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Last Year at Marienbad
Directed by Alain Resnais
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House of 1,000 Corpses

Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* returns

BY J. HOBERMAN

The winner of the 1961 Venice Film Festival, Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* returns to us after years of public-domain limbo in a sumptuous new print.

Back in the day, literal-minded audiences had great fun pretending to be baffled by this artiest of European art films. Basically, *Last Year at Marienbad* — which Resnais directed from an original screenplay by “new novelist” Alain Robbe-Grillet — is a situation. The politely avid X (Giorgio Albertazzi) pursues the mysteriously diffident A (Delphine Seyrig) through a huge, mirror-encrusted château, complete with formal garden — “a universe,” as Robbe-Grillet described it, “of marble and stucco, columns, moldings, gilded ceilings, statues, motionless servants.” Gloomy organ music under-

scores the proceedings as X insists against A's protestations that a year ago she'd promised to leave her husband M (the cadaverous Sacha Pitoëff) and go off with him. The tension is never resolved: Is X casting a spell or breaking one?

One thing is certain: Breathtaking in her slouch, the irresistible Seyrig — whose only previous film appearance had been as the put-upon beatnik wife in the entirely different art-house hit *Pull My Daisy* — transforms the noun “arabesque” into a verb. (Later, the Method-school actress would reveal that many of her poses were improvised on the set.) This languid, elaborately coiffed and bejeweled creature — her beyond-Dietrich outfits designed by an uncredited Coco Chanel — embodies obsession. Is she married to Death, who never loses the version of pickup sticks that would thereafter be known as the “Marienbad game”? Or is it Death who woos her? In either case, the spectator is similarly obliged to surrender to the movie's incantatory rhythms and sublimely maddening mannerisms — or else leave the theater.

In Paris, where *Marienbad* was compared to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the movie was an enormous, record-breaking hit with audiences queuing around the clock at the chic Champs-Élysées cinema where it opened. When *Marienbad* premiered in New York the following spring at the old Carnegie Hall Cinema, Bosley Crowther, the proudly square *New York Times* critic, hailed it as “the ‘furtherest out-

film we've ever had.” Jonas Mekas responded in the *Voice* that this only showed how little local reviewers knew about what was going on in contemporary cinema — Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage, for example. Certainly, *Marienbad* popularized a particular and then dated surrealist aesthetic. (Its two antecedents are Joseph Cornell's film assemblage *Rose Hobart*, a portrait of the actress that Resnais could not possibly have seen, and Adolfo Bioy Casares's novel *The Invention of Morel*, a fantastic adventure positing a cinematic virtual reality, which Robbe-Grillet certainly had read.)

Hopelessly retro, eternally avant-garde, and one of the most influential movies ever made (as well as one of the most reviled), *Marienbad* is both utterly lucid and provocatively opaque — an elaborate joke on the world's corniest pickup line and a drama of erotic fixation that takes *Vertigo* to the next level of abstraction. It's a movie of alarming stasis — elegant zombies positioned like chess pieces in a hyper-civilized haunted house — and unsurpassed fluidity. The hypnotic dollies elaborate on those of Resnais's earlier *Hiroshima Mon Amour*; the montage effortlessly synthesizes past and present, flashback and flash-forward, svelte shock cuts and shock match cuts.

Marienbad eludes tense. The movie is what it is — a sustained mood, an empty allegory, a choreographed moment outside of time, and a shocking intimation of perfection.