



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Last Year in Marienbad

'I am now quite prepared to claim that *Marienbad* is the greatest film ever made, and to pity those who cannot see it.' So wrote Jacques Brunius in *Sight & Sound* in 1962, regarding 'the film I had been waiting for during the last 30 years'. Five decades on from its first release a year earlier, Alain Resnais's stylish conundrum still seems conjured out of some sui generis cinematic future. (Which is not to deny its influence on – to name two blatant instances – Stanley Kubrick and Peter Greenaway, not to mention Karl Lagerfeld, whose spring 2011 collection for Chanel played grandiloquently with the costumes and set design of the film.) What Resnais and scriptwriter Alain Robbe-Grillet achieved in *Last Year in Marienbad* was not just the much bruided importation of the narrative techniques of the nouveau roman into film – Resnais had already made *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Robbe-Grillet's texts were anyway indebted to what he called cinema's perpetual 'present tense' – but nothing less than the transmuting of film into a type of sculpture. *Marienbad* is cinema's greatest hymn to stasis.

It was perhaps the mysterious immobility of the film, allied with Sacha Vierny's gliding cinematography in 2.35:1 Dyaliscope, that transfixed and bemused audiences in 1961. (Vierny later commented: 'While the [Dyaliscope] format usually implies a certain immobility, something extremely static, Resnais had a field day with camera movements, low-angle tracking shots.') But at least on the surface, it was the riddle of the film's story and structure that intrigued. Aman (X, played by Giorgio Albertazzi) tries to lure a woman (A, Delphine Seyrig) from her presumed husband (M, Sacha Pitoëff) with the tale of a prior meeting and promise a year earlier. She resists, and the repetitive and labyrinthine pattern of their cross-purposed encounter is played out, with infinite slowness, in the ballroom, bar, garden and bedrooms of a vast, luxurious hotel. The critic Roger Ebert recalls emerging from a screening of the film in Illinois and engaging in earnest discussion as to the meaning of this elaborate game. What had actually happened (if anything) in *Marienbad*? Was the film a dream, a fantasy or a *mise en abyme* about the construction of memories?

On the face of it, then, *Last Year in Marienbad* is 'about' time, storytelling and the lures of memory, in the manner of other great modernist works of the last century. But just as Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, one of the film's obvious analogues in terms of prismatic recall, turns out to be more concerned with bodies, space and things than the subjective machinery of memory, so it's worth asking how Resnais embodied the flummoxing narrative matrix imagined in Robbe-Grillet's script. The answer, as even a confused or resistant viewer must admit, lies in the film's ravishing way with gestures and attitudes, all the 'prodigious tableaux' (as Michel Leiris put it in a letter to Resnais) in which bodies and inanimate objects – they are often the same thing – are discovered. The central ménage is just the pretext for an essay on cinematic movement and immobility.

In his introduction to the published version of the script, Robbe-Grillet remarked that he and Resnais saw the film entire from the outset, as if in architectural plan. A certain frozen quality was already part of that vision; in Resnais's ideas, the novelist writes, 'I recognised my own efforts toward a somewhat ritual deliberation, a sense of the theatrical, even that occasional rigidity of attitude, that hieratic quality in gesture, word and setting which suggests a statue and an opera.'

Almost everything in the closed world of *Last Year in Marienbad* (apart, that is, from Vierny's elegantly vagrant camera) is frozen solid into sculptural poses and gestures. The hotel itself, confected on a set in Paris and in the opulent precincts of chateaux at Nymphenburg, Schleissheim and Amalienburg, is filled with fluid but moribund marble and stucco, gilded ceilings and mouldings, statues and motionless servants. The characters themselves are frequently frozen into attitudes of boredom, impassivity or languor. Even desire and shock are signalled in statuesque poses, and when they move at all the principals wander among guests dispersed around cavernous rooms like so much dusty furniture.

More than this, A (played by Seyrig with a delicate and faintly comical mix of *froideur* and vulnerability) seems at every moment ready to meld with the stone, wood or glass around her. Here she is ascending a huge staircase, her body tensing along the stone banister until she is almost a part of it; or shrinking from the calmly insistent X to fling her arms around a marble column; and again, in a scene that Seyrig later claimed was improvised on the spot, becoming one with the mirrored panels of a wardrobe. Seyrig's insistence that 'certain gestures, which seem highly studied, were simply the result of my awkwardness' is beside the point in a film where human bodies are reduced (or promoted) to the status of metaphysical mannequins. And this is before one has considered the profusion of statues and smaller sculptures that punctuate Vierny's tracking shots through corridors and garden – including the slyly insinuated cardboard cut-out of Hitchcock that lurks in the shadows ten minutes into the film.

If the timescale of *Last Year in Marienbad* is endlessly fluid and vexing – scenes from the present and (possibly notional) past are constantly imbricated in each other – the film nonetheless encircles a solid emblem of the encounter between X and A. In the hotel's intricate and sterile garden, a large sculpture depicts a man and woman in classical dress, he advancing and she holding back. It's the couple's gestures that fascinate X and A: is the man's hand extended to hold her back, and hers to point towards something we cannot see? (In numerous shots, the hotel guests – and the central trio – also gaze out of frame at who knows what.) Sculpture here is an embodiment of hesitation, of a movement stalled and uncertain. It transpires that the frozen universe the film describes is really no such thing: the static bodies, real as well as artificial, are poised at the threshold of decision or action. Statues represent quivering potential, not a withdrawal into stasis.

At one point, in voiceover, X speaks (apparently to A) of a corridor 'through which I was advancing to meet you between two rows of immobile faces'. The brightly lit scene rhymes with another darker one: 15 years earlier, in Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la bête*, a passageway flanked by fragments of statuary,

which turn into living candelabra, had introduced one of that film's motifs and themes – a petrified life suddenly animated by the desire and fear of another. We might even say that the sculptural obsession of *Marienbad* (in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* Jean-Luc Godard speaks of Resnais as a filmmaker who 'makes sculpture') is part of a pattern or frieze in mid-century French film. *La Jetée* (1962) is the obvious comparison: Resnais's occasional collaborator Chris Marker populated his mostly static film with numerous statues and portions of statues. Both *La Jetée* and *Marienbad* are in part films about ruins: the material remnants of vanished civilisations (in Marker's case it's Paris that is ruined; in Resnais's a whole refined culture that appears spectral and distant) and the traces of memories or fantasised futures.

In sum, after 50 years [in 2011] *Last Year in Marienbad* remains no less suggestive and strange in its eerie approach to the condition of sculpture. In his essay 'Notes on Gesture', the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has written that one of the functions of cinema in the 20th century was to rescue the realm of significant gesture that had been destroyed with the advent of technologies of speed and a slackening of ideas of public comportment. If that's true, then for the most part film achieved this through action, in the meaningful arcs traced by bodies on screen, whether comical or tragic. But in *Marienbad* everything stalls, and the history of human gesture returns, this time as shadows and ghosts among the statues.

Brian Dillon, *Sight and Sound*, August 2011

LAST YEAR IN MARIENBAD (L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD)

Director: Alain Resnais

Production Companies: Terra Film (Paris), Société Nouvelle des Films Cormoran, Précitel, Como Films (Paris), Argos-Films, Les Films Tamara, Cinétel, Silver Films (Paris), Cineriz di Angelo Rizzoli

Producers: Pierre Courau, Raymond Froment

Unit Production Manager: Michel Choquet

Unit Manager: Jean-Jacques Lecot

Production Manager: Léon Sanz

Production Secretary: Janine Thاون

Assistant Director: Jean Léon

2nd Assistant Directors: Volker Schlöndorff, Florence Malraux

Script Supervisor: Sylvette Baudrot

Screenplay/Dialogue: Alain Robbe-Grillet

Director of Photography: Sacha Vierny

Camera Operator: Philippe Brun

Assistant Camera: Guy Delattre

2nd Assistant Camera: François Lauziac

Gaffer: Elie Fontanille

Key Grips: Louis Balthazard, René Stocki

Stills: Georges Pierre

Editors: Henri Colpi, Jasmine Chasney

Art Director: Jacques Saulnier

Assistant Art Directors: Georges Glon, André Piltant, Jean-Jacques Fabre

Set Decorator: Charles Mérangel

Ms Seyrig's Two Feather Costumes by: Bernard Evein

Ms Seyrig's Other Dresses: Chanel

Make-up Supervisor: Alex Marcus

Make-up: Éliane Marcus

Titles: Jean Fouchet

Music: Francis Seyrig

Organist: Marie Louise Girod

Music Director: André Girard

Sound: Guy Villette, Jean-Claude Marchetti, René Renault, Jean Nény, Robert Cambourakis

Cast

Giorgio Albertazzi (X)

Delphine Seyrig (A)

Sacha Pitoëff (M)

Françoise Bertin

Luce Garcia-Ville

Hélène Kornel

Françoise Spira

Karin Toeche-Mittler

Pierre Barbaud

Wilhelm Von Deek

Jean Lanier

Gérard Lorin

Davide Montemurri

Gilles Quéant

Gabriel Werner

France/Italy 1961

94 mins

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780