

L'année dernière à Marienbad (Last Year at Marienbad)



L'année dernière à Marienbad (*Last Year at Marienbad*) (1961 France/Italy 90 mins)

Source: ScreenSound Australia **Prod Co:** Terra-Film/Société Nouvelle des Films/Cormoran/Précitel/Silver/Cineriz **Prod:** Léon Sanz, Pierre Courau **Dir:** Alain Resnais **Scr:** Alain Robbe-Grillet **Phot:** Sacha Vierny **Ed:** Henri

Colpi, Jasmine Chasney **Art Dir:** Jacques Saulnier **Mus:** Francis Seyrig

Cast: Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi, Sacha Pitoëff, Françoise Bertin, Luce Garcia-Ville, Hélène Kornel

You couldn't have endured this trompe l'oeil style.

– X in *L'année dernière à Marienbad*

A crematorium may look as pretty as a picture postcard.

– Jean Cayrol, *Nuit et brouillard* (1955)

BARILLON: You couldn't let me forget this...this catastrophe! You couldn't just let me sleep...forever!

– Feydeau & Desvallières, *Le Mariage de Barillon*

Alain Resnais' films are famously haunted by memory, but after treating such Serious Subjects as *Guernica*, the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, *L'année dernière à Marienbad* seems at first like a retreat into formalism. Its setting is as far from the real, political, historical world as can be imagined: a large hotel with fabulously geometric gardens, peopled by the fabulously rich, consumed by their own fabulously irrelevant obsessions: did X (Giorgio Albertazzi) meet A (Delphine Seyrig) at Marienbad (or somewhere else) last year? Did A promise to run away with him? Is A married to M (Sacha Pitoëff)? Did (or does) M shoot A? Etcetera. Alain Robbe-Grillet, author of the screenplay, bluntly states: "Let's get one thing straight: these questions have no meaning" (1).

The opening sequence – a visual overture equalled in the cinema only by *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1984) – conjures an atmosphere of constriction,

with slow tracking shots along ceilings, deserted lobbies, and empty corridors. The confining architecture is echoed by the incantatory repetitions of the narrator's voice, weaving in and out of the soundtrack like a faulty wireless, or a broken record; the desolate organ music and seductive camera movements lull the viewer into the same trance-like acquiescence as the audience who watch what appears to be a tableau vivant, or a particularly torpid play.

Marienbad is full of such self-consciousness, drawing attention to its status as exquisite artifice, with paintings, prints, frescoes, statues, plays, dances and games repeated throughout. But this opening also reveals continuity with Resnais' previous, more obviously "political" work: the camera movements through the hall, caressing décor and artworks (and later vivifying a statue in conjunction with montage) recall the explorations of the museums in *Les statues meurent aussi* (Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, 1953); the play between historical presence and present absence (the narrator's voice is un-situated and disembodied; the hotel is initially empty) figured in mournful tracking shots evokes *Nuit et brouillard*; the disjunction between subjective memory and the "reality" of remembered events was also essayed in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959).

Marienbad has one of those structures that are clear enough in their own terms, yet vague enough in meaning to suggest all kinds of allegorical signification (and to lead scoffers to dismiss it as "meaningless twaddle" (2)). We are eventually told the building is a hotel, but the disorientating opening allows us to speculate on alternatives. The overpowering atmosphere of confinement, repetition and inertia suggests, perhaps, a sanatorium for the super-rich, a metaphor, as in Thomas Mann's 1924 novel *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*) for a decadent Europe or social system (both Resnais and Robbe-Grillet were leftists); or some kind of prison, perhaps a World War II prisoner-of-war or concentration camp, with its "guests" removed from time, waiting, unexpectedly and inexplicably vanishing, and sinister groups of men target shooting (the narrator suggests a milieu of oppressive conformity: "It was a place for rest, business was not discussed, no plans were hatched, no one mentioned anything which might arouse controversy. There were notices everywhere: 'Quiet'"). The organ music and resultant church-like or funereal gravitas; the repetition of formulae, ritualistic movements and uniform-like dress code; and the occasional display of cruciform imagery even suggest a religious dimension – perhaps these characters are trapped in Limbo (like the monochrome dead in *A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, [1946])), awaiting some kind of redemption (3). There is a post-apocalyptic, almost science-fiction feel to the film that some critics have linked to the work of Resnais' friend

and sometime colleague, Chris Marker (especially *La Jetée* (1962)) (4). A world where memory has begun to disappear, is distorted or denied.

It is tempting to accept the script or spoken narration, and read the film as a visualisation of the workings of memory: the house, with its labyrinthine structure, false perspectives and *trompe l'oeil* effects is an architectural correlative to the faulty workings of the mind; its weighing down with historical artefacts – statues, furniture, furnishings, paintings – mirroring the mind's encrusting with fragments of past and barely remembered events. It might be worth asking at this point why it is *Marienbad*, rather than more obviously challenging works like *Hiroshima* or *Muriel, ou le temps d'un retour* (1963), that has long since become emblematic of not just Resnais' career, but the experiments of the *nouveau roman* and 1960s European art cinema as a whole (5). Where those other films are fractured in editing and (sometimes bewilderingly) complex in narration, there is something soothing about *Marienbad*. Even if you're baffled by what is (or isn't) going on, you're hypnotised by the beauty of the gliding camera, the glistening Cinemascope images that allow you to take in fully the ravishing décor and grounds, the expensive clothes, the glimmering jewellery and impeccable haircuts. This kind of fetishising of costume and detail is not so far removed from the much-reviled Merchant-Ivory, and leaves *Marienbad* open to charges of prettification, art-for-art's-sake self-indulgence: the ultimate, glossy, air-brushed art-house package (the film opens with the imprimatur of top prize from the Venice Film Festival).

But is this to take the film at its narrator's word, to fall into his self-justifying trap? There is often the tendency with Resnais – such is his reliance on highbrow literary figures for the material of his films – to downplay his importance as generator of meaning in his work (6). This is to overlook a counter-verbal form of memory in the film, the ghosts of cinema past that remind us that *Marienbad* isn't quite the anomaly in cinema history it seems to be: "Resnais belongs to that first generation of film-makers brought up in the shadow of the Cinémathèque Française, the first generation for whom film history...has meant something" (7). If we must assign to *Marienbad* literary provenance, the book it always reminds me of is Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, published six years earlier by a Parisian press (the Russian was an admirer and later acquaintance of Robbe-Grillet). This is another exercise in memory as the narrator Humbert Humbert recounts his obsessive pursuit of a spiritually unobtainable female. Because the novel takes place through the prism of Humbert's mind, and because it is overpowered by his words, his brilliance, his poetry, it is easy to miss Vera Nabokov's advice to "stop searching for symbols and focus instead on Lolita's helplessness, her pathetic dependence on a monster, her

heartrending courage" (8). Similar counter-currents flow beneath the stagnation of *Marienbad*.

Resnais' film may be a study in the workings of memory, but not necessarily memory as guarantor of history and truth. *Marienbad* may also be about memory as power, false memory masquerading as history. The film's architecture, its single most important and memorable "character", may represent the narrator's mind and memory, but it is full of "false history", and deceptive visual effects, such as Renaissance statues masquerading as classical subjects, or mirrors that look like windows. X's dialogue, apparently so sincere and full of meaning, is often assembled from the conversations of other guests. Actions don't match descriptions or sounds, spatial and temporal logic is repeatedly broken by characters. Even the organ score, one person playing a huge complex instrument in an empty church, evoking the grasping memory-seeking of the solipsist, is punctuated by blasts of cod-Baroque set in a Romantic style. Is the question working under the film not whether X met A at Marienbad the previous year, but what he did to her? As the narrative progresses, as X persists in forcing his memories on A, in creating her as a figment of his subjectivity, in prying into her inner life, in stifling her voice (at one point stopping her laugh; "women's laughter is subversive" (9)), she becomes increasingly resistant, calling him insane, and trying to get away. As X's memories elude even his grasp, like a patient under psychoanalysis circling but denying some hidden event (10), more sinister questions emerge. Did X meet A? Did X rape A? Twice, when "force" is intimated by the text, the almost monotonous visual and aural coherence of the *mise en scène* breaks down, camera movements become fast and unpredictable, the image is bleached as the camera "takes" A repeatedly before subsiding into post-coital silence, and what appears to be her surrender. The film plays on images of order (e.g. the game, architecture) and fragmentation (e.g. broken glass, the pieces of the game), possible displacements for violation (the narrator says: "I loved your fear that evening. I watched you, letting you struggle a little.")

Or worse. Did X murder A? ("No, that ending is not right, I need you alive, as you were then"). The second half is full of images of A on a bed, sometimes in a sepulchral pose, her existence as diaphanous as her white dress. Robbe-Grillet may profess such questions irrelevant, but even "abstract", formal experiment is not neutral of social or ideological baggage, especially when it is female "mystery" and "suffering" that is used as its vehicle. Resnais reinstates, as he did in *Hiroshima* and would in *Muriel*, the importance of A's helplessness (Robbe-Grillet was sniffy about Resnais' adding "a bit of psychology" (11)). In the script, she is constructed

negatively, speaking only to deny. The film, unable to break out of the perfect circle it has constructed for itself, needs to resort to the linearity of plot, of violence and escape, to itself escape, or at least end; and A becomes the site of this violence. When the film closes on a twilit shot of the hotel “devoid of memory”, supposedly after the “lovers” have finally escaped, the few remaining lights give way to a final darkness. Architecture here seems to embody less the voice of the narrator than his victim’s soul.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Jean-Louis Leutrat, *L’année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*), British Film Institute, London, 2000, p. 28. The “names” A, M, and X come from Robbe-Grillet’s screenplay, not the film, where “I”, “you”, “he” etc. might be more appropriate. ↑
2. Geoff Andrew, “Last Year at Marienbad”, in John Pym (ed.), *Time Out Film Guide*, Penguin, London, p. 46. ↑
3. Leutrat, pp. 28–30. ↑
4. Leutrat, p. 65. ↑
5. For more on *Marienbad* and the *nouveau roman*, see Linda Dittmar, “Structures of Metaphor in Robbe-Grillet’s *Last Year in Marienbad*”, *Boundary 2* no. 8, vol. 3, Spring 1980, pp. 215–240. ↑
6. “Resnais’ version is singularly faithful to Robbe-Grillet’s text and generally preserves the import of the verbal materials”. Dittmar, p. 219. ↑
7. Richard Roud, “Alain Resnais”, *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary – Volume 2: Kinugasa to Zanussi*, ed. Richard Roud, London, Secker and Warburg, 1980, p. 855. A quick archaeology of *Marienbad* might unearth the dark fairy-tales of Méliès; the regenerating plots, image-systems and fantastic conspiracies of Feuillade’s serials; the architectural and dress motifs of L’Herbier; the modernist mythopoeia of Cocteau; the physics-defying camerawork of Max Ophuls; the Art Deco dancescapades of Fred and Ginger; the country house metonymy of *Le Règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, 1939); the trauma-through-*mise-en-scène* of Vincente Minnelli; the eternal return to Geiger’s house of death in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946); the metaphysical staging of 1950s Bergman; the nocturnal and ambivalent forbidden love in a bourgeois milieu of *Les Amants* (1958, Louis Malle); the spirals of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). For more on Resnais’ cultural formation, see Resnais, “The Serpents and the Caduceus”, Mary Lea Bandy (ed.), *Rediscovering French Film*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1983, pp. 37–38, and Leutrat, especially pp. 14–16, 20–22. ↑
8. Online [Q&A with Stacy Schiff](#), author of *Vera* (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov), Random

House, New York, 2000. ↑

9. Ginette Vincendeau, "Binoche, the Erotic Face", *Sight and Sound*, vol. 10, no. 6, June 2000, p. 16. ↑
10. Derek Prouse suggests X as A's psychoanalyst, "striving to make her recall a past emotional experience which she has unconsciously blocked from her memory". Prouse, "Last Year in Marienbad", Ann Lloyd (ed.), *Movies of the Sixties*, Orbis, London, p. 30. ↑
11. Leutrat, p. 18. ↑