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RESNAIS

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L'ANNEE DERNIERE A MARIENBAD

PENELOPE HOUSTON

L'ANNEE DERNIERE A MARIENBAD is not a film to be reviewed from a neutral corner. The critic who likes to weigh and balance, to award a point here and subtract one there, to find it "impressive, but . . . " and "significant, although . . . " is not going to get much change out of this film. *L'Année Dernière* is a study in persuasion, and one which involves the audience as much as the people on the screen; and it is a work in which the technique and the action are quite literally fused. If it were not told in this particular way, the film would not exist. Form and content, the thing expressed as opposed to the way of expressing it, on this occasion become quite meaningless terms: try to write down a summary of the plot, out of the context in which the film gives it existence, and you would end up either with a blank sheet of paper or with your own interpretation of the picture. And this interlocking of elements in the film, and in its relationship with its audience, entitles it to a total response: accept the experience, or reject it.

Those who reject it, or see it as nothing much more than an exercise in pretentious mumbo-jumbo, have a well-entrenched line of sharp-shooting positions to argue from. A film in which almost every shot of the heroine could be frozen for re-employment as a fashion photograph is suspect. A film which contains no characters seen working for their living, eating solid food, thinking or talking about any aspect of life in the 'outside' world, obviously has nothing much directly to say about that world. A film which concentrates on a single love story, yet has hardly a vestige of passion in the ordinary sense about it, may seem to be misfiring on a fairly essential cylinder. Resnais was accused of being trivial about a big theme in *Hiroshima mon Amour*, and this time he's criticised for being portentous about a little one. What does it matter what happened last year, in Marienbad or Fredericksbad, between these two over-dressed representatives of a world already dying on its feet? Irrefutable arguments, as far as they go, but they seem to me to be going a fair step in the wrong direction. They are trying to adjust the film to a context of objectivity which is not its own, asking it to declare and explain itself. And all it can declare *is* itself—or, rather, the invitation to experience it contains.

L'Année Dernière opens, like *Hiroshima mon Amour*, with a sustained and elaborate introductory passage; in *Hiroshima* Resnais called it the 'opera'—here it is certainly not less than the overture. The music behind the credits fades, and before the last names come up on the screen a voice is heard, impersonal, grave, and at first very quiet. The voice becomes clearer as the first images appear: the long corridors of a big hotel, empty of people but suggesting a weight of habitatior in their rich, arrogant decoration. Incantatory, the voice continues: "Once again I walk, once again, along these corridors, across these *salons*, these galleries, in this edifice from another century, this huge, luxurious, baroque hotel . . . " Organ music drowns the voice, then it returns, then the music rises over it again. The camera tracks slowly, inevitably, hovers over a theatre poster, a print of a formal garden, a row of numbered doors, moves down corridors, across baroque ceilings, gives such crystalline clarity to a section of moulding that it looks like a glistening bunch of fruit waiting to be picked. Then people: an audience for a play, gathered in a great *salon*, motionless and abstracted as they sit on their little gilt chairs and watch the stage. The voice of the actor on the stage takes over, as it were, from the narrator. "Voilà maintenant," says the actress, "Je suis à vous." Curtain.

This opening is entirely hypnotic. Like the beginning of a fairy tale, it draws us into an alien world, gives us no chance to get our bearings, hints at clues which may or may not turn out to have meaning. Slowly, through a mosaic of images and fragments of dialogue, flashes of single figures, static groups, conversation pieces, all framed within the heavy theatricality of the setting, the theme of the film begins to crystallise. A stranger (Giorgio Albertazzi), a woman (Delphine Seyrig), the man "who may be her husband" (Sacha Pitoëff) are drawn into focus; the setting changes and shifts, the sense of interaction, hardly yet more than a suspicion, between present and past, imposes itself; and the stranger keeps up his unrelenting monologue, his claim to have come to a fixed meeting place.

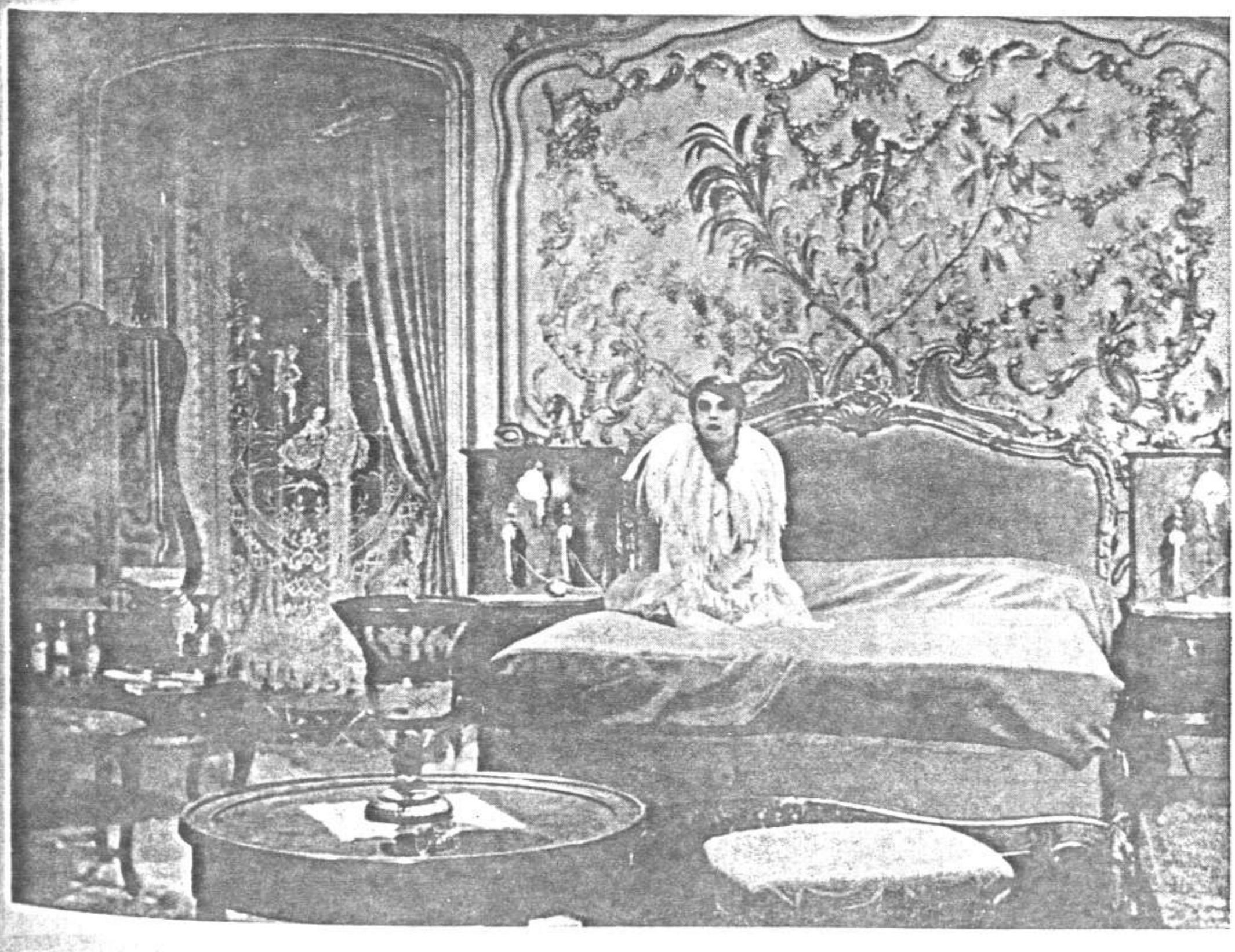
a rendezvous with the woman arranged "last year, at Marienbad," with the purpose of taking her away with him.

The stranger's strength is in the sheer pressure of will: he wants it to be so; it will be so; it is so. Did they know each other, were they in love, if so, why does she resist the memory, if not, what is his motive? Are they patient and analyst, or does each achieve existence only in the imagination of the other? These are enticing though perhaps irrelevant questions. We are watching a conviction gradually taking shape on the screen, spreading out, acquiring an independent form, drawing in nourishment from the air around it like a Japanese flower dropped into a bowl of water. Gradually we realise that the stranger's territory is that formal, continental garden with its neatly clipped trees, gravel paths, ornamental lakes and neo-classical statuary. The ground floor of the hotel is, as it were, neutral ground; and the woman's bedroom is her territory, ceded only when persuasion has already gone far towards winning the day. An initial hint of secession comes in those hallucinatory shots of her room, a series of flashes, each almost imperceptibly longer than the last, from the sombre darkness of the hotel bar to this blinding white room, as yet bare and unfurnished by imagination. The stranger enters the room—and in the bar a glass is suddenly dropped by the woman, smashing into a reverberating silence, while a servant scurries forward to mop up the broken fragments.

Much later in the film, an agonised cry from the woman brings us back to the scene at the bar: the silence, the still figures, the frozen moment. It's an effect—a juggling with time to communicate a world outside time—that Resnais uses elsewhere, always electrifyingly. The stranger tells the heroine of a meeting between them, of how they walked through the garden, how she slipped and broke the heel off her shoe. And, later, we see an encounter, filmed in long shot, see the pair walking up the gravel path, see her suddenly stumble and clutch at his arm. Again, near the end of the film, she demands that the stranger leave her—and a balustrade gives way under him as he leans his weight on it. We cut sharply away from this fantasy; yet when we come back to the garden, there, still, is the broken balustrade. In their context, these moments are eerie, ominous, charged with tension. They are part of the whole elaborate process of involvement in the man's belief, catching us unaware, forcing us into a world in which the real is not quite real, the imagined not quite unreal; in which there are only a series of possibilities, which become actual once they are admitted and accepted.

The husband—the man who may be the husband, as the film-makers insist—remains somewhat on the periphery of the dream. He plays, endlessly and largely with the stranger, a game with matchsticks, which he always wins. (In another of the film's flashes into pure fantasy, we see the heroine, stretched out on her bed, with photographs of herself spread out in the pattern of this game.) The game is a contest of wills; and the husband wins. A group of statues in the garden plays a crucial part in the stranger's apparatus of persuasion; and the husband, the man of reason, 'explains' the statues. Who, then, is the real winner? As the stranger's arguments begin to break

"L'Année Dernière à Marienbad": Delphine Seyrig.



down the heroine's resistance, so the tone of the film darkens. The pistol shooting—a silent row of figures, spread across the screen, turning in elegant ritual to fire at invisible targets—assumes a more menacing emphasis. She envisages her own death; she turns to the husband for reassurance ("I am here with you, in this room, don't leave me") and gets only the reasoned and just answer: "But it is you who are leaving, you know that." And so she goes to the midnight meeting with the stranger, sits waiting rigidly for the clock to strike, leaves with him. But about this ending there is no sense of exaltation or relief. She goes because she has no choice, because for her all the possibilities have narrowed down to a single decision, but she has no idea where she is going. The stranger's final words offer no comforting clue: "It seemed, at first sight, impossible to lose yourself in that garden . . . where you are now already beginning to lose yourself, for ever, in the quiet night, alone with me." The film's last shot is of the great chateau; and, with its few lighted windows, it no longer looks like a prison but like a place of refuge.

This ending, shadowed with apprehension, can be explained as one chooses. The prince, one could say, has rescued the sleeping princess from the haunted castle—and there are enough hints of fairy tale about the film to justify this. But was the princess safer in her sleep? The enigma invites a subjective interpretation; as, of course, does the entire film. Deliberately, it embeds itself in a setting as artificial, as frozen, as shuttered against time and the world, as the sleeping beauty's own haunted castle. The actors have been encouraged to do nothing which would break the spell—nothing, that is, which would bring their own personalities into play. Delphine Seyrig's attitudes are hieratic; Giorgio Albertazzi is a kind of personification of moral force; Sacha Pitoëff is a deep, resonant voice speaking from an elongated black and white form. They are automatons. The film's passion is predominantly intellectual, and it is the idea, not the man, that triumphs. She does not 'go away' with him: she accepts her necessary place in his dream.

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"Reality is a cipher with many solutions, all of them right ones." This is not either of the two Alains, Resnais or Robbe-Grillet, in one of the many decidedly gnomic statements they have made about their film, but one of the manipulators of effect in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Iris Murdoch's most cryptic book. Seeing *L'Année Dernière*, I was oddly and unexpectedly reminded, at however many removes, of an Iris Murdoch novel. There is a similar setting up of a world consistent to itself, but only contingent to ours. Symbols, in the same way, are suspiciously ready to yield up an immediate significance—Resnais' statues, his pistol-shots, his matchstick game—while keeping other meanings in reserve. Recurring fantasies of violence play a not dissimilar part; emotions are not only felt but willed to be felt.

Comparisons of this kind, of course, should be taken only so far; they are at best no more than marginal. But *L'Année Dernière*, if written as a novel, would certainly seem nothing like as audacious or challenging as it does on the screen. Subjective time, recurring time, the gradations of reality and experience, are nothing strange to the modern novel. But the film can accommodate them more easily—or more suggestively; and since its essential ingredients are space and time it can manoeuvre in both at once, make both relative to its own purposes. In *Hiroshima mon Amour* Resnais explored time and memory from a fixed point of reference. Here there is no fixed point, and consequently the film imposes its own time. When it ends, it is over, apart from the echoes it sets reverberating in our minds. It has come full circle, from the scene on the stage at the beginning ("Je suis à vous") to the setting out into the dark garden; but how long has it taken to do so? An evening in the heroine's mind; a week of persuasive effort by the man? It has taken, one can only say, the time it needed on the screen. As Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote in an article published in our last issue, it assumes as its starting point the basic fact that the screen image is always in the present tense. From here it evolves its own transitions: juxtaposes light images, such as the dazzlingly fast, overexposed tracking shot when the heroine moves out from the hotel to the light of the garden balustrade, with sombre ones; allows us foreknowledge and then uses this itself to startle us; gives us not flashbacks in time but a supersubtle orchestration of real and imagined, the border lines of hallucination.

When Resnais says that he and Robbe-Grillet thought of filming a crime story in the same setting, and that if they had done this they would probably have made much the same film, it sounds like a piece of deliberate perversity. But one begins to have an inkling of what he means. Persuasion can function in many forms: as between detective and criminal, between lovers, between strangers, between film and audience. *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* is a piece of persuasion; and the materials out of which it builds are those suggested by the setting itself: the quality of a dream hangs heavy over it.

Early in the film, half a proverb is quoted: "*De la boussole* (compass) *au navire* . . . " And half a proverb is literally what it is. Alain Robbe-Grillet has said that he made it up and didn't bother to go beyond the few words he needed—anyone will think he's heard it before, anyone can complete it for himself. This proverb is not wholly irrelevant to the film. No picture could be more fully realised, less of a do-it-yourself kit for filmgoers, than *L'Année Dernière*; but it is a film which opens up perspectives, alternatives, and at the same time that it spreads them out before the filmgoer it also contains them. Think of a solution, and the film will probably have forestalled you; the meanings will be there, the clues offered, yet when you get to what seems to be the centre of the maze, there's still another path, and another . . . The meaning of the film is not, I would suggest, in some aphorism—the second half of the proverb—which you can bring out of the maze with you, but in this process of exploration, this containing of possibilities. Objective explanations can be sought but not imposed. We are being given not a comment on 'reality' but a series of mirror images, with the idea that this is how we apprehend—not reality, for that goes beyond the film's definition, but whatever it is we apprehend. And the involvement, finally, is in a shared dream: "Once again I walk, once again, along those corridors, across those *salons* . . . "

LA NOTTE

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH

NEO-REALISM AT ITS PUREST, in De Sica, Visconti or De Santis, set out not only to describe life but to interpret history. But history refused to be rewritten, the revolution did not materialise, and neo-realism petered out. Antonioni is the inheritor of this failure. The elegant formal patterns of his films are not arbitrary, but the expression of the revolt of creative intelligence against reality—the reality of a historical situation which it needs more than a simple faith in God, Marx or Freud to interpret and criticise.

In *Rocco* Visconti brought his characters out of the world of conventional neo-realism into a new situation. Abject poverty gives way to comparative affluence, but whereas poverty creates its own conditions—attitudes to problems of religion,