



Maybe Last Year

ALAIN RESNAIS gave fair notice in "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" that he was at war with the traditional film of incident and plot. By exploring more than one time level he achieved a passionate and mythlike quality, with his two anguished lovers imprisoned in the vast meanings of their time. This tendency he has carried much further in "Last Year at Marienbad." He has taken the most basic of triangle situations and created with it a dreamlike tour de force, in which subtle film technique has almost been made an end unto itself.

The wonder is that he is able to find the writers who can provide him exactly the material he requires. For "Hiroshima, Mon Amour" it was Marguerite Duras, and for "Marienbad" it was Alain Robbe-Grillet. Both are, of course among the leaders of an interesting group of younger French novelists who blandly dispense with conventional narrative techniques and give only the vaguest sketch of their characters' backgrounds.

For Resnais their poetic but skeletal constructions are ideal. The Robbe-Grillet screenplay for "Last Year at Marienbad" employs the repetitive, cadenced phrases reminiscent of those in "Hiroshima, Mon Amour," and while they first appear to be spoken by a narrator, it is he who turns out to be one of the principal members of the triangle. The centuries-old "hotel" in which this man moves, invariably attired for dinner, is an enormous baroque palace with endless receding corridors, mirrors, stucco traceries, ornate staircases—a decor of formal, empty magnificence. While we learn little of a "hard" nature in this film, we can assume that the guests of this hotel live out idle amusements and rituals in a magnificent but prisonlike atmosphere. They have their bar, card tables, dining rooms, shooting gallery, a theatre in which the actors only echo the meaningless fragments of the conversations of the guests.

The man, named by the program as X, meets an elegantly beautiful woman, A, who is "perhaps married" to M. This simple, almost mathematical triangle then becomes an enigmatic situation which begins, ends, and seems to begin again like an infinite regress. We find X attempting to persuade the vaguely attentive A that they have met last year "perhaps at Marienbad," that certain events had occurred between them then, and that it was she who had suggested they meet this year at this

place, which is like Marienbad, with the same icily handsome decor, the same formal gardens with no flowers, no shrubs, but only a cold arrangement of flagstone and gravel walks, of water and statuary. Meanwhile, the third party to the triangle, M, regards what appears to be happening between the woman and the stranger from his aloof distance, solemnly interested in the possible disruption of his own relationship with the woman.

At times he is drawn to the stranger, engages him in a game involving the arrangement of sixteen cards or matches in a mathematical progression (the "Marienbad game"), politely suggests a meaningless meaning for a puzzling sculpture in the garden. Is he jealous? Only in the woman's imagination as she finds herself unable to resist the slow accumulation of detail with which the stranger "proves" to her the truth of what happened last year.

Neither a factual or chronological understanding of the story is sought by Resnais, who instead creates a romantically formalized world, perceived as though broken into fragments which now rest on varying levels of time, and which can presumably be reassembled as desired by the individual viewer. This may sound passing strange to random moviegoers not yet accustomed to some of the newer film explorations, but if seen without preconception or hostility "Last Year at Marienbad" is marvelously fascinating. Resnais uses startling camera, editing, and sound techniques to build curious, haunting images of a ritualized, almost lifeless experience.

Nevertheless, Delphine Seyrig appears here as a woman of rare beauty, Giorgio Albertazzi is effective as the remorselessly insistent lover, and Sascha Pitoeff is silently evocative as the man who, perhaps, will be desolated if his wife has responded or will respond to the stranger. Remotely, at first, but tellingly, the feeling grows of people caught in a hardened atmosphere of convention, with the eternal romantic ever attempting to break through the formal façade, which imprisons and freezes life, like death.

But the meaning I took out of this brilliantly photographed and original film may not be someone else's. It has been said, in fact, that the writer and director have given varying interpretations of what is now on the screen, where form, this once at least, has gained a victory over substance.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

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BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

Our Man in the Ozone—5. Over the Phnom

QUITE some time ago I adopted the theory that all airline schedules are not made in the traveler's heaven. My long-standing fidelity to that supposition was reaffirmed recently when I was persuaded, at half-past five in the morning, to rise in the mechanically contrived frost that pervaded the room I was occupying in the Auberge des Temples, just across the moat from the ruins of Angkor Wat, and shuffle off in the direction of the airport of Siem Réap, a small town in northwestern Cambodia. The antique C-47 I boarded is one of the two airplanes that comprise the flying fleet of Royal Air Cambodge, which evacuates passengers from Angkor just twice a week, running down from this old capital of Cambodia to the new one at Phnom Penh in about an hour.

In the salad days of the Khmer kings, when the empire called Kambuja included Annam, Laos, parts of Thailand, and even selected districts of China, Angkor was the capital, an Asian Athens in the jungle clearing. But the neighboring Thais, with whom the Cambodians are still not on friendly terms, undertook a seven-month siege of Angkor in 1430 and the Khmers of Kambuja were forced to

evacuate the capital two years later. They removed it to the banks of the Mekong, to the site of Phnom Penh, 175 miles south and east of Angkor where the Tonle Sap and the Mekong come together and then flow apart again, coursing southward through Vietnam and then into the South China Sea.

In the middle of the nineteenth century the French moved into Southeast Asia, establishing a protectorate over Laos, Tonking, Annam, Cochinchina, and what emerged as Cambodia, a kingdom with brilliant regal trappings and an overlord from far-off Gaul. When the Japanese swept through Asia, white Western rule lost face, and when the war was over the Communists and the nationalists drove for separation from the colonial powers. France officially left Cambodia in 1954, but its imprint is clear in Phnom Penh, a gem, as Asian cities go, with clean streets, broad boulevards, tree-lined avenues, raked parks, and whitewashed curbstones. Along these byways flutter motorized rickshas, U.S. Army trucks labeled "American Aid," and a colorful assortment of Cambodians, Europeans, an occasional stunning Eurasian, old white Asian hands and some new ones imported by Cambodian

owners to run the hotels and restaurants. Then, too, along the riverfront, where they labor as fishermen, live the Vietnamese refugees, mostly Christians, an impoverished minority in a neutralist Buddhist society. It is, I would judge, a difficult assortment to please, for the other day the movie theatre called the Eden was playing "Les Nuits d'Amérique" in French, the Lux was showing "Le Voleur de l'Hirondelle" in Chinese, and the Hawaii had "Chang Cham Nenh Dach Cham Nang" in Khmer.

One almost needs to be able to enunciate Khmer syllables to pronounce the name of the capital at all, but it is all beastly simple for the Cambodians, who exhale *phnom* through the nose secure in the knowledge that everyone knows it means "hill" anyway. As for Penh, with its useless trailing "h," it was the name of a lady who, according to some legends, spied a tree floating in the Mekong with statues of Buddha hidden inside. She had them taken to the top of a hill (*phnom*) out of reach of floodwaters. The capital sprang up around the *phnom*, which still exists today. A *stupa*, or steepled tomb, contains the remains of Mme. Penh, who shares the summit with a Buddhist monastery, a circumstance that insures a continuous file of saffron robes trudging up and down the hill.

The morning I arrived in town from Angkor I buzzed off with some dispatch to the grounds of the Royal Palace, which is open to all comers who arrive in the proper hour (mornings only) and who remember to bring their passports. Guides in white jackets and brass buttons conduct visitors into the dazzling compound studded with palaces, monuments, and national treasures. There is a small palace for the royal musicians and another larger open one with ceiling fans for the royal ballet. There is a formidable palace, guarded by sentries, which is the residence of Queen Norodom Kossamak Nearath, mother of Prince Sihanouk, the chief of state.

If I have followed Cambodian politics correctly—*ma foi*, even those of Jersey City perplex me—the Prince, to take him back to the proper place, was, on the death of his grandfather in 1941, jumped over his father and a number of uncles, and placed on the throne. He was eighteen. I have heard it said that a group of royal counselors was responsible for the maneuver, and I have also heard the coup charged to the French. At one juncture in his fight for freedom from the French, Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father, but later returned and rules now, not as king, but as "Chief of State," where, unfettered by



Throne Hall in Phnom Penh—in the dazzling compound of the kingdom, no king.

—H. S.