

## Document Citation

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*Last Year at Marion's Pad:* This is the story of an Ambassador who meets a Countess whom he thinks he met once before, but he isn't sure. The Countess knows she never met the Ambassador before, but she thinks that a wine merchant she meets is someone she met once before, but she isn't sure. The wine merchant knows he never met the Countess before, but thinks he met himself once before, but he isn't sure. He also isn't sure he's a wine merchant. This brilliant film was directed by René Clair or Harpo Marx – the producer isn't sure!

–From “A Mad Guide to Art Films,” *Mad*, December 1963



**L**ARRY SIEGEL'S PARODY synopsis may be only moderately funny and even less accurate, but the fact that *Mad* magazine – targeted, in those days, more to adolescents than college kids – would even think to make reference to Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* says something about the film's immediate stature as the artsiest of art films. Or something about *Mad*'s refusal to write down for its audience: Forget *Marienbad*. Did they think any of their readers would recognize René Clair's name?

By foreign-film standards, Resnais's film was a big hit in the U.S. when it arrived here in 1962; Alain Robbe-Grillet's screenplay even received an Oscar nomination. It provoked a lot of debate and analysis and became the icon of pretentious, incomprehensible foreign movies – replacing the previous icon, Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, which the same *Mad* article rendered as *Rosh-Hoshona*, Myer Moore.

The “story” – and I use that word cautiously – is a simple love triangle. At a sumptuous resort, “X” (Giorgio Albertazzi) pitches some furious woo to “A” (Delphine Seyrig), who is there with “M” (Sacha Pitoeff), her creepy husband or lover. (No, the characters don't have names on screen; “X,” “A,” and “M” is how they're designated in the script.) “X” insists that he and “A” met a year earlier, fell in love, and deferred running off together to test their devotion. “A” claims to have no idea what he's talking about. Is “X” just hustling her? Is he insane? Or does she have amnesia? (At one point, there is the suggestion that she's recovering from a breakdown.) In any case, will they leave together?

The story is simple; it's the narrative that's unbelievably complex. The film opens with a voiceover almost too faint to understand. It's so sonorous and hypnotic, it seems to be *trying* to put us to sleep. As it gains in volume, it describes passing through endless corridors; and



~ LAST RESORT: DELPHINE SEYRIG TRIES TO EVADE GIORGIO ALBERTAZZI'S ADVANCES BY DISGUIISING HERSELF AS A POTTED FICUS ~

## Abstruse Triangle

### ‘Marienbad’ is still crazy after all these years

~ BY ANDY KLEIN ~

the camera glides down these corridors. Or are they *different* corridors? Do the descriptions match? After a few minutes, the camera reaches a theater, where a play is in progress. As the voiceover blends into the dialogue on stage, we suddenly wonder whether the voiceover has really been part of the play's dialogue rather than an abstract narration.

As the play ends, the audience gets up and starts chattering. Then everyone suddenly freezes, as though someone hit reality's pause button ... except you notice that “X” or “A” or “M” is alive among frozen humans, almost like Will Smith amidst the mannequins in *I Am Legend*.

Throughout the movie, there is almost constant narration from “X” ... except, as in the above case, maybe it's not always from “X.” Or maybe it's not narration but rather “X” speaking within the scene, but standing just out of frame. Sometimes the voiceover seems to match the visual; other times it doesn't. Yet other times it does, then doesn't, all within the same shot.

Actions are repeated, often in different, contradictory ways. At one point, “A” heads toward the camera several times in a row, in short bursts of a second or two, as though we're watching a damaged DVD/laserdisc that keeps skipping backward. At times, the voiceover seems to be rewriting what we're seeing, trying

out alternate visualizations.

In short, *Marienbad* is a Grade-A, world-class mindfuck. The closest contemporary equivalent might be David Lynch's *Inland Empire*, but, where Lynch seems to have just cracked open his subconscious and spilled everything out, *Marienbad* is rigorously, meticulously structured. (It's also, to its credit, roughly half as long.) There are even hints of a mathematical plan: Not only is the hero named “X,” but he and “M” repeatedly play Nim, the old card/matchstick game. “M” always wins; regardless of how “X” moves, the outcome is the same. The whole progression of the film could be seen as “X” attempting to break free of determinism, frustrating “M” by removing “A” from his control.

To quote Henry Silva in *Amazon Women on the Moon*, “Bullshit? ... Or not?” (regarding my bits of analysis or *Marienbad* itself: your call).

When I first saw *Marienbad* – I was 15? 16? – I thought it was ridiculous – the most boring, pretentious piece of crap ever made. For a variety of reasons – like film school – I ended up seeing it a couple more times anyway. Somewhere around my third or fourth attempt, it all just ... *clicked*. I'm not sure that I've ever had a stronger 180-degree shift with a movie.

Two things gave me a handle with which to process *Last Year at Marienbad*. One was an essay by Robbe-Grillet, in

which – even though both he and Resnais tried to avoid pinning things down – he made it clear that in his eyes the whole narrative was “a persuasion: it deals with a reality which the hero creates out of his own vision, out of his own words.” In sheer plot terms, this suggests rather strongly that, no, “X” and “A” did *not* meet the previous year, that (to put it crudely) this is the story of a dude trying to hustle a chick into bed by insisting that they already had an affair, which she has mysteriously forgotten.

Somewhat that made everything more approachable.

Second – and more important – was discovering what might be considered a “key” into *Marienbad*. For context, look at three other films in which Resnais plays with continuity of time and space. Each has a rational structure within the film to explain its unusual aspects. In *Je t'aime, je t'aime*, an experiment with a time-travel machine goes bad, throwing the hero back and forth within his memories; in the more conventional *Stavisky*, the story is told through the overlapping testimony of witnesses at an inquest; in *Providence*, an amusing mishmash of styles, genres, and constantly revised events turns out to be the drunken nocturnal thoughts of a sick old novelist.

*Marienbad* is much more ambiguous, but Robbe-Grillet helped out by ► p. 28



# FILM

## Abstruse Triangle (continued from p.22)

acknowledging the influence of *The Invention of Morel*, a 1940 science-fiction novella by Argentinean writer Adolfo Bioy Casares. While *Marienbad* is by no means a straight adaptation of *Morel*, the similarities are enough to make *Marienbad* even more interesting.

To North American readers, Bioy Casares exists primarily as a footnote to the career of his far more famous countryman, Jorge Luis Borges. The two were close friends, frequent collaborators, and mutual influences; Bioy Casares even turns up as a character in Borges's fictions (as well as in his own).

The plot of *The Invention of Morel* is *Robinson Crusoe* gone psychedelic. The narrator, an es-

*Morel*, the narrator describes the phantoms as acting as though the island were "a summer resort like Los Teques or Marienbad.")

One of the pleasures of *The Invention of Morel* is that it yields innumerable interpretations. The same is true of *Marienbad*; it would diminish the film to apply *Morel*'s plot devices too rigidly in reading it. *Marienbad* is rich enough to be read as being "about" memory, metaphysics, one or more pathological mental conditions, the blurred distinctions between art and life, and God knows what else.

Robbe-Grillet's take on it emphasizes its connections, not only to *Morel*, but to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* – which leads to a potential femi-



~ MARIENBAD'S SHIFTING REALITIES GIVE NEW MEANING TO THE TERM 'OCCASIONAL TABLE' ~

caped convict, is hiding on an isolated, abandoned island, when suddenly a large party of well-to-do vacationers appears out of nowhere. Their arrival is inexplicable, as is their behavior: They pretend he doesn't exist; they hold picnics in the pouring rain; they have the same conversations over and over. They disappear one day and reappear the next.

The narrator eventually discovers that these are not real people, but 3-D projections of a vacation party from 20 years earlier. One of the phantoms, an inventor named Morel, recorded the entire week with a device which could reproduce touch, smell, and mass, as well as sight and sound. He then set the equipment, powered by the tides, to replay their week indefinitely, conferring upon his friends and himself a form of immortality.

Like *Marienbad*, *Morel* is at once a love story, a metaphysical mystery, and a metaphor. It also provides a sort of internal rationale for the film's jump cuts, time distortions, hallucinatory inconsistencies, sudden freezes, and hip-hoppy fragmentation of continuity. (Robbe-Grillet's choice of title was likely a coy pointer toward the Bioy Casares book: On the third page of

nist interpretation. I.e., like James Stewart's Scotty, "X" is imposing his reality on a woman he barely knows in order to retrieve a lost love, essentially bullying her into playing a role he "writes" for her. (This would be the moment to mention Hitchcock's cameo appearance in *Last Year at Marienbad*: Roughly 10 minutes in, you can see Hitchcock – OK, a promotional cutout of Hitchcock – standing in the shadows on the right side of the screen. Another little pointer, perhaps.)

Besides its influence on films like *The Shining*, *Mulholland Dr.*, and *The Usual Suspects*, *Marienbad* can be seen as a precursor to *The Matrix*, with the latter's cat doppelgangers, frozen crowds, and internally constructed environments. *Marienbad*'s fluid reality is almost like cyberpunk before there was cyberpunk. ★

**Last Year at Marienbad. Directed by Alain Resnais. Written by Alain Robbe-Grillet. With Giorgio Albertazzi, Delphine Seyrig, and Sacha Pitoeff. Opens Fri. at the Nuart.**