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**IMAGINO ERGO SUM:**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *Last Year at Marienbad*

THERE are many who have attempted to define art. Most of their definitions agree that art brings order and significance to experience and that a work of art creates a world of its own, pulsating with a high degree of "felt life." This world must present a unified, harmonious whole, created from multiple, diverse, often opposing, segments which function organically to create the whole. To be a great work of art, the whole must be greater than the sum of its parts.

Using these criteria I would like to attempt to defend, as a work of art, the motion picture *Last Year at Marienbad* written by the French novelist Robbe-Grillet and directed by Alain Resnais. I use the term "defend" because the film has been attacked as a hoax, a joke, a meaningless maze and a pretentious bore which lacks even the aesthetic qualities of art for art's sake.

For convenience sake, I will type this film a visual novel, although the distinction between the genres of narrative and drama is blurred. It is closer, in form, to the twentieth century novel than to drama. Moreover, the contribution of the author, in *Last Year at Marienbad*, seems to me to be the major contribution. The film, in tone, technique and content is far closer to Robbe-Grillet's novel, *Jealousy*, than to Alain Resnais' previous films. Because this, their first collaboration, is such a startling departure from even the most experimental of motion pictures, I attribute the significant, new aspects of the picture to its author. In this case, the camera was directed by the pen.

## PLOT AND POINT OF VIEW

The plot concerns three people in an enormous, elegant resort hotel: a woman and two men. It is constructed on the shifting relationships of the eternal triangle. The woman, A belongs to M, "who watches over her and who may in fact be her husband."<sup>1</sup> The other man, X, may or may not win the woman in the end. "The whole film . . . is the story of a persuasion: it deals with a reality which the hero creates out of his own vision, out of his own words."<sup>2</sup> It takes the basic relationships between a woman and two men and explores every potential inherent

<sup>1</sup>Alain Robbe-Grillet (for film by Alain Resnais), *Last Year at Marienbad* (New York, 1962), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 10.

from POV Point of View I Oct 1963



in the situation. What happens to them is the subject, not the object of the film.

Although this appears simple in summary it is endlessly baffling as it appears on the screen. The resolution is never clarified. The plot is not constructed linearly. Conventional time is fractured as a cubist painting shatters conventional space and splinters the solid construction of objects in space. Whether or not the film is successful in reassembling its pieces, as the cubists did, to form a new vision of reality and to bring this vision new perceptions of human experience, is the crucial question in evaluating the film as a whole. Because *Last Year at Marienbad* is avant garde in an age when the avant garde rapidly becomes the rear garde, the evaluation of the strange and new becomes extremely difficult.

The story is told within a narrative, circular frame. It starts and ends with a play within a play. The clock strikes the first stroke of midnight "making exactly the same sound as at the end of the play, at the beginning of the film."<sup>3</sup> The narrator is X. His voice is heard at the beginning, throughout, and at the end. How much time elapses we never know; but it is my conviction that the actual time lapse of the story is identical with the length of time it takes to tell the story, thereby compressing the unity of time to make it identically parallel to the time spent in viewing the picture. Time is the most complex part of this film and will be discussed in more detail presently.

The story is told from the point of view of X because it occurs entirely in his mind. The story, its mood and development reflects X's attitude toward life, his passionate, impetuous, romantic nature. He manipulates the action to suit his purpose. The narrative is in the second person; X addresses A. It includes everything he imagines in numerous conflicting ways, and everything he remembers or forgets that he has imagined in the past. Large portions of the film are invocations to A: his muse. This adds intimacy and immediacy to the film. It might be considered an interior monologue based on a stream of consciousness technique, except that the consciousness is so selective and so focused on a single set of impressions that the perspective is actually closer to Henry James than to James Joyce. We always know how X feels; we never know what he thinks because there are no separations between reason and emotion.

At this point I had better acknowledge another point of view. There are some critics who feel that X has created the story in his own mind but that at a particular point he convinces A that the story is true. The camera then goes into A's mind and depicts her interior monologue. From that point on, in a fugal structure, the two voices merge into one chord and the camera shows the unison of a memory or vision occurring simultaneously in both minds. I do not think the text nor the film substantiate this view. Although, to add to the confusion, the author claims that A's fantasies are shown. However, those scenes in which X is not present can easily be explained as projections of X's mind.

The literal level of the plot shrinks to negligible importance. Despite Aristotle's plot priority, what actually happens in *Last Year at Marienbad*, what events follow other events logically, in chronological order, are of minimal concern. It is this disregard for conventional plot structure that has caused so many viewers

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 163.



to suffer anguish or boredom. However, the reason that the plot is of no importance is that nothing happens to any of the characters while the audience is seeing the picture. Everything has already occurred last year or the year before or possibly never at all. All the action of the picture consists of X's memories, fantasies, confusions, desires, alternative imaginings and projected wish fulfillments. All of these occur in X's mind. They make up a labyrinth of possibilities, intrigues, tensions, climaxes, and anxieties, so that the picture is almost overloaded with episodes. These episodes do not appear on the screen in chronological order but in the logic of an inner order. Some exterior object leads to thought association, to sensation and emotion. *Leit motifs* occur and recur in the mind of the hero. Nothing happens externally while the audience watches and hears the story told of what X thinks or imagines or wishes had happened last year. Because X's mind can know only his version of the story, and not know that version with objectivity and verisimilitude, the actual events are lost in obscurity. Many fruitless discussions have ended in frustration because viewers insist on exploring what really happened at Marienbad. Have X and A met before? Why did she forget? Did he conjure up this whole incredible story in order to seduce A? Did he ever see her before? Was it a dream? Did it occur, if at all, at Friedrickbad, Karlsbad, Marienbad or where? Was she killed, raped, wounded? Do they run away together? The film answers none of these questions because what occurs on the plot level occurs in X's mind, which does not wish to separate illusion and reality explicitly to answer these questions. The mind sees the problem in purely subjective terms and mixes "memory with desire." X may only have seen A and then constructed this romantic fantasy or X may have convinced A that they met in the past and persuaded her to go off with him. All the audience ever knows is that X wishes passionately to possess A, and this, for X, is reality. The plot is oxymoronic: its essence is both action and inaction.

In discussing point of view in relationship to plot, it is necessary to identify the role of the camera and sound track. These are equivalent to the author, and because the author is in the mind of the central character, they become objective correlatives for the mind. Whatever they select to present to the viewer, is, in fact, selected by X, himself. Or, as some insist, if some scenes are depicted from A's point of view, the author, camera and sound track then enter A's mind. This has certainly been done previously in the novel by means of stream of consciousness and on film through flashbacks, but in *Last Year at Marienbad* the film and sound track frequently separate. The camera often precedes the sound track as X's mind runs ahead of what he imagines he is telling A. When they join again, we realize that X is now focusing on a more satisfying fantasy. At one point the camera inserts a series of quick flashes of A in her bedroom although the conversation between X and A takes place in the bar. The camera wins, as always, and the scene switches completely to the bedroom, a more attractive place for the fulfillment of X's desires. The conflict between camera and sound track depicts the struggle between fantasies occurring simultaneously in the mind to be resolved in the most desirable way. X often brushes aside film that disturbs him just as the mind tries to eliminate unpleasant images.

## CHARACTERS

The characters are as completely abstract as their designations, which are not even names, would indicate. The girl is called A. She is staying at the hotel with a man referred to in the script as M. We do not know if he is her husband, lover or friend. The protagonist is referred to as X. The characters never call each other or anyone else by name. We know nothing about them but what we see. We do not know their ages, where they come from, what professions, if any, they have, nor anything about their families. They have no pasts exclusive of the events seen on the screen.

In addition to the three main characters there are twenty or thirty other guests at the hotel who have only visual identities for the audience. They perform as a Greek chorus in reverse, ironically reinforcing the mood of the film. They move in stylized patterns, and frequently freeze into sculpture-like poses as the camera fixes them in a still shot. They depict the stiff, formal, polite and bloodless society in which the three main characters move and provide an ironic contrast to the passionate, wild turbulence within X's mind. The chorus, periodically, engages in polite, apparently meaningless, chit-chat, but each line of their dialogue suggests to X some aspect of his obsession with A. Two members of the chorus talk about the weather. X is reminded of a snow scene in a hotel bedroom that X thinks A once occupied. Two more characters discuss a clandestine love affair; a young girl and a boy discuss a previous meeting last year, and marriage versus freedom. Each overheard conversation suggests X's compulsive love, and frequently the camera goes off on a dithyrambic, kaleidoscopic reverie as we see what X is thinking. The sound track fades when the conversations of the chorus are irrelevant to X's main and only theme.

Even A poses in a "familiar pose," statue-like, in many a scene. She rarely comes to life except when X is talking to her or remembering or imagining her at various moments. Their relationship is like that of Pygmalion and Galatea, indicating that the human mind is both sculpture and sculptor. The statue-like quality of A and the chorus is fortified by numerous stone statues in the hotel and in the garden. Much of the dialogue between A and X concerns a statue of a man, woman and dog. Each interprets its meaning in terms of the other's position in the story. On another level, this piece of statuary evokes the myth of Orpheus going to the Underworld to rescue Eurydice from the dead. Symbolically, X is trying to rescue and free A from a world that is sterile and decadent. He describes her as the only one who is still alive. To enhance the abstract, lifeless quality of the characters their movements are slow; they dance in graceful floating movements; they glide, and they arrange themselves in artificial patterns. They repeat the same activities in trance-like rituals that are only empty forms of something that once had content and meaning.

Under this discussion of character I want to raise the question of whether or not A actually exists at all except as a member of the chorus. It is possible that X creates her as his symbol of love and beauty; that he gives her life. The script shows a scene in which she is standing in one pose, but X fantasies her in another



pose, so she "corrects her position."<sup>4</sup> In another scene she is shown completely without expression. X says "You looked so alive."<sup>5</sup> There is a brief delay. Then, A smiles and "assumes the position X describes."<sup>6</sup> This might explain A's constant change of clothing. The only consistent explanation for the different gowns she wears is that X imagines them all. He also imagines her makeup, often lacquered and chic, but in the intimate scenes, freer, slightly wanton and far more sensuous.

In the scene in which X imagines the sexual consummation of his love A comes to him flooded in light. The film is over exposed so that her image is almost obliterated. Suggestively Neoplatonic in this linking of Eros and light, the film also obliquely links love and death, in that the image which X has created is wiped away when she submits to him. The death fantasies of murder, rape and guilt crowd into the climax of the film, but it is significant that in the moment of A's willing submission she, as an objective human being, is blurred by dazzling light. Perhaps that which X created, he has now destroyed.

A is usually shown withdrawing in fear or acquiescing submissively. In the death fantasies, she dies, wearing a feathered negligee. She seems, quite obviously, to be the dying swan, a symbol of beauty which the artist seeks to possess. X is seen in terms of a single passion. M is always portrayed as sinister. He silently stalks A or appears suddenly in a rigid death-like pose. M always wins the oft-repeated game, which is a metaphor, patterned and pointless, for the lives of these people, trivial and fixed. The game is based on a mathematical certainty. M is a mechanical monster. X sees him as the winner who takes nothing. In the Marienbad world, he is death.

All the characters survive in the memory as archetypes, not as individuals. But there are levels of abstraction from the play actors, to the chorus, to M, then to A who is slightly more individualized, and finally, to X, who is the most individualized and most alive character in the film.

The three unities are carefully observed. Time is the present. It is actually the one hour and a half that the film runs. The place is never extended beyond the mind, and the mind sees only the hotel and the garden. There is a single plot, that of the love story remembered this year, which may have occurred last year, or perhaps, never. In this classic structure the characters are idealized. The lover represents romantic man, the ardent lover of beauty. The girl represents beauty, perhaps beauty that exists in the eye of the beholder. The other man represents death, destruction, and all that clashes with the ideal union of love and beauty.

## SETTING

The setting of this film is in the human mind. The film is limited in actual interior space but the mind has fantastic qualities and can decorate its minute set with fabulous wonders and transform it "into something rich and strange." In this case, the mind extends its creative powers to the building of an enormous, elegant hotel surrounded by formal French gardens. The film opens while the stage is

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 63.

being set by the narrator, X. He says "Once again—I walk on, once again, down these corridors, through these halls, these galleries, in this structure of another century, this enormous, luxurious, baroque, lugubrious hotel—where corridors succeed endless corridors—silent, deserted, overloaded with a dire, cold ornamentation of woodwork, stucco, moldings, marble. . . ."<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile the camera photographs every detail of the "black mirrors, dark paintings, columns, sculptured door frames."<sup>8</sup> The viewer is dazzled by the opulence but puzzled by the sombre tone of the narrator's voice as X's mind expands to encompass this baroque setting. Yet, the actual place of the film, as it exists in the cortex of the brain, is compressed to the most miniscule dimensions.

The baroque set furnishes a provocative contrast to the purity of the classic unified structure and generalized allegorical characters. It is also symbolic of a world which exists far from reality. "It was a place for relaxation, no business was discussed, no projects were undertaken, no one ever talked about anything that might arouse the passions. Everywhere there were signs: Silence, Quiet."<sup>9</sup> The set, in some ways, even symbolizes the hero's mind. Although the garden and hotel are formal and highly patterned, for the viewer trying to orient himself, they are a labyrinth, much like X's mind.

There is a heavy emphasis on the fact that the hotel existed in another century and that its ornate, baroque furnishings are anachronisms in the twentieth century. Yet, this is how the hero sets his stage for the background of his love, which is his whole life. The stress on the past gives the picture a "Berkeley Square" quality and furnishes a fitting backdrop for the ritualistic motions of the chorus. The set of the play within the play is equally stylized to reinforce the patterned quality of that past, which is still a part of the present. The set functions to illustrate the presence of the past in the immediacy of the present and to reinforce the death-in-life of the characters who inhabit this world. At the film's end, when X imagines, or convinces A, that they have left together, they go out of the hotel through the park, "a kind of garden à la française without any trees or flowers, without any foliage . . . between statues with frozen gestures and granite slabs."<sup>10</sup> He says that it seemed, at first glance, impossible to get lost here. They go into the calm night, alone, together. They leave this sterile world, paradoxically full of awesome splendors, and get lost together in a calm night. The hotel is death, prison; but it is also security, the security of habit, convention, and the stability of the past.

## TIME

I have left for last a detailed discussion of time, for in this dimension of the film lies one of the chief clues to the mysteries of "Marienbad." The dimension of time in this film is best described as mental time. The author and director are primarily concerned with the speed of mental time which they find varies considerably. "In reality, our mind goes faster or sometimes slower . . . It skips cer-

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 9.



tain passages, it preserves exact records of certain 'unimportant' details, it repeats and doubles back on itself. And this mental time, with its gaps, its obsessions, its obscure areas is the one that interests us since it is the tempo of our emotions, of our *life*."<sup>11</sup> The use of time becomes the primary device in unleashing the dramatic impact of the film and in ultimately realizing its theme.

The medium of the motion picture is particularly effective in aiding the author's purpose because, through the interplay of sound and sight, the audience experiences almost the same simultaneity of sensation as does the human mind. At first it is confusing to hear dialogue on one level and see action on another. To add to the confusion, even the sound track is split between the narration and the dramatic scenes. When the image is ahead of the sound the audience is actually able to experience the hero's remembering something he has thought of or experienced previously himself. X speaks to A in one of the corridors of the hotel. He starts to describe to her a previous meeting. Before his voice completes the description of where they met or what they were doing, the camera jumps ahead and the audience sees what X is thinking. A is laughing as she leans on a balustrade overlooking a formal garden. Eventually the sound track catches up, but frequently, when it does, the film again out-distances it and the audience get a rapid glimpse of A in her bedroom, as that image flashes through X's mind.

X's mind is, in fact, a kaleidoscope of fantasy, memory and desire. All the levels of previous experience in time crowd each other into a rapidly changing and intricate pattern of mental impressions. Time is compressed and expanded simultaneously. Cause and effect relationships are unclear. To attempt to sort out these impressions would be as difficult as removing, piece by piece, the mosaics of San Apollinaire. However, as guide to *Marienbad* time, one might first firmly establish the time of the narrative as the present. The story is being told now, to A by X. X says as the picture opens "Once again, I walk on down these corridors . . ."<sup>12</sup> Within the narrative, circular frame, there is the simple past, the continuous past of his memory or fantasy, the past perfect; and the future conditional. X says, near the end "It would be a year ago that this story began,"<sup>13</sup> and at the very end "Where you were now getting lost, forever, in the calm night, alone with me."<sup>14</sup> X remembers now, what he was thinking and feeling, what he had been thinking and feeling and what he might have been thinking and feeling. The new dimension that has been added to this film is the conditional. Why is it there? Because the real exterior action of this picture is all conditional. X says "It would be a year ago that this story began . . . that I would be waiting for you . . . that you would be waiting for me."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, X projects in his mind what he might have thought she might have been thinking under certain conditions. Little wonder, the film is complex. These are difficult areas to dramatize.

We, the audience, do not know if they met, or if X just imagined and wanted

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 165.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 156.



them to meet. Nor do we know if X and A escaped together or if it was only X's passionate desire that they escape. In the mind it could have happened, and it would have happened, given certain conditions. We see and hear, on all these levels of time, simultaneously, all the conditions and possibilities inherent in the situation, but we never know what actually occurred. All we know is that X is telling a story, and into the conditional future, he has, in the past, projected all his emotions.

The effect of this splintering of chronological time (illustrated by the separation of sight and sound) creates in the audience, a perception of the actual workings of the mind, as no stream of consciousness, nor Joycean attempt at simultaneity could do. This man's mind, filled with Freudian guilts, (the surrealist shooting scenes) slips, and forgetfulness (perhaps it was Friedrickbad, or Karlsbad, last year, not last year), becomes the entire reality of the film and because mental time is real time for X, time, itself is the most dynamic actor in the picture. Rapid mental time shifts give the picture pace, movement, build to the hysterical climax (A's imagined death) and slacken to a slow-paced denouement (A's possible escape). Mental time quixotic, shifting, instantaneous is contrasted to clock-time, slow, patterned, and heavy. Moods shift as time shifts. Time creates the entire structure of the film.

## THEME

What is the philosophical significance of this unconventional treatment of an already stereotyped medium? What statements are the author and director making? At this point, the pieces of the mosaic must be fit back into the whole if the picture is to be called a work of art.

The interior monologue tells us very little about the central character. Most interior monologues are more revealing. We never know what actually occurred between X, A, and M. Most plots reach a satisfactory resolution.

We know so little of X because he takes his entire experience and emotional responses from the objects around him. Even the people and their conversations are objects, whose stimuli incite X to mix this tantalizing concoction in the cauldron of his mind. Every conversation he hears (that of the clandestine lovers, the two men dully discussing past snow storms, the young boy and girl who have met before, the woman discussing a scandal; another woman discussing the broken heel of a shoe, and even the plot of the play within the play) suggest to X's mind fantasies of passion that are vividly filmed. He takes all his experience from exterior sources, and then, through some strange alchemy of the mind, creates a world of real experiences for himself. He is the archetypical Romantic. Even this prime characteristic comes from the baroque splendors of a hotel, of another age, probably viewed as a more romantic one.

Philosophically, the author poses the same questions that have tormented philosophers since men have been able to ask questions: What is the nature of reality? How does time affect reality? How does the human mind know reality? The author seems to be turning Locke, Berkeley and Hume upside down. He seems to be saying that all we can ever really know is *external* reality. We can only know

objects which last in time. From these we derive impressions which we adapt to suit our own changing desires. The fact that, in X's mind, illusion and reality are never clearly separated indicates that his subjective world is completely real to him. All his actions are governed by it. But once he translates objective reality into subjective reality, he can never assess reality objectively again. The objective and subjective world are linked through the senses. The film, itself, illustrates this phenomenon. The camera slips back and forth from an object to a subjective response. The latter is always seen in terms of the former. The plot develops in a series of alternate possibilities. Only the objects are constant. In fact, they remain static from a past century, formal, rigid, framed. The alternatives shift because many possibilities always exist within any situation, often simultaneously. All such possibilities are a part of the real situation. Fantasies, too, are a part of subjective reality. For example, even the garden may be fantasy, suggested by the framed pictures of formal gardens hanging on the walls of the hotel corridors. The audience never knows how faithfully A is characterized but while viewing the film, one is convinced that she exists and that the scenes between her and X actually occur. It is only in retrospect that one doubts her reality. It is a tribute to the human imagination, and to the film-makers, that, working through the mind, they can make her appear both real and a fantasy.

Perhaps there are relative degrees of reality, including that of the life of the mind, which is real, too. Could this be why the plot is not resolved clearly and explicitly? Could this film be saying that one kind of reality lies in external objects but their significance becomes blurred and reshaped once they have made impressions on the mind?

The social implications of the film are clear. We are given, through X's eyes, a picture of an elegant, rich, polite society in which everyone is "dead." He wishes to save the heroine, to free her from this prison, to take her out of this arid, suspended Hades or Purgatory into a formalized Eden. Death imagery permeates the film. Two clandestine lovers speak of "living . . . like coffins laid side by side underground in a frozen garden."<sup>16</sup> We see fantasies of the heroine's being murdered; men are lined up in a shooting gallery. M stalks through the picture like Death itself and A is M's prisoner in this world of plush stultification. This elite world is a hell of ennui for the privileged classes. The ideal for the artist, the romantic, is to escape. Only beauty is alive in Marienbad, but she is ailing. She will never survive unless she is freed from this world that drains all vitality.

The psychological aspects are basic to the structure and woven into the texture of the film. Surrealism (a device to externalize the psyche) is particularly adaptable to a visual medium and Marienbad exploits it shamelessly. Match sticks and playing cards become a woman's face; men spring up and shoot at an unseen target; a marble floor becomes a chess board. Freudian influences permeate the film revealing the deep abyss of the unconscious mind ". . . the essentially Freudian view assumes that the mind, for good as well as bad, helps create its reality by selection and evaluation . . . reality is malleable and subject to creation . . . a

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, p. 31.



series of situations which are dealt with in their own terms."<sup>17</sup> There are many dream characteristics in *Marienbad* but to dispose of the entire film as just a dream is too pat. To do a complete Freudian analysis of the picture would take another essay. Briefly, the struggle between the Id and the Ego are shown. Nightmarish qualities reach peaks of terror in the shooting, rape, broken wine glass and broken slipper scenes. There are dream-like characteristics in the odd, seemingly irrational, juxtaposition of scenes, the contrasts, repetitions and jumps. The meaning comes through images and symbols. Devices of condensation and displacement are used, as in a dream. The film shows the unconscious in action and therefore, illustrates the workings of the human mind in Freudian terms. This leads to its meaning, but we must also consider its form, the use of myth, and the social and philosophic implications to understand the whole work of art; its "being and essence."

Before attempting to complete the task of reassembling these multitudinous pieces, because I am discussing a motion picture, I would like to make a few comments about the motion picture as an art form. The motion picture has a set of conventions that draw on literary and dramatic conventions but differ in many respects. *Marienbad* takes full advantage of all film possibilities and extends them further than any motion picture to date. The motion picture tells a story dramatically. It has characters, plot, action, dialogue, soliloquy, flashbacks, montages, close-ups, and panoramic views. It combines many of the strengths of both the narrative and the drama. From the narrative it takes scope in time and place and descriptive power. From the drama it borrows immediacy and sensory appeal to sight and sound. From both of its parent forms it inherits introspection and retrospection in the form of the soliloquy and the flashback. It is the newest literary form since the novel but, sadly, it has been wooed away from its artistic heritage by those twentieth century monsters, the mass media and exploitation. However, *Last Year at Marienbad*, paradoxically breaking through all film frontiers to create something fresh and different, has returned to its literary heritage and has contributed to the mainstream of literary development in the mid twentieth century. The film draws heavily on Proust, James Joyce, O'Neill, Cocteau, and *Citizen Kane*. Making its statement in a hybrid medium it has accomplished miracles that were either impossible for its forerunners, or merely tentatively suggested.

In attempting a final evaluation of *Last Year at Marienbad*, I would like to return to the definition of art: Unity from diversity. This picture has achieved unity in combining the many diverse elements previously discussed. It has achieved a unity of mood and tone. It is first colored by the Romantic mode in which we have a world of unlimited expectations, out yonder, beyond the castle which has imprisoned the princess. The outlines of the picture have been drawn lightly in the mythic mode with its subtle allusions to Orpheus, Cinderella (the broken slipper episodes) and Pygmalion. Ritual deepens the delicate line. Tension between the forms comes from the ironic pastoral elements (a walled-in paradise, a castle with no windows, a garden in which nothing grows, a land

<sup>17</sup>Lionel Trilling, "Freud and Literature," *Literary Opinion in America*, Ed. M. D. Zabel, (New York, 1951), p. 684.



without children) working against the mythic, in which nature is not alive but dead, and the people, themselves, are in a trance-like state. The final and only panoramic scene of the huge hotel disappearing into the dark night, deepens in space adding an element of the sublime, and as the tones darken, the romantic mode takes on elements of the tragic.

To make a closer visual parallel, the film recalls Monet's Rouen Cathedral series, with the image growing increasingly blurred as light and time change, while the mood shifts from canvas to canvas to finally crystalize into a haunting, tragic mystery.

Are these many parts harmoniously adapted to the whole and is this achieved organically? The texture is rich, the diction is poetic and literary, having the highly refined purity of a Renaissance drawing. The music is disturbingly unresolved. These function on the surface to involve the viewer. Tension and conflict, necessary for both the novel and the drama, build gradually within a matrix of suppressed excitement, to reach a climax of thunderous sound and dazzling light.

Even ambiguity functions in *Marienbad*. Those who attack this film object to its ambiguity of form, plot and theme. But ambiguity is not necessarily a pejorative word. In this case, it is a necessary component of an artistic whole. The film's statement could not have been made in any but an evocative, oblique manner. It presents the ambiguity of the mind. The film is in the mind; form and theme are inseparable. It is this very ambiguity which creates the mood of anxiety, fear, and sadness against the insistent, persistent swell of rising passion.

*Marienbad*, by including the strange and the new arouses the most intensely felt emotion within those viewers to whom it communicates. One does not see *Last Year at Marienbad*; one experiences it. It has succeeded through its medium and form in making a major break through in recording the simultaneity of human experience.

It is in fact, realized content, achieved through form. The experimentation with the medium such as the counterpoint between film and sound track, the brilliant flashes of over-exposed film, the treatment of time, the setting, which functions so expressively to illustrate the theme, the philosophic statement, all contribute toward creating a world saturated with mood, suspended in a state of "arrested agitation" pulsing with "felt life."

Coleridge, the prophet of Romantic criticism might have liked *Last Year at Marienbad*. It "reveals itself in the balance of reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness with difference, of the general with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative, the sense of novelty and freshness, with the old and familiar objects: a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order . . ."<sup>18</sup> Although it is dangerous, and often embarrassing to make predictions, I will attempt it by stating that I predict that *Last Year at Marienbad* will be considered one of the masterpieces of the twentieth century, perhaps even by those, who ferociously attack it in 1962.

<sup>18</sup>Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chap. XIV.