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L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE A MARIENBAD. France/Italy, 1961.

(Last year at Marienbad)

Director: Alain Resnais. Script: Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Players: Delphine Seyrig; Giorgio Albertazzi; Sacha Pitoeff.

Alain Resnais began as an editor, then made a number of highly praised documentaries (GUERNICA; NUIT ET BROUILLADE: TOUTE LA MEMOIRE DU MONDE). In 1959, he made his first feature, HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR, and since then has been one of the most widely discussed figures in contemporary film-making.

All his work displays two things: a dazzling technical virtuosity, and a preoccupation with time. Both his documentaries and his features deal with the same theme: the intermingling of past and present, the shifting uncertainty of our memories. In order to deal with this theme, he has made use of the unique resources of film to bring past and present to the spectator simultaneously.

Complex intercutting of newsreel clips and contemporary scenes in NUIT ET BROUILLADE, for example, bring home to the audience the horror of Auschwitz, even as they see the present-day ruins of the camp. The same technique is used, and extended, in his feature films.

Scenes are recapitulated, cut up in different ways, put together in different orders, each new arrangement being designed to throw more light on the action, while emphasizing that no part of it can be taken for granted.

Resnais' influence on other film-makers can be seen in films such as KÅRE JOHN (recently screened in Honolulu), in which a very simple story was taken apart and re-arranged in several different ways, so that by the end of the film, the relationships made sense, and the influence of the past experience on the characters was clear.

Similarly, the story of L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE A MARIENBAD is slight. Two guests at a huge, luxurious hotel meet. The man says they have met before, a year ago, and that the young woman promised then to go away with him. She says that she has never seen him before. He persists, and slowly, she remembers. Or does she?

There is throughout a feeling of uncertainty; is it memory, or illusion? The shifting points of view, jumps in time, repetitions of scenes and phrases in different contexts - all these help to create an air of unreality.

The film is a puzzling one, and like all Resnais' feature films, has caused many critics to spend a great deal of time on interpretation. Some have dismissed it in puzzled irritation; others have seen it as an excuse to appear erudite and profound.

There is, of course, no 'true answer' to the puzzles of the film. It is a brilliant exercise in technique; a clever way of telling a slight story; an experiment with time sequence; a comment on the uncertainty of things.

It is, above all, an absorbing and provocative film.

... Dawn Ryan

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