

(1) *L'année dernière à Marienbad* and the cinema of ambiguity

Initially denied a release by its distributor, who saw no commercial potential in its obscure formalism, *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, or (2) *Last Year in Marienbad*, henceforth to be referred to simply as *Marienbad*, appeared finally in 1961, fifty years ago, having won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, to be greeted by critical plaudits on the one hand, while being decried on the other as meaningless pretentious drivel. Before long it became one of those films one just had to see, and about which hold an opinion, (3) rather like those of Lars von Trier today. It remains one of those unchanging jewels of the medium (4), immune to the vagaries of style and fashion, so hermetic is its world, so devoid of context, so timeless its themes. With this film cinema, at the tender age of 65, finally grew up and asserted itself as art.

(5) Some meditation of the nature of cinema is perhaps desirable here. The new medium was born just before the novel, that great literary endeavour to combine narrative with the representation of lived reality, arrived on the threshold of modernism, (6) giving greater importance to the psychology of character in its seeking after truth than to the accumulation of sociological detail. Consequently looked down upon as a form of mass entertainment, (7) the cinematograph, as it was first called, nevertheless granted the verisimilitude of photography an altogether greater impact: (8) pictures that flickered, (9) people and objects that moved in depth.

(10) Godard once famously remarked that cinema was truth twenty-four times a second, and the illusion of movement rendered possible by a defect in the eye (11) known as 'persistence of vision' (the same phenomenon that enables you to draw pictures in the night air with a sparkler) (12) at first held audiences spellbound with actuality footage and travelogues (13), then acquired the grammar (14) of close-up (15) and medium shot; but it was the device of splicing shots together to produce a sequence that revealed the narrative potential of the new medium (16); editing introduced the reverse angle shot, the possibility of parallel action, of story continuity, in short the organisation of film time; (17) not to mention some

ideological applications courtesy of Soviet montage, juxtaposed images meaning *one* thing. By the 1920s cinema's expressive capabilities were being plumbed by German cinema (18), and with it an attempt to give the emotive states of characters visual manifestation through décor, makeup and lighting.

Since cinema's primitive beginnings there had been a tension between the apparent truth of a medium which records what it sees through the incidence of light on photo-sensitive film, (19) and its more oneiric or expressive ability to give substance to the workings of the imagination. Initially this was exploited for comic or fantastic purposes: in *Let Me Dream Again* (1900) (20) a husband cosies up to a dancehall girl, only to wake from what was a dream and find himself next to his wife. (21) By the time of tonight's film, 1961, both film and the novel had moved on.

With the addition of sound at the end of the 1920s the cinema was now a fully evolved narrative medium. (22) In the mainstream, and this is important to stress, this meant clear dramatic progression from exposition through to resolution with a sense of guiding moral purpose: the story moved in a straight line and good was ultimately triumphant. Within the scene, shots moved from master (23) to medium shot to shot-reverse shot for dialogue as the latter reached its dramatic point. Nuances of genre overlaid these conventions with the individual tropes of the musical comedy (24), the gangster film or western.

Towards the end of the 1950s, while they worshipped certain genre craftsmen of the Hollywood studio era, the French directors of the so-called New Wave criticised an essential complacency in mass entertainment, whereby cinema achieved acceptability by annexing the codes and practices of a national literary heritage. At the same time the societal *angst* of the nuclear age brought with it a retreat in the importance of plot and character, to be replaced by a contemplation of the void, in the cinema of Ingmar Bergman or Michelangelo Antonioni (25), or a self-reflexive contemplation of cinema's own essence, in the films of Jean-Luc Godard. It is in this context that *Marienbad* emerged, through a collaboration between director Alain Resnais and writer Alain Robbe-Grillet. (26)

Resnais had worked in short films (27), such as *Nuit et Brouillard* (28), on the Nazi concentration camps, and *Toute la mémoire du monde* (29), on the national book repository, that showed a preoccupation with history and memory. This carried over into his feature work with *nouveau romanciers* Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet. The Duras film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, (30) juxtaposed the love affair of a Japanese with a French woman tormented by memories of the occupation with the story of two towns, Hiroshima, with its own burnt-on memories, and Nevers, where her trauma took place. *Marienbad* (31) is concerned with a man (X) who attempts to persuade a woman (A) that she had agreed the previous year to leave her husband (M) and run away with him. Time, memory, trauma.

The *nouveau roman*, (32) alluded to just now, moved the novel on from a philosophical contemplation of the individual's place in a godless universe, to which it had been taken by Camus, to a point where, since the universe was meaningless and without purpose, there was total refusal of plot and character, or any reflection on the part of some omniscient narrator that might attempt to create order and meaning out of the action. Likewise, the character's own subjective impressions, his psychology to use a more fashionable term, were discarded in favour of an exhaustive inventory of his visual observations. In the case of Robbe-Grillet (33) there was a preoccupation with geometric forms in description and a disruption of chronology. Vision, form, time.

One can thus begin to see how Robbe-Grillet's work intrigued Resnais, not to mention the appeal for the author of the medium of cinema, and the very formal setting of *Marienbad* within the grounds of a vast luxury spa and château (34), its ornamental gardens and corridors offering exquisite vistas framed in Dyaliscope, the anamorphic widescreen process used for the film. The issue of chronology is alluded to in the title, and much is made of the extent to which X and A's recollection of events the previous year is reliable.

(35) So let us recap. We have a medium whose very visual nature offers both hotwire access to the brain through its dreamlike imagery and associative power, and an atavistic knack for telling stories. Now, just as the *nouveau roman* occupied

itself with the building blocks of novel writing – the order of words, of blocks of narrative, the problem of narrator point of view – so the cinema was about to concern itself with the language of cinema itself, the medium rather than the message.

(36) Having signalled that *Marienbad* is not concerned with telling a story, one might be considered foolhardy for attempting to give a synopsis. (37) However, it might be useful for those of you who have not seen it before, and provide a reference point for discussion to come. Just after the commencement of the film we see guests from the hotel – among them stands the husband 'M' – watching a play (38) whose action clearly reflects that of the central couple in the film, a fact emphasised by using the voice of the actor who plays 'X' for his counterpart on stage. We then see the guests mingle in dinner dress, exchanging platitudes, or alternatively frozen in mute poses (39). X observes a couple who appear to be having the same conversation he will have with A during the rest of the film – perhaps it gives him the idea? The husband 'M', or so we assume him to be, plays a mysterious game with X (40), which he does throughout the film, now with matches now with cards, without ever failing to win. X proceeds to take A through a series of reminiscences of what occurred the previous year, in an attempt to convince her that she is supposed to be waiting for his return so that they can finally leave together. In one of these memories they discuss the significance of a pair of statues overlooking an ornamental lake (41). In another she breaks a heel while trying to re-join her friends (42), or was it while walking out with X? In still another, we see her in her bedroom where he comes to find her (43), an event pregnant with trauma and which seems finally to draw an emotional response from A. X shows her a photograph, taken the year before, of A on a bench by a plinth, but we see later that she has dozens of such photographs (44) in her drawer (has this process of persuasion been taking place year after year, or month after month?) As you can see, it is impossible to 'tell' this film without resorting to the language of cross-reference or ambiguity, for so is it designed. In the latter third of the film, X becomes less and less certain of himself, and there is the suggestion by A that he might have to wait 'just one more year' before she will go with him. In a memory of X next to the statues mentioned earlier, A comes to

warn him with a voice full of emotion, that he must leave (45). He does so by retreating over the stone balustrade, but when we next see it, with M on the scene, part of it has collapsed. The suggestion of foul play is emphasised by another image in which M appears to shoot A in her room (46), presumably out of jealousy. Earlier in the film M is among guests practising the use of firearms in a shooting range, but when it comes to X's turn to shoot he turns in the other direction and aims at, in a reverse cut, the approaching figure of A. Softening the view of the skeletal figure of M is the scene where he lies across A's bed and tells her sadly that she is going to leave him (47). Indeed, as the husband leaves to attend the late-night performance of the play we see open the film, A arranges to meet X at the foot of the stairs to the lobby, telling him, however, that if her husband arrives before the stroke of midnight she will not go with X. The clock chimes, the same chiming we earlier heard ending the play with the woman's accompanying words 'Je suis à vous', X appears on the stairway and together they leave into the night. M arrives, too late.

(48) While such an account might seem reasonably coherent, the language of *Marienbad* makes the artifice of the undertaking immediately apparent, and its contradictions render much of it ambiguous. To begin with it is a question of staging: no one in the film, with the exception of X, looks like a character in a normal film. Instead they resemble automata; they do not eat, drink, get up, go to bed, kiss or fight, but merely stand or sit around, (49) or else dance in a manner suggestive of those interweaving figures on top of Swiss musical clocks. The setting, a luxury hotel full of classically proportioned rooms and corridors (50), with baroque ornamental carvings and stucco mouldings, surrounded by apparently limitless gardens (51) whose rectilinear avenues are surmounted with geometrically arranged bushes, which do not even cast shadows, whereas the characters do, calls to mind a gilded cage. Could they all be ghosts, unaware that they are dead? Early on they are described in those terms: 'figés, morts, silencieux'. But if they have no substance, why do they cast shadows? The identity of the location is itself open to question. If last year the couple met, as suggested, at Frederiksbad, then are we now at Marienbad? What then, of the title? What, indeed, of the fact that not only are the statues (52) that played such an important role at Frederiksbad also present here

and now, but neither is there any perceptible difference between the present setting and that of the recollected memories. (Ironically two Bavarian chateaux were used for the filming, though co-mingled indiscriminately.) (53) When we look at the first scene at the statues, (*slowly*) in the first shot of A and X at the balustrade there are lawns and avenues behind them and another gravel pathway in front, (*wait*) but in another taken from behind the statues there is an ornamental lake. The effect is disorienting, and there are other examples. (54) After the play has ended at the beginning of the film, a woman in a pearl necklace turns to look behind her (like the mythical Eurydice), and the décor changes from the theatre to the lobby, to her momentary bemusement.

In the area of performance, as has been noted, the actors had very little room for manoeuvre, stiffness being *de rigueur*. Moreover, Robbe-Grillet had recorded every line of dialogue in his meticulously detailed shooting script, which Resnais insisted on playing to his actors before takes, further confining their approach to inflection in delivery. (55) Only Delphine Seyrig was spared this approach, Resnais instead choosing to direct her himself. As a result her performance is the most yielding to multiple interpretations. Whereas Albertazzi, who plays X, is unique in being relatively supple in movement and warm in regard, (56) A appears at times to share his romantic longing, (57) while at others to be tired, bored or apprehensive (58), even fearful. (59) (*slowly*) One of these moments occurs in the bar scene when X succeeds in conjuring in her mind a memory of A in her room. A series of flash cutaways gradually increase in length, (here X seems to succeed in impressing on A's consciousness a memory hitherto suppressed, or perhaps un-lived) until we see A among her shoes (an allusion to the broken heeled shoe of another memory), followed by her recoil from some aggressor and the breaking of a glass toiletry dispenser. This is then matched by a similar recoil at the bar and the breaking of a glass. (60) Ambiguously, the incident is later repeated after a very different memory of meeting X in the garden at night in her black feather peignoir, (*pause*) with the husband offering her a drink of water to recover from her malaise. Both versions of the event are linked to trauma, the one of sexual violence, the other of foul play.

Ambiguity in *Marienbad* extends to all aspects of the *mise en scène*. If we examine costume, the men are almost entirely shown in evening dress, except for the daylight scene between X and A in the garden. But A's clothing changes with disorienting regularity. (61) In an early group of scenes in the film we begin with A standing in a doorway in evening dress. As X's voiceover says how she hasn't changed, we see her in the same characteristic pose, left hand placed in the hollow of her right shoulder, but in daytime dress. We then have two significant shots, one of a pair of men (*pause clip*) seated playing a game against a *trompe-l'oeil* painting designed to reflect the symmetries and vanishing points of the chateau and its surroundings. (The French expression, actually used elsewhere in the spoken text of the screenplay, means 'deceive the eye' and refers to the creation of an optical illusion through the manipulation of two and three-dimensional effects in art or architecture. Truth and illusion) (*Resume play*) The other shot is a brief view of the Frederiksbad statues before they are actually spoken of in the screenplay, an example of visual premonition common to both Resnais and Robbe-Grillet. (*Pause*) As X takes A's hand to lead her away there is a cut and another change of costume as he leads her in a dance. The effect is to disorient the viewer, who is trying to piece together some sort of chronology for what he sees. *Marienbad* rejects chronology along with character, context and action, because it is concerned not with restaging time in the manner of a conventional narrative, but with deconstructing it, after the manner in which our memory reshapes it. As if to reinforce this idea, (62) when A next appears in that silvery knee-length outfit, it triggers a fuller recollection of the statue episode.

As we have just seen, the element of film editing, or *montage*, is intrinsic to this manipulation of time in the film. The order of shots obeys no immediately apparent logic but appears out of sequence, as memories themselves occur out of sequence, according to their importance. Those scenes and lines most repeated in the film are therefore the most important. In the former category are the pair of statues and their disputed allegorical significance, and the scene in the bedroom; in the latter the words, '*Vous n'aviez jamais l'air de m'attendre*', or similar, '*Il est trop tard maintenant*', '*Vous avez or aviez peur*', the tense shift showing the equivalence of past and present, as events seem destined to repeat themselves indefinitely.

(63) *Marienbad* has drawn, indeed invites, a range of interpretations, and such is its slipperiness that no single one quite satisfies. (64) For some X is the sole character in a world of automata to be endowed with memory, and attempts to convince A so that he can save her from the meaningless gestures and rituals that make up existence in the château. If he cannot do so by the stroke of midnight, he is fated to begin the whole process again, hence the variety of remembered images thrown up for us to puzzle over: this is not the first time. We see already that whilst it is no doubt devoid of narrative context (we know nothing of these people or what they do, how they have become rich, whether they are married, even their names), *Marienbad* is full of mythological context, alluding to story structures and sometimes discarding them. (65) (The shooting of A by M culminating in X's objection, '*Non, cette fin n'est pas la bonne*'.) In the light of the above we might think also of Orpheus and Eurydice (66), the hero saving his beloved from the land of the Dead. This idea is in turn reinforced by the character of M, (67) the actor Sacha Pitoëff surely being cast for his implacable death mask-like features. (68) In many of his scenes he is playing a mysterious game which he always wins, and at which the hero attempts several times to best him. This is at once a metaphor for the intractable puzzle of the film itself, and a structure designed to recall the challenges of Hades or the riddle of the Sphinx, (69) or even the game of chess in *The Seventh Seal*.

Other mythologies are conjured in other ways. (70) The opening titles roll over lush Wagnerian romantic music, evoking Tristan and Isolde. (*pause*) They are then discarded in favour of contemporary organ music, the accompaniment for much of the film, though the Wagnerian music makes reappearances (71) (M for King Mark?). The broken heel and chiming of midnight of course recall Cinderella, (72) while the importance placed upon doors (*fausses portes*) and mirrors remind one of (73) Cocteau's *Orphée*, itself of course constructed around the Orpheus myth. Finally, the whole film, from screenplay to setting, is a labyrinth (74) in which X attempts to reel in the thread of time and make good his escape with his Ariadne (this time the initial letter, A, is conveniently the same).

For the writer Pierre Andelot, the character X (75) is a prisoner of the closed and rigid world of the film and tries to impose some sort of story on it, a love story, in order to escape boredom. (75b) He endlessly directs A, as again with the scene at the statues (*pause*). (75c) Or again later in the lounge when he insists to her that she is afraid of something. Of what? Of whom? Like a film director, he tells her what to do with her hand, when to turn, how wide to open her mouth and eyes, until he succeeds in wresting her from the control of the movie and leaves it behind, bringing about an end. Other interpretations have been advanced: he is a psychiatrist, she a patient in an asylum; she is Resnais resisting the directions of the closed puzzle of Robbe-Grillet's screenplay, at times leaving doors open that should be closed, or refusing to decide on which side of the bed to lie down. (76) (*slowly*) In this extraordinary sequence, she seems to have wrested control of both *mise en scène* and editing, resulting in disorienting mismatched shots as X struggles with his memory of a scene at which he was not even present, clearly because his voice is in fact that of Robbe-Grillet the writer and *metteur en scène in absentia* whose shooting script Resnais changed very little, including, no doubt, this very scene. Far better to see it as part of the meditation on memory, and as the equivalent of Robbe-Grillet's exhaustive obsessing over detail in his novels.

(77) It is worth looking at the opening of the film, as it illustrates a number of things I have been talking about this evening. (78) To begin with we have a voice, introduced during the titles. The strong Italian accent tells us it is the voice of our hero, played by actor Giorgio Albertazzi. It is a mesmerising description of the hotel, given in a sentence apparently without beginning or end, and which fade-outs and fade-ins render it difficult to reconstruct and give order to. Amongst the technical anatomisation of a baroque château, the phrase 'je m'avançais, une fois de plus' is repeated; not only has X been on this journey more than twice, but furthermore the imperfect tense implies that *this* time is being recollected itself from some future present vantage point. More important in this sequence formally, however, is its status as an epitome of the film to come: out of order, repeated, though with some variation, and apparently without conclusion. How telling then, when the conclusion does come in the form of the play the hotel guests are watching, which both depicts

against a backdrop resembling the location of the film a culmination of the hero's quest (the line *Maintenant, je suis à vous*), and renders possible at the film's conclusion the actual flight of X and A. Furthermore, through repeated listenings, transcription and cutting and pasting I have reconstructed the following sentence, admittedly without beginning (I shall read the French, if you would like to follow the translation on the powerpoint): (79)

des salles silencieuses

où les pas de celui qui s'avance sont absorbés

par des tapis si lourds, si épais,

qu'aucun bruit de pas ne parvient à sa propre oreille

comme si l'oreille elle-même

de celui qui s'avance une fois de plus

le long de ces couloirs, à travers ces salons, ces galeries

dans cette construction d'un autre siècle

cet hôtel immense, luxueux, baroque, lugubre

où des couloirs interminables succèdent aux couloirs

silencieux, déserts

surchargés d'un décor sombre, froid de boiseries

*de stuc, de panneaux moulurés, marbres, glaces noires, tableaux aux teintes noires,
colonnes*

encadrements sculptés des portes, enfilades de portes, de galeries

des couloirs transversaux qui débouchent à leur tour sur des salons déserts

des salons surchargés d'une ornementation d'un autre siècle

des salles silencieuses

(At this point we are back where we started and the cycle is repeated and could go on forever, but there is a wormhole, for towards the end of the sequence the words '*comme si l'oreille elle-même...*' are concluded differently, leading to a way out of the labyrinth)

où les pas de celui qui s'avance sont absorbés

par des tapis si lourds, si épais,

qu'aucun bruit de pas ne parvient à sa propre oreille

comme si l'oreille elle-même

(80)

était très loin, très loin du sol

du tapis, très loin de ce décor lourd et vide, très loin de cette frise compliquée qui couche sur le plafond

avec ses rameaux et ses guirlandes, comme des feuillages anciens

comme si le sol était encore du sable ou des graviers, ou des dalles

de pierre sur lesquelles je m'avançais une fois de plus

comme à votre rencontre

entre ces murs chargés de boiseries, de stuc, de moulures, de tableaux, de gravures encadrées, parmi lesquelles je m'avançais...parmi lesquelles j'étais déjà moi-même en train de vous attendre

très loin de ce décor où je me trouve maintenant devant vous...

What we have now is a piece of prose very like those of Robbe-Grillet's novels. For example, in *La Jalousie*, parts of which are reproduced here (the scene between A and M in her bedroom; A rummaging through the drawers of her *écritoir* for a photograph, the name of the supposed taker of the photograph, Frank). In *La Jalousie*, as I say, the author allows his jealous husband to be distracted by contemplation of his banana plantation, with rigorous description of the various rows and parcels of banana trees, at various stages of harvest and replanting. (81)The cataloguing, the preoccupation with geometric shapes, (82, 83) are reproduced in *Marienbad*, also by Resnais's camera.

The phantom ride through the château at the beginning, a popular device used in early cinema to suggest for example a train's eye view through a tunnel, mimicked much later in the famous short film 'London to Brighton in four minutes', also suggests a point of view, that of the narrator no doubt, except that it is almost too smooth, too disembodied, and

instead becomes us, the spectator, or aloof voyeur of the darkened cinema. (84) These tracking shots, and others later in the film, anticipate those of Stanley Kubrick in *The Shining*, (85) another story of a character doomed to repeat himself in a hotel whose sumptuous comfort contrasts with the unease of those fated to reside there; the shots of room numbers on doors, of framed pictures representing the hotel and its grounds, that we saw earlier, the presence of a real maze in the Kubrick film (86), the intimations of some past trauma, the drawer full of photos resembling the pages and pages of 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy', the presence of phantom guests in evening dress, all make of *The Shining* an unofficial homage to *Marienbad*, showing how it is possible to build a film merely out of the building blocks of narrative and cinematic form. (87) The presence of a Hitchcock cut-out several minutes in (around the time Hitch also generally made his personal appearances in his own films) indeed suggests mischief afoot between Resnais and Robbe-Grillet, and that we are in danger of taking the film too seriously. It led French critic and writer Luc Lagier to find traces of *North by Northwest* and *Psycho* in the film, (88) the latter Hitch's avowed attempt to make a film purely from the manipulation of the film form, while using the most banal plot and characters imaginable. One could indeed be talking of *Marienbad* there.

(89) To conclude, *Last Year in Marienbad*, (90) is for me the ultimate paradox: a film without plot or characters to speak of, which nevertheless absorbs one totally in a world of fantasy, allusion, puzzlement and beauty – indeed we have not paused to appreciate the ravishingly lit and composed images of this cinematic Rubic's cube. It is also in a sense the ultimate film, since it is purely about film; in as much as film is after all the inheritor of the other arts, all are present here: painting, sculpture, drama, architecture, music, poetry. Finally, by reorganising screen time – by breaking the rules governing the cut, the sequence shot, the sequence – the elements that render narrative in cinema possible, it addresses with audacity the most intangible subject of all: memory. And what is cinema but a fleeting record of remembered people, objects and places, *figés, morts, silencieux*, to which we cling in the vain hope of resolving the unrepeatability of lived experience, of seizing again what is past and possibly meant nothing at all?