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Trying to Understand My Own Film

--ALAIN RESNAIS

THE Venice 1961 Golden Lion picture, Alain Resnais' *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, is a 'sealed' work of art. Some of its mysteries are unsolved by the director himself. Two young French writers—Andre S. Labarthe and Jacques Rivette—have been analysing the film with Resnais. And Resnais, in turn, has been discussing its implications with its author, novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet.

The debate started with a detail that may prove for many the big issue of *Marienbad* . . . a game played throughout by the two men, while the woman waits. What is the mystery of the game?

RESNAIS: The game is the only point about which I am unable to tell you anything. I have never played it. Apparently it is very ancient; the Chinese played it three thousand years before Jesus Christ. It was the game of Nim, of which Robbe-Grillet has invented a variation without even knowing it existed.

QUESTION: But it functions less as a game than as a trap?

RESNAIS: Quite. My personal impression is that when Albertazzi loses it is consciously and deliberately. Perhaps through sheer unconcern. In any case X has a very complex character: he has periods of violent wilfulness and obstinacy which abruptly give way to discouragement.

Q: What is the hidden relationship between the game and the film?

RESNAIS: It is, I believe, the necessity of making a decision. Of course, the characters, while playing, may be allowing themselves a few moments' reflection while arriving at their decisions. In any case, the whole thing is possibly a part of the woman's stream of consciousness, as, on the point of deciding what to do, she recalls all the various factors in a few seconds. I don't think there are any other meanings, except possibly that there may be a cyclic recurrence of one's problems. This would correspond to the element of musical form and to the obsessive qualities of dreams. But so far as I am concerned *Marienbad* contains no symbols or allegories.

Q: But there are things which one may take as symbols.

RESNAIS: Yes, of course, one may be reminded of the legend of the Grail, or anything else. But the film is open to any such myth. If you look for parallels to ten different themes, whether mythological or realistic, you will arrive at a correct interpretation of sixty or eighty per cent of the film. But your interpretations will never hold good for the film as a whole.

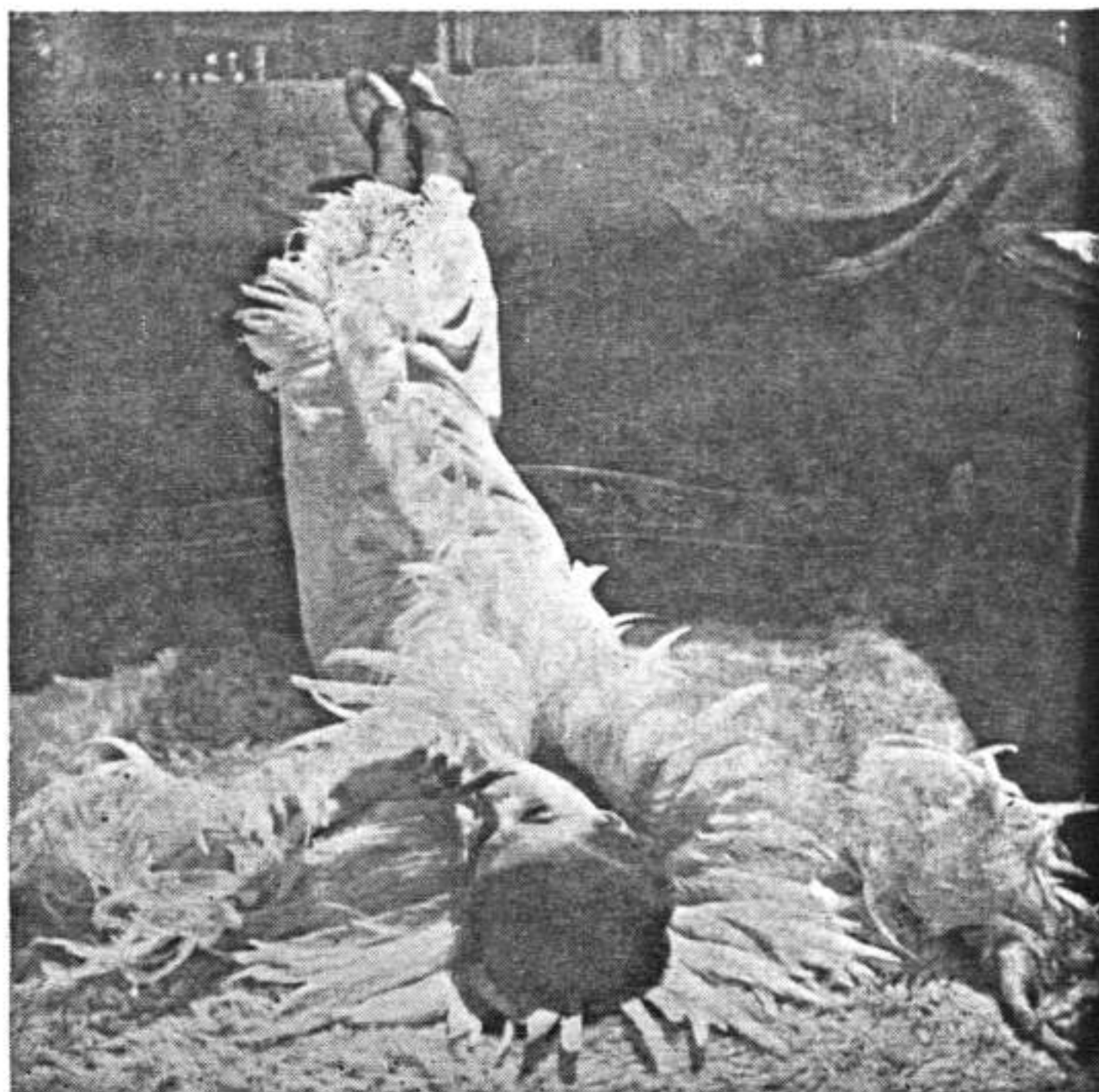
One of the themes which interests me in the film is that of the parallel universe. It is quite possible that all the characters are speaking the truth. We didn't deliberately organise the film around this possibility, but

there is a certain connection with 'automatic writing'. The possibility of 'automatism' can't be dismissed simply on the grounds that Robbe-Grillet's style is extremely precise and his vision very clear-cut. His way of working often reminds me of Le Douanier Rousseau, who used to start his canvas in the left-hand corner, filling in the smallest details, and then work across to finish in the right-hand corner. This is what was so fascinating about the film; we were forced to begin orientating it, I won't say without knowing how it would end, but, all the same, the last pages of the script had hardly been typed when we began shooting. The important thing was a constant fidelity to our intuition. It's the sort of film of which one says, 'Once it's shot, there will be twenty-five possible ways of editing it'. But on the contrary; we always fell back on our original ideas. This is why Robbe-Grillet and I feel so excluded from the film, we look on it as something apart from ourselves. We wanted the film to work quite differently from a conventional entertainment; by a sort of contemplation, of meditation, a series of advances and retreats from the subject. We wanted to feel ourselves in the presence of a sculpture which one studies first from one angle, then from another, from near or farther away.

Q: But there is still a resistance by the cinematic material, which has to be overcome.

RESNAIS: Yes. Personally, I see the film as an exploration of various themes, an attempt to discover which are the blind alleys and which are the real avenues of approach. Both are present in the film. For the time being, I am too close to the film to see it clearly. Every morning I read what has been written about it, and I notice that some critics speak of a work which is as cold as the poems of Mallarmé, while others call it tender and passionate. Which doesn't enlighten me very much. Possibly both reactions are justified, the film may act as something like a mirror for every spectator.

Q: Without setting out to make an exegesis of the film, isn't there a snag in the idea of guiding the spectator towards



PLUMES: Delphine Seyrig, plumed in the 'past' in one of the many atmospheric scenes of Alain Resnais' *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. Her two male co-stars are Giorgio Albertazzi and Sacha Pitoëff. Photo: Sebricon

the past or the future? Seeing it again, we have the impression that the film is not concerned with time so much as with the relationship of the real and the imaginary.

RESNAIS: The film is about degrees of reality. There are moments where it is altogether invented, or interior, as at the moments where the picture corresponds to the dialogue. The interior monologue is never in the sound track; it is almost always in the visuals, which, even when they show events in the past, correspond to the present thoughts in the mind of the character. So what is presented as the present or the past is simply a reality which exists while the character is speaking. The other day, I was talking to a girl who had just returned from India; and suddenly I visualised her wearing a blue dress and standing in front of the temple of Angkor. Yet she had never been to Angkor and the blue dress was the one she was wearing now.

Q: There are a great many interpretations. When Robbe-Grillet summarises the film he describes it from the point of view of the man who suggests a past to the woman.

RESNAIS: That's right. If one accepts Truffaut's dictum, 'Every film should be summarised in one word,' then one can say: *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, or, *Persuasion*. That's a solution, but there are others.

Q: One can also take the film as if the past was real, that the woman repudiates it, and that the man plays a rôle analogous to that of a psychoanalyst, forcing her to accept events which she has deliberately repressed.

RESNAIS: It's from this angle that I directed the film. Some psychoanalytic themes were introduced quite consciously, for example, the ostentatiously large rooms, indicating a tendency towards narcissism. They signify impotence; I finally cut them. At one point Albertazzi hears shots, and

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out during the editing, because they didn't conform to my idea of his character. Or perhaps because I was too aware of their psychoanalytical significance?

Q: The moments of tension between Albertazzi and the girl correspond to those arising between analyst and patient?

RESNAIS: I don't know if you remember that scene towards the end, where the man has his hand against the door, just after the hypothetical sequence of death, where she imagines that if she left with him she would be killed, and so on. When she says, as if in despair, "But I have never stayed so long anywhere", I get the impression, particularly from her intonation, of an acquiescence which is total: so that the scene is real. It is also attractive to conceive of her as an invalid. First of all, that hotel has a special air. And I have always been intrigued by Sacha Pitoeff's words to the woman as she lies on the bed: "You must rest, remember that is why we came here." This always reminds me of *Caligari*, where the Doctor says, at the end, "Yes, he will be calmed, I shall cure him." There does seem to be a certain similarity. Perhaps the hotel is really a clinic.

Q: There is another interpretation which you sensed: that Albertazzi is death.

RESNAIS: Robbe-Grillet finally hit on the phrase 'granite flagstone' and he realised that the description of the garden would fit a cemetery. On pursuing this line of thought, he realised that the film had affinities with the old Breton legends — the story of Death coming to fetch his victim and allowing him a year's respite. But we never attempted to make the film conform to any precise meaning; we always allowed a certain ambiguity.

Stray from Reality

In the first quarter of the film, things seem to have a fairly high degree of reality; we stray further and further from it as the film proceeds; it is quite conceivable that, at the end, suddenly, everything converges, that the conclusion of the film is the most real part of all.

Q: And there'd be a big climax half-way through when she recognises the statue.

RESNAIS: Yes, when she discovers the garden and realises that the garden is, after all, only the place where they happen to be. This poses all the problems of the film's chronology.

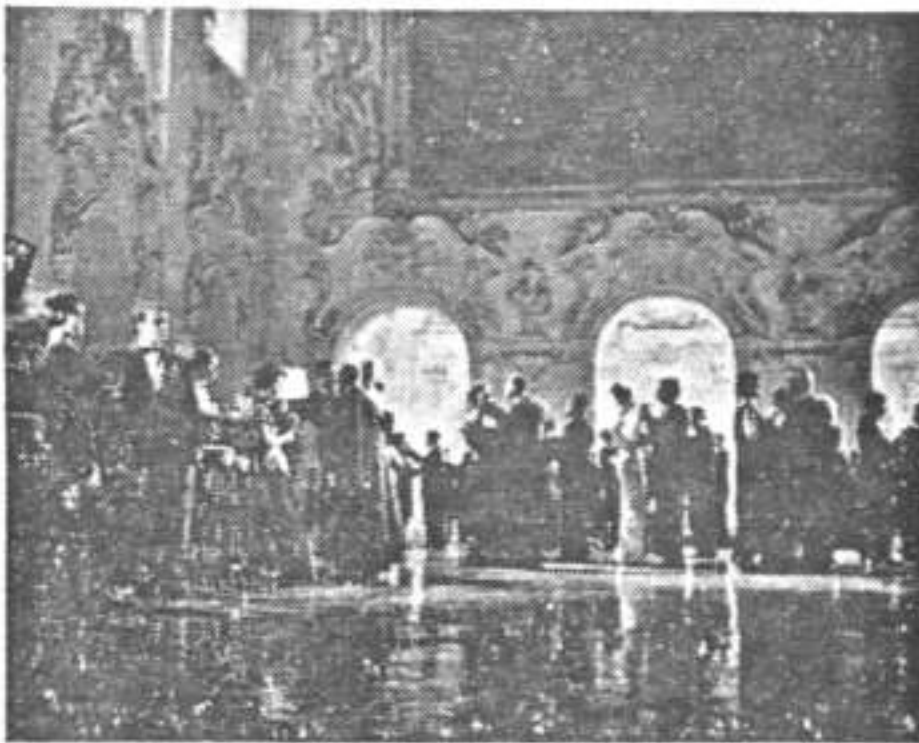
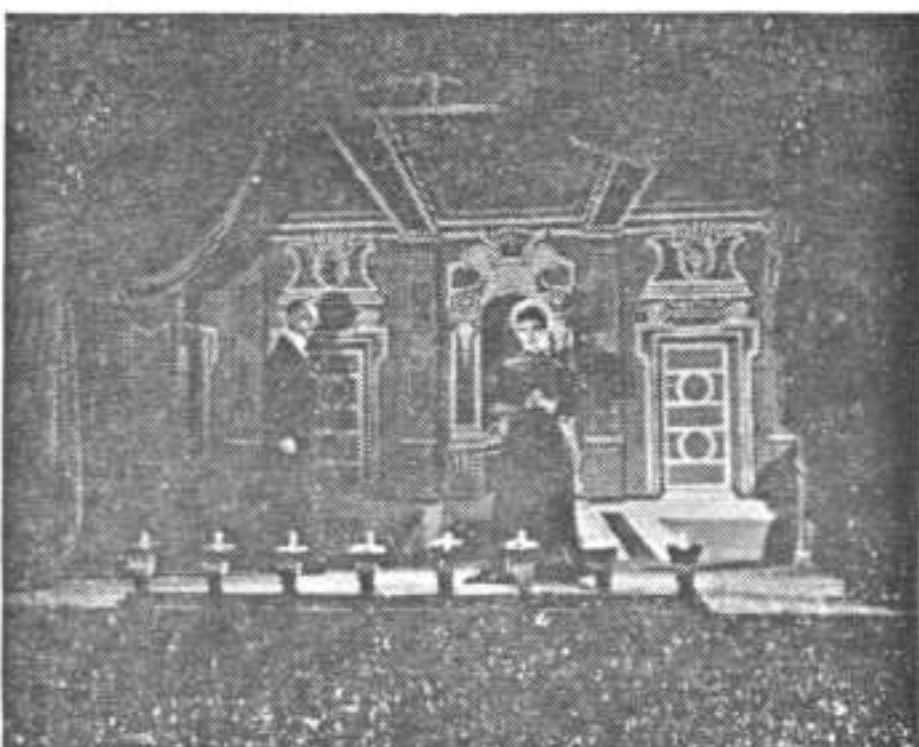
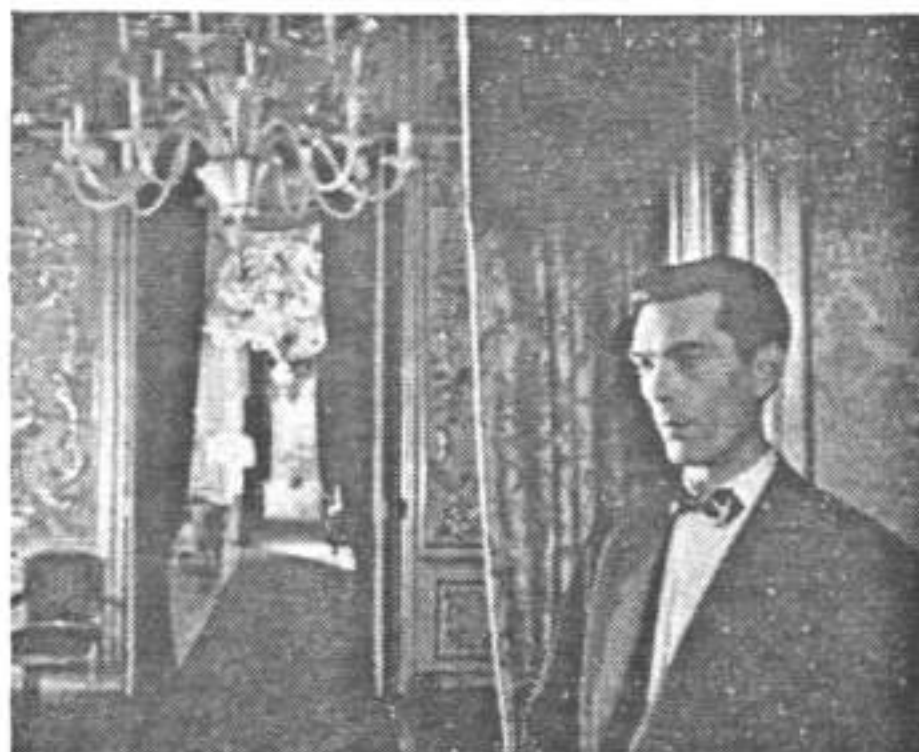
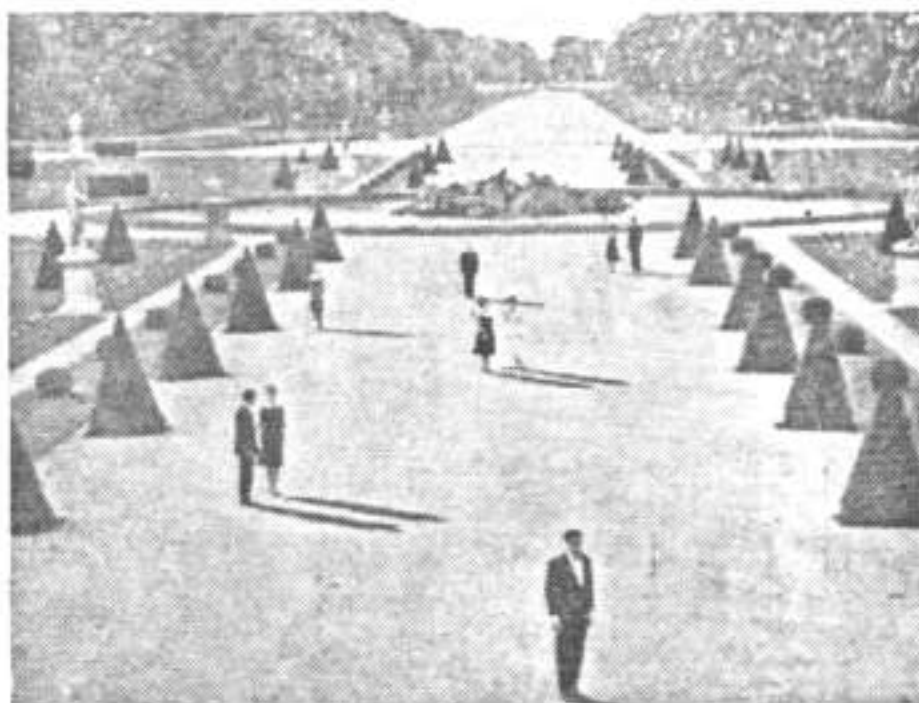
Q: There is a moment when she realises that she is trapped. Is that when she laces her shoe?

RESNAIS: Exactly. From that moment, we can take it that she has remembered. If, perhaps, she is sincere at the beginning; if her refusal is not sheer coquetry, or fear, then, from that moment, she remembers. But, of course, we never really know if the scenes are occurring in the man's mind or the woman's. There is a perpetual oscillation between the two. You could even maintain that everything is told from her viewpoint. Several spectators have told me that the woman does exist, that she died long before, that everything is happening between two ghosts. But, one only thinks of these possibilities after the film has been completed—not while shooting, or even editing.

Q: What was your guiding principle

EVOCATIVE: Scenes from the 'frames' of Alain Resnais' L'Année dernière à Marienbad, an eternal triangle fantasy set in a luxury French hotel. The stars: Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi and Sacha Pitoeff. It evokes moods and ideas that the director himself tries to analyse.

Photos: Sebricon



in organising this material, which you were deliberately keeping vague; was it a feeling of affinity between theme and image, internal rhyming?

RESNAIS: Interestingly enough, I was not the only one to be guided as I was. During the whole shooting there was no disagreement, whether among the actors or the technicians. Now and again we discussed various possibilities. We talked about the shots beforehand, we said: "This is in the 'tone' of the film, this isn't". But such discussions never lasted more than a few moments. We were all compelled to follow the one path, from which we were not allowed to stray. It almost became teamwork, of a sort; we were prisoners, not of a logical argument, but of a para-logic, which kept us in constant agreement, from Philippe Brun to Sacha Vierny or Albertazzi. It would be most interesting to draw up a diary of 'correspondences' in the selection of locations and actors. There was any number of bizarre coincidences, phenomena which would have delighted André Breton or Jean Cocteau. I have the impression that the form must have pre-existed, I don't know how or where, and that somehow, as one writes, the story automatically takes the mould.

Every time I make a film I discover that one can't allocate gestures or words to the characters just as one pleases. There was a moment, during the preparation of *Marienbad*, where I arrived with my little black notebook and suggested to Robbe-Grillet that we should introduce the real world under the guise of conversations concerning a political problem, which would be insoluble, at least for those who were interested in it. But we realised that the real world would be introduced by the spectators themselves as they watched the film, and that it was impossible to include them in it.

Not Free

At one point I also wanted the woman to be pregnant; I mentioned it to Robbe-Grillet, but it turned out to be hardly feasible. We were not free. I am convinced that we don't make these films as we choose.

For me the film represents an attempt, still crude and primitive, to approach the complexity of thought and of its mechanisms. But I must stress that it is only a small step forward compared to what we should achieve eventually. I have found that in each descent into the unconscious an emotion is born.

I remember how I felt while watching *Le Jour Se Leve*, with its sudden moments of ambiguity, as when the image of the wardrobe begins to fade out and another scene gradually materialises. In reality we don't think chronologically; our decisions never conform to an ordered logic. We all have clouds, factors which determine our being but are not successions of logical acts following a perfect sequence. I am interested in exploring that universe from the point of view of reality, if not actually of morality.

Q: There is the danger of falling into a trap, rather like that which Paulhan mentioned in connection with language; what one thinks of as the height of liberty is liable to be for someone else totally arbitrary.

RESNAIS: The difficulty is inherent in all communication, whether between two people or ten million.

One has to know how much of one's

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subjective reality one can share with others (for we have sight, hair, thought, and so on). One arrives naturally at the idea of a 'global unconscious'. I am attracted by the idea of applying disciplines rather different from those of the most contemporary films. It arouses my curiosity. In the Cinema I am drawn to the idea of popularisation. A book or a painting first make contact with a thousand people, while a film reaches millions straight away.

From this angle, it is interesting to recall the experiences of a writer in 1880 or a painter to only a few connoisseurs. I dislike sectarianism; and any attempt to demolish the walls of the *clique* delights me for its own sake. In any case, even if one wanted to repeat exactly what others have already done, the chemical composition of the Cinema is too different. When Van Gogh amuses himself by copying Delacroix, or Picasso Velasquez, the result is a completely new painting. Of course, the Cinema is rather clumsy, with its concrete images. Its style is rather pachyderm. We are still afflicted by the old dichotomy between the realism of Lumiere and the fantasy of Melies. We wobble between these two alternatives and often fall between two stools. *Lola*, for example: is it Lumiere or Melies?

Form Important

When I see a film, I am less interested in the characters than in the play of feelings. I think we could arrive at a Cinema without psychologically definite characters, where the pattern of feelings exists freely, just as, in a modern painting, the play of forms is more important than the 'story'.

Q: What alarms us is the position which René Clair pushes to its logical absurdity when he says: "Shooting is just a chore".

RESNAIS: For me, shooting is elucidation. I do make small sketches beforehand, but for the sake of peace.

Q: While shooting, what attitude do you adopt towards your sketches?

RESNAIS: I still study them. It helps in my relationships with the actors and the cameramen. They save the actor from getting panicky eight or ten days before we shoot. If he has read the shooting script and has a clear idea of it, and then, while shooting, I place him in a position or composition which hasn't been foreseen, he is apt to worry. And as I like everyone to be as relaxed as possible on the set, I prefer arguments to be over before shooting. I'm all in favour of rehearsing the entire film before shooting begins.

For *Marienbad* we drew up a complete chronology on squared paper. And before beginning any scene with the actors, we said, 'In the editing, this scene follows such and such a scene, but, in actual chronology it follows another scene, which will appear much later in the film'. I frequently recorded a fragment of the preceding scene, so as to work from the continuity rather than from the cue. This chronological chart was drawn up after the scenario was finished. Obviously, all the changes of costume correspond to different 'layers' of time.

Dilatation of Time

That isn't the 'key' to the film, assuming there is one. But one could edit the film so as to restore the chronological order of the scenes. One might see the film as extending over a week, or with all that is shown in the present tense as taking place from Sunday to Sunday inclusive. This doesn't stop Robbe-Grillet from saying: "Maybe it all happens in five minutes". This is consistent with the dilatation of time in dreams, at least as far as we understand the mechanism of dreams.

Q: Your montage is in a sense the modern version of the 'montage of attraction'. For Pudovkin, the shots were the words of a phrase, whereas for Eisenstein each shot was in itself a living element.

RESNAIS: Eisenstein has more in common with the encounter between 'an umbrella and a sewing-machine on a dissecting-table'. And insofar as I remain very aware of the Surrealist discipline, I feel much nearer Eisenstein's conceptions. Each shot retains its life.

Q: There is an attitude of great humility before each of the elements, whether in reality or on creative work, which must preserve its organic life and at the same time be part of an organic whole.

RESNAIS: I would be reluctant to transform a setting, even in small details, to suit the camera. It is up to the camera to present the decor in the right way, it's not for the setting to conform to the camera. The same holds good for the actor. I have an immense respect for an actor's work. How rarely we alter the shooting to suit an actor's feelings, whereas we are constantly changing it on account of the weather!

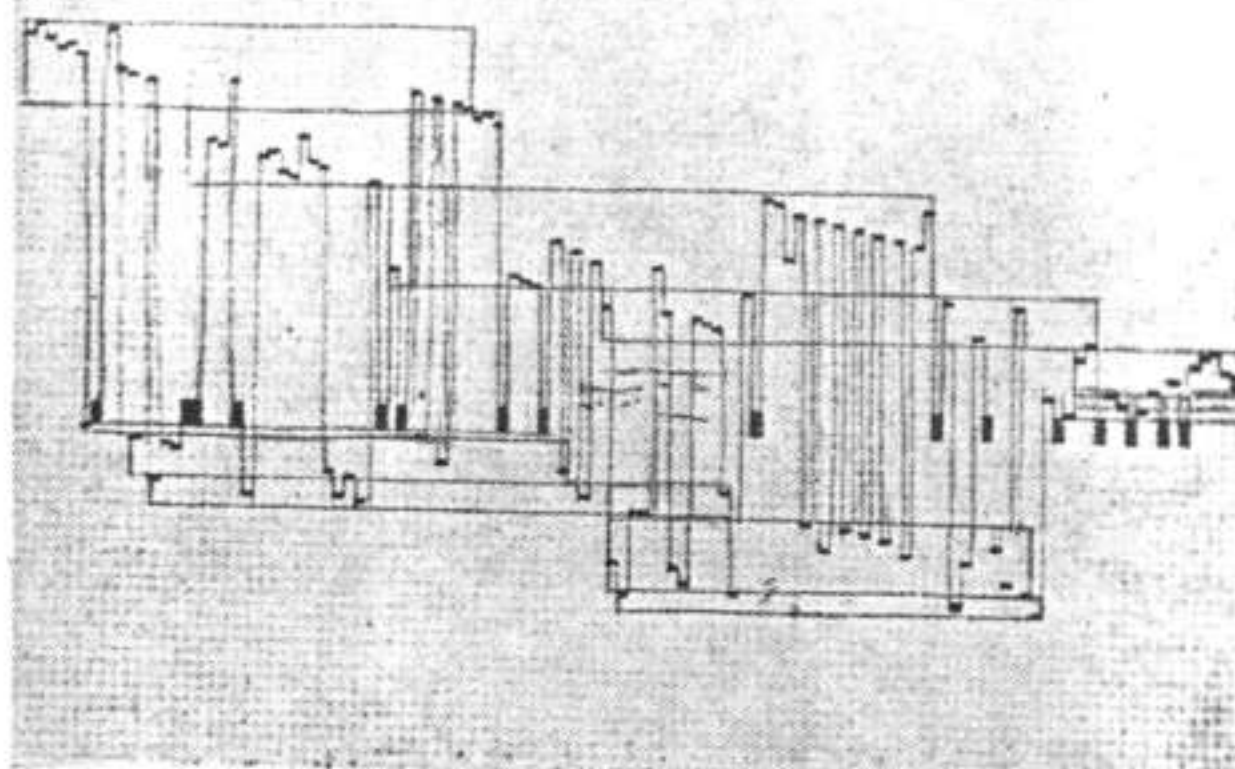
Translated by Raymond Durgnat from *Cahiers du Cinema*.

NEXT MONTH: Resnais and Robbe-Grillet debate *L'Annee dernière à Marienbad* in relation to other trends in World Cinema.

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Despite the rigorous construction of the script and the rigidity of the editing, we doubt whether the shooting of *L'Annee Dernière à Marienbad* was carried out without subterfuges by the director. It was after all necessary to begin at one point and end at another and to control the whole machinery. The above chart was, in fact, one of those ruses, or snares, designed to tame the film and lead it to a successful conclusion.

Asked what its function was, Resnais confessed that he was unable to explain. Possibly—we cannot be sure—it concerns the organisation of sequences according to their various degrees of reality. The real interest of this chart is more prosaic and circumstantial. It is a diagram for internal use only and whose usefulness is ended; ordering the selection of costumes and lighting, and, in particular, facilitating the work of the actors, helping them to give their work a coherence which otherwise might have been lacking.



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while she is waiting for Paul. But after Paul has seduced Flo, Charles gives up. Clovis's jealous gloating over the flesh has its counterpart in his sulking, and gradually his jealousy runs away with him. One evening, while he is studying, Flo, after quarrelling with Paul, comes to him and tries to tell him that she is free to love him now, anxious and repentant. But he has become dishonest. He forgets that his motive in working like a demon was to win Flo back from Paul after they broke up. The means have become an end in themselves. Success in the examination has become his collection of pistols. Only he is in deadly earnest.

We don't know why, finally, Flo leaves Paul—perhaps because she realises that in his love there is no depth, no permanence. (He and Clovis had taunted her with the dull, mediocre permanence of middle-class domesticity which was all Charles could offer someone of her sexual experience and avidity). But Charles's love defeats itself. For with his old-fashioned jealousy he seems to accept that Flo belongs to Paul because they have made love; and later, when she comes to him, he rejects her, as if she were now soiled beyond redemption. After his failure in the exam, he plops the streets, and catches sight of Flo in a restaurant with Clovis and a callous-looking business man. She is sinking to the status of a *poule de luxe*. We feel that if Charles walked into the restaurant, 'old her to get from the table and follow him, she would. She casts at him a look full of shame and appeal, but, egocentric in his despair, he turns away.

The film's theme is not a struggle between virtue and vice, but a struggle for power. Paul is a showy disciple of garbled Nietzsche; for Charles power is best obtained by 'virtuous' bourgeois methods. Two Italians represent power in its most crude, obvious aspects—the Milanese industrialist thinks it's money; the piece de resistance at the second party is a Strong Man who, while bursting chains, bawls operatically at the top of his lungs. But money and muscles by themselves are just jokes to these young people. Real power is more subtle. Clovis is perpetually frustrated, perpetually malignant, perpetually power-less; he is the film's nastiest character. Charles, betrayed by his own weapons, resorts to Paul's; Charles, via Paul, kills Charles. Paul, who is the film's 'sun-king', offers his friends and himself all the happiness power can offer—money, parties, etc.—but is persistently dogged by the callousness of his own gaiety, just as Charles is dogged by the morbidity of his own sincerity.

Pattern of Contrasts

The morality of these characters, who are all depicted very accurately and never wear their labels, is determined by a pattern of contrasts. Paul, the too-ostentatious virility figure (in psychoanalytical characterology, a phallic narcissist), whose charm and beard are slightly diabolical, is exceeded in Satanic nastiness by Clovis, his apparent opposite and accomplice. Both have a streak of homosexual sadism and are a 'twin character'. Charles's 'excess'—and binary—is the bookseller, who thinks scholastic success will solve Charles's problems. Charles's relationship with Florence is echoed by that of a younger boy, Rameau, with a girl whom he insults in a fit of uncontrollable jealousy and for whom he commits suicide. And Charles and Paul, without knowing it, complement and love each other. Charles's death is associated with the 'Liebestod' from *Tristan and Isolde*, and there may be an echo of a scene in Dassin's *Brute Force*. There the sadistic prison warden (Hume Cronyn), also a brandisher of guns (only with him it's a long double-barrelled shotgun), beats a convict (Sam Leven) to death, to the same music. Given these intense associations of power and sexuality it's not surprising that the film has two (reciprocal) crystal-

lisations of the Oedipal situation—Paul, calling vainly for his mother in the snows of Stalingrad, sees Charles and Florence together in the darkness; and Charles swots hard while through the frosted glass of the bathroom Paul and Flo, showering together, laugh and struggle in the nude.

One can also see in the film the sort of religious meaning Chabrol and Rohmer attribute to Hitchcock—that Charles commits Paul's crime, that the closure of the church is an Act of God to ensure that Charles will endure his martyrdom, become guilty (the murder attempt) for the crime Paul is always playing at (longing for), recovers his innocence (repentance) and becomes a scapegoat for Paul, whose final state of guilt may be a prelude to a state of grace. The 'sun king' becomes a Christian with a sense of guilt. The film gains from an oscillation of the two sets of meanings; and Chabrol's Christianity can hardly be said to be of the bourgeois variety. Paul's set is hardly typical of young people in general but it crystallises several important features: the amoral confusion, the indifference to 'work' and politics, the Americanisation in superficialities, the latent tolerance of Fascism and so on. It's not surprising that it was one of the year's big commercial success not only in Paris but throughout France.

Les Cousins and *Les Tricheurs* both deal with the "destruction" of the best in bourgeois youth by a "set" of rich and raffish egoists. Comparable encounters which end less disastrously are described in de Broca's charming *Les Jeux de l'Amour*, *Les Nymphettes* (which might almost be a deliberate revision of *Les Dragueurs* by someone who has at least a rough idea of what he's talking about) and *St. Tropez Blues* (where Marie Laforet, unabashed by the jeers of artists and even artists at her virginity, obstinately holds on to it, keeping it for the boy she loves and for the moment when he admits that he loves her. To be pedantic, I think she does sleep with him during the fadeout, for instead of pushing him away she bites her knuckle thoughtfully instead).

Frustrated Passions

Films dealing with the unnecessary frustration of erotic passion by the worst in the bourgeois ethos are too many to enumerate: from *Day of Wrath* to *Partie de Campagne*, from *Separate Tables*, where David Niven, who once committed "a sexual offence", and Deborah Kerr, an old maid at forty, come together despite the Legion of Decency, to *Forbidden Fruit*, where Fernandel, goaded beyond endurance, spiritedly shifts the blame for his adulterous affair with a young prostitute (Françoise Arnoul) to his grim wife and grimmer mother.

It parallels *En Cas De Malheur*; it's curious how Verneuil's film passed without comment whereas Autant-Lara's aroused cries of protest; for even in its indecencies it is a faithful transcription of Simeon's novel and the real villain of the piece is the amoral young neo-Fascist who lives in a hotel full of Algerians (=a young Frenchman in Algeria?). Most extreme of protests are Buñuel's and from *Un Chien Andalou* to *Le Fiebre Monte a El Pao* his work traces a steady path from the total revolt of despair to a constructive anarchist morality.

But the general confusion has been described by Antonioni:—"Today, we have witnessed the birth of a New Man, with all his fears and dreads and hesitations, loaded down with a heavy baggage of feelings which cannot yet be called too old or out of date. They condition his situation without helping him, get in his way without offering a solution. He goes on loving and hating and suffering, pushed by forces and moral myths which should not be holding him back on the eve of his landing on the moon. But they are. If man makes a mistake in science, he is prepared to start again. Science is so humble it can renew itself from day to day. In feelings, however, conservatism still reigns. We all know that these feelings are antiquated, yet we go on respecting them. Why? Because we are lazy? Or because we are cowards?"

NEXT MONTH: Mad Love, Sweet Life.

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