the catalogue and, finally, it must be placed on the appropriate shelf. These actions each take place in different parts of the library: Resnais follows the trajectory of the book Mars, which is
exactly the same as any other, and the book is passed from hand to hand by library employees, travelling on a trolley past uniformed men wearing caps, women in light-coloured dresses and men in protective gowns who repeat a series of processes in the intermediate space between outdoors and in. A request from a reader triggers another set of processes, which make up the consultation system: the request form is received at the desk; the librarian identifies the thematic field to which it corresponds (and/or the section of the repository where it can be found, which amounts to the same thing); the librarian sends the request to the section via pneumatic tube; the form is received by a repository employee, who identifies and collects the book required, leaves a ‘ghost’ index card in its place, transports the book on a trolley and sends it to the librarian via the lift or service lift to the area where it is handed to the reader. Millions of index cards have changed hands; millions of messages have been sent via the tubes; millions of prints have been transported along the library’s corridors; millions of books have been opened and consulted over and over again. Isolated processes have been repeated and strung together into systems. These systems make up some of the stories told by Resnais in his short film. There is nothing special about these processes, systems or stories, yet the history contained within the library is truly epic. Beyond all the possible epics of human thought recounted in books, the ultimate epic story is that of the library as an artefact.

The library as an artefact is the physical counterpart of the processes, systems and stories that organise and preserve all the memory in the world. We can see this material universe in Resnais’s film: desks, chairs, shelves and drawers; trolleys, lifts, service lifts and pneumatic tubes; corridors, staircases, mezzanines and repositories; courtyards, anterooms, rooms and halls. Rather than a backdrop or inert frame, this material universe is a device. The reception desk at the legal deposit library is a device allowing a print to enter the knowledge system; the shelf where a book stands is a device allowing it to occupy a precise location within its field; the trolley transporting a book to the reading room is an obvious device as it moves and operates, just like wheeled chairs, lifts and stairs, which connect different areas. Each device is specialised: activated by an instruction, it performs its task, regardless of its size or complexity. It is not only furniture that is a device; the building itself is too. In the case of the National Library, Henri Labrouste’s building is a device in itself as it can function even without the rest of the system. In his eyes, the memory of the world is not abstract but tangible; it is all the memory in the world.

Is it a machine? Without a doubt, the building is operated. Its different parts function in specific ways. The sum of the parts gives rise to systems (of knowledge or information), which are made up of specific, repetitive, reliable processes. Yet Resnais’s metaphor is organic: the library is the memory of the world, or in other words, the brain. The shots taken by Resnais in the catalogue – a room devoid of decoration and excess, tidy and white, with several pillars, numerous wooden chests of drawers and a few people moving discreetly from one to another – provide proof: the narrator says that this is the brain. Further proof can be found in Resnais’s images from the control room: a metal panel the size of a whole room, covered in buttons, knobs, switches, lights, indicators and clocks, with an operator monitoring every detail (and, by extension, controlling the organism’s temperature and fluids). Drawing on a literary, nautical metaphor, the narrator suggests that this is Captain Nemo’s control room, but we know that he is referring to the hypothalamus.

Toute la mémoire du monde presents a history of the organism that contains all the world’s knowledge, unveils the machine that systematises human ideas and records the devices employed to bring order to the objects of memory. The short documentary combines and assembles small fragments (static shots, pans, travelling shots, dollying shots, high-angle shots, low-angle shots, bird’s-eye views, close-up shots; script, music, sound; information, description, interpretation, fiction) into a collage of the life of the library in 1856 and the finished product is a whole made of parts that work together. Since film administers time (just as architecture administers space), Resnais’s re-presentation of the library builds on the storyline hinted at in the title: this is all the memory in the world. In his eyes, the memory of the world is not abstract but tangible; it is not a general category, but a specific, tactile, quantifiable thing. This material memory, however, exceeds the volume of the library building (or buildings), both literally (the repository always lacked space) and metaphorically (the “world” in the title is always larger than this Parisian block). Consequently, just as the building cannot be understood through its spaces and can only be explained by its functions, the library as an institution cannot be explained by its mission, organigram, laws or customs and can only be fully comprehended through its physical form. The library as an institution is the building housing the National Library of France on the Richelieu site after Labrouste’s intervention. Labrouste gave material substance to the “Imperial Library” project at the request of the director Jules-Antoine Taschereau between 1858 and 1868. Taschereau’s focus was on centralising the library, echoing the instructions of the Empire, and on making it expedient through an emphasis on cataloguing. Labrouste’s work defines the place occupied by the library (and its boundaries), as well as influencing its functioning. He designed his exterior buildings on the existing complex (preserving the Cour d’Honneur, the Jardin Vivienne and what was then the Cour de l’Administration but is now Cour Tubeuf, with its perimeter buildings), corrected the bar over Rue Richelieu, cleared the block of private properties on the corner of Rue Vivienne and Rue Colbert to make space for Pascal’s Oval Room and cleared the corner between Rue Richelieu and Rue des Petits-Champs. In this empty space, he placed his strategic rooms: the reading room and the repository. Occupying inner areas of the block, they were lift from above: the reading room is a single large space (the pillars are 10 metres tall, while the total surface area of the room is 1500 m²) and the total
The height of the repository is divided into four levels that are each 2.3 metres high, with floors made from metal grates to allow the light to pass through. Labrouste opted for a cast iron structure due to its fireproof qualities, in conjunction with masonry walls like those he had used at the Sainte-Geneviève Library (1844-1850). Unlike the latter, however, Labrouste created a dense repository of books, a busy beehive that freed up the remaining space for visitors to consult and quietly read the volumes.

Despite being interdependent, the reading and repository areas are separate to allow them to be specialised. The form of each of the two spaces reflects their use, although one is decorated and the other is not. With this project, the focus of the architect’s work shifted from the urban form (which is also present) to the interior: indeed, Labrouste’s most strategic, enduring work is primarily interior. Countering the dictum of classical architecture that emphasises the discipline’s representational role, Labrouste treads a different path. Although the building represents something, it does so not through a single external form but through a series of lived, used, connected interiors. In other words, Labrouste’s building not only reshapes the site and use of this block on Rue Richelieu, but also establishes an eminently modern approach by designing specialised, separate yet interdependent interiors, making a typological contribution that transcends the building itself.

Resnais captures both Labrouste’s library and the library as it appeared following the process of aggiornamento led by the architect Michel Roux-Spitz during his time at the National Library between 1932 and 1953. Julien Cain, who was director of the library from 1930 to 1940 (and is mentioned by Resnais in the acknowledgements at the start of his short film), said in the magazine L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui in 1938 that the renovation sought “to adapt an ancient institution” more than two centuries old. By the time this issue of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui had been published, much of the work was already complete despite the ongoing war interrupting the renovation process. Cain encouraged the idea of the World’s Brain and his plan for the library reflected this concept: it was to be “a sort of mental clearinghouse for the mind: a depot where knowledge and ideas are received, sorted, summarised, digested, clarified and compared”. This notion was central to the first World Congress of Universal Documentation, which coincided with the Paris Exposition of 1937. The modernisation of the building and especially the new communication technologies seen in Resnais’s documentary are the product of this idea and heighten the impact of Labrouste’s approach.

The National Library of France captured by Resnais is, therefore, the sum of a series of buildings added together over time. Its final form is a rather haphazard balance between asymmetrical solids and voids entrapped in an eternally provisional layout, which, nevertheless, preserves the constant flows of things, information and ideas circulating within it. Tout la mémoire du monde portrays both the content and the container, revealing how they both take shape: it depicts a sum of parts that weigh down and occupy the space and the abstract, alphanumeric index that brings order to them. Tout la mémoire du monde reveals the building and institution simultaneously. The documentary serves as a humble key to a door that allows us to glimpse “... this and other worlds” or tiny fragments of human knowledge, upon which we can draw every time we embark on a search of all the memory in the world.
Notes
02. Among those involved in the short film were Chris Marker (film director), Jean Cayrol (writer), Agnès Varda (film director) and Maurice Jarre (musician and father of Jean-Michel Jarre).
04. “[…] the book being processed was not a real book, but a non-existent title in the real Petite Planète (Little Planet) series of travel guides edited at Éditions du Seuil by none other than Chris Marker. Physical details of the book seen in the film included a cover photo of the Italian actress Lucia Bosé and a table of contents with the letter Z, polyphonies and mixtures”. When theFrançois-Mitterrand Library opened, the prints were inventoried and assigned a year and a serial number. Other departments using the Brunet system (five categories: Polite Literature, History, Sciences and Arts, Jurisprudence, Theology), the prefix ‘Ge’ for geography, etc. Meanwhile, the library also uses an analytical indexing system, RAMEAU (Unified Encyclopaedic and Alphabetical List of Subject Authorities), and the Dewey system for open-access materials and legal deposits. See https://www.bnf.fr/fr/a-cotation-la-bnf and https://www.bnf.fr/fr/indexation-sujet-les-referentiels-utilises-par-la-bnf.
07. “[…] The Royal Library was transferred to Rue Vivienne in 1866 by Colbert, to the building at number 49[…].” “[In 1724, the Regent [Philippe of Orléans] transferred the Royal Library to the old Mazarin Palace”; “[In] 1834, the layout of the buildings had not changed in a century, with the exception of the large courtyard, which had been closed on the Rue Colbert side […] This was the state of the buildings before the radical transformation embarked upon by Labrouste”, writes Michel Roux-Spitz in “La Bibliothèque Nationale de France”, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui (year 9, nº. 3, March 1938, p. 30), my translation. Until Labrouste's intervention, it could be considered that “the Library did not yet [form] a circumscribed quadrilateral[…] because several private properties continued to occupy the northeastern corner of the block. Galvez, op. cit, note 26, my translation.
08. Labrouste refused to share his plans with his client, Taschereau, who “would never forgive him for not informing him of the layout of the future buildings from the start of the works”. Ibid., p. 32, my translation. None of Labrouste’s plans for the project were preserved, except one small plan of the whole site. When Roux-Spitz’s team embarked upon the renovation of the Library, they had to survey and plot the existing site before they could design their interventions. Roux-Spitz, op. cit., p. 32.
09. Comparison of the state of the buildings in 1834, prior to Labrouste’s work (left), and Labrouste’s plan (1859). Ibid., pp. 30-31.
10. Natural lighting had to be used to avoid the risk of fire.
11. At Sainte-Geneviève, the repository is on the lower floor and the reading room on the piano noble.
12. The repository at the National Library preforges later high-rise repositories: “We have already pointed out… the value of the approach taken by Labrouste to building the large central repository of prints. His bold use of cast iron [de la fonte et du fer], the innovative layout of the shelves, the lighting via the glazed roof and translucent slabs created a true silhouette of books (the first in the world)… [This large-scale approach has been taken to the extreme by the Americans, who have expanded upon Labrouste’s original idea…] Ibid, p. 99, my translation. The high-rise approach to repositories (“the American model”) refers to the “library towers” found at the universities of Pittsburgh, Rochester, Nashville and Yale in the United States, as well as the Ghent, New Bodleian and Cambridge University libraries, among others.
14. Roux-Spitz was awarded the Prix de Rome in 1920 and held the positions of chief government architect, editor of L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui and lecturer at the École Nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts.
15. Roux-Spitz’s main task at the time was to build new repositories for books (at Versailles), which freed up space to reorganise the Richelieu site in order to “consolidate the book repositories again” in the print section according to “Labrouste’s original plan”. Julien Cain, “Bibliothécaires et architectes”, in L'Architecture d’Aujourd'hui, year 9, nº. 3, March 1938, p. 3. According to Cain’s list, two basements were to be built beneath Labrouste’s repository, as well as two floors above it; the administration was to be reorganised in the basement; a power plant was to be built; the buildings were to be equipped with electricity and air conditioning, and mechanical means of transport were to be installed, among other requirements. The upward extension of Labrouste’s repository was not implemented in the end but the basement extension was completed, along with new foundations to allow the new upper floors to be built.
16. The war also interrupted Cain’s time as director. As a Jew, he was deported to a concentration camp in Eastern Europe following a decree from
Vichy, as José Meyer reports in “The Bibliothèque Nationale during the Last Decade: Fundamental Changes and Constructive Achievement”, *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, University of Chicago Press, vol. 12, nº. 4, October 1942, p. 826. The text by Meyer dates from 1942 so it does not include the happy news of the liberation of the concentration camp where Cain was being held (Buchenwald) in 1945, nor of his return to the National Library and continuation as director from 1946 to 1964.


18. “During the Paris Exposition in 1937, a World Congress of Documentation was held” begins a short note signed by “P. R.” in *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, year 8, nº. 3, March 1938, p. 8. Paul Otlet was among the participants. On this occasion, the library exhibited part of the surveying work that informed Roux-Spitz’s renovations (op. cit., 9), my translation.

**Images**

