



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 and 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 bruted 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 Thacon
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 Lauillac
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
Héléna 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

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Touch of Evil

Mon 27 Mar 20:45; Tue 4 Apr 14:30; Sun 9 Apr 18:30; Fri 28 Apr 20:45

Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Tue 28 Mar 20:50; Wed 12 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 14 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 14:30

To Sleep with Anger + Borom Sarret (The Wagoner)

Wed 29 Mar 18:10 (+ intro); Mon 10 Apr 12:45; Wed 12 Apr 18:00

Rio Bravo

Thu 30 Mar 20:20; Sun 9 Apr 12:50; Fri 21 Apr 20:20

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Fri 31 Mar 21:00; Thu 13 Apr 21:00; Thu 20 Apr 18:15

Last year in Marienbad (L’Année dernière à Marienbad)

Sat 1 Apr 12:50; Mon 3 Apr 20:30; Sat 8 Apr 18:20; Tue 18 Apr 20:45

La Grande Illusion

Sat 1 Apr 13:00; Wed 12 Apr 20:40; Sat 15 Apr 18:00; Fri 21 Apr 18:15

The Godfather Part II

Sat 1 Apr 16:00; Sat 22 Apr 18:40; Sun 30 Apr 16:30

Nashville

Sun 2 Apr 17:50; Sat 8 Apr 20:00; Sat 29 Apr 16:30

The Passenger (Professione: reporter)

Wed 5 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 7 Apr 20:20; Sun 16 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 18:10

Pickpocket

Thu 6 Apr 20:45; Tue 11 Apr 14:30; Mon 17 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 20:50

The Portrait of a Lady

Fri 7 Apr 14:30; Wed 19 Apr 17:50 (+ intro); Sat 29 Apr 20:15

Code Unknown (Code inconnu)

Sun 9 Apr 15:45; Wed 26 Apr 18:15

The Lady Eve

Mon 10 Apr 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 12:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:15

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