

# FILM

AN INTRODUCTION

# ART

FOURTH EDITION

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most classical films, Dreyer emphasizes the camera movements as a motif, calling our attention to the parallel and developing situations.

In the course of this scene, Merete publicly accuses Anne of witchcraft. Martin abandons her, and Anne breaks down, confessing to having been in the service of “the Evil One.” Does this, then, settle the matter of her witchcraft?

We know that in analyzing a film, it is useful to contrast the beginning with the ending. *Day of Wrath* begins with the image of a scroll unrolling, over which the medieval church melody *Dies Irae* plays nondiegetically. The scroll depicts and describes the terrible events that befall the sinful earth on Judgment Day (the “Day of Wrath” of the title). (See Fig. 10.47.) After Anne confesses, she looks upward for help, for mercy? The scroll now returns to the screen, accompanied by the sweet solo voice of a choirboy, describing how the “bruised soul” will be lifted to heaven. In the eternal context of the scroll, Anne is apparently forgiven. Yet *what* she is forgiven for—seducing Martin, practicing witchcraft, accepting her society’s definition of herself *as* a witch—is never stipulated. The scroll seems not to resolve the ambiguity so much as to postpone it. The final image of the film is a cross, but the cross is slowly transformed into the witch motif we saw earlier, during Herlofs Marthe’s execution (Fig. 10.48). Presumably, the parallel with Herlofs Marthe is now complete: Anne will be burned. But the causes of certain events, the nature of witchcraft, the desires that motivate Anne—these remain, like her eyes, “fathomless and mysterious.” *Day of Wrath* illustrates how a film may fascinate us not by its clarity but by its obscurity, not by fixed certainties but by teasing questions.



Fig. 10.47

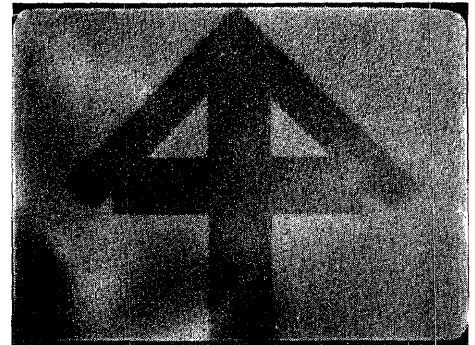


Fig. 10.48

## ■ LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD (L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD)

1961. Précitel and Terrafilm, a French-Italian coproduction. Directed by Alain Resnais. Script by Alain Robbe-Grillet. Photographed by Sacha Vierney. Edited by Henri Colpi and Jasmine Chasney. Music by Francis Seyrig. With Delphine Seyrig, Giorgio Albertazzi, Sacha Pitoëff.

When *Last Year at Marienbad* was first shown in 1961, many critics offered widely varying interpretations of it. When faced with most films, these critics would have been looking for implicit meanings behind the plot. But, faced with *Marienbad*, their interpretations were attempts simply to describe the events that take place in the film’s story. These proved difficult to agree on. Did the couple really meet last year? If not, what really happened? Is the film a character’s dream or hallucination?

Typically, a film’s plot—however simple or difficult—allows the spectator to construct the causal and chronological story mentally. But *Marienbad* is radically different. Its story is impossible to determine. The film has only a plot, with no single consistent story for us to infer. This is because *Marienbad* carries the strategy of *Day of Wrath* to an extreme by working entirely through ambiguities. As we watch the opening of the film, the events seem to be leading us toward a story, complicated though it might be. But then contradictions arise. One character says that an event occurred,

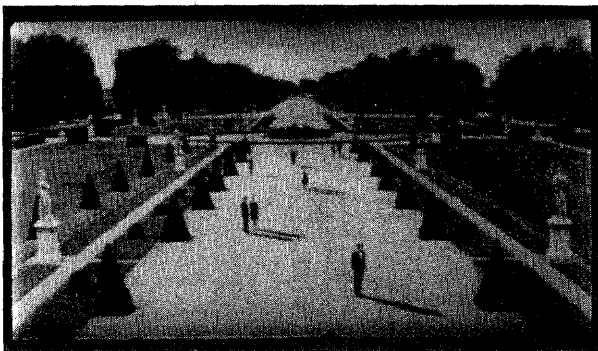


Fig. 10.49



Fig. 10.50



Fig. 10.51



Fig. 10.52

specifying the time and place, but another character denies it. Because such contradictions are never resolved, we have no way of choosing which events are part of a causal series that would make up a potential story. The flow of the narration never supplies clear-cut story information.

*Marienbad* creates its ambiguity through contradictions on many different levels: the spatial, the temporal, the causal. Within the same shot, impossible juxtapositions may occur in the *mise-en-scène*. At one point a track forward through a door reveals the shrub-lined promenade that is (sometimes) situated in front of the hotel. The people scattered across the flat expanse in the center cast long, dark shadows, yet the pointed trees that line the promenade cast none (Fig. 10.49). The sun is both shining and not shining. Later in the film, there is a shot of the woman. (As none of the characters have names, we shall call her the Heroine, the lead male the Narrator, and the tall man the Other Man.) We see three images of her within the frame. Apparently two must be mirror reflections, yet the three images are facing in directions that make an arrangement of mirrors impossible (Fig. 10.50).

Settings shift in inconsistent ways between different segments of the film as well. The statue to which the couple frequently returns appears sometimes to be directly outside the French windows of the hotel (as in the fast track right as the Heroine leaves the Narrator and runs through these windows). At other times the statue is set at a great distance. In some scenes the statue faces a lake; in others, the lake is behind it. In still other scenes the tree-lined promenade forms the background in shots of the statue. (Compare Figs. 10.51 and 10.52.) Within the hotel, things change as well,



Fig. 10.53

as the furnishings of the Heroine's room become progressively more cluttered. New pieces of furniture appear, the gilded mounting on the walls becomes more elaborate, and the decoration over the mantle is sometimes a mirror and sometimes a painting. The Narrator's frequent descriptions of the "vast hotel . . . baroque, dismal" and the "hallways crossing hallways" point up these impossible changes. His words cannot pin down the appearances of things, which frequently shift—as do the descriptions themselves, which the Narrator repeats many times, with different combinations of phrases.

Temporal relations are equally problematic. In one shot the Heroine stands by the window to the left of the bed in her room. The darkness of a nighttime exterior is visible, and the lights by the bed are lit. But when she moves left, with the camera panning, she reaches another window through which sunlight is visible. The type of lighting inside the room is also different in this new portion of the setting, yet no cut or ellipsis has occurred (Fig. 10.53).

Across the whole film, the temporal sequence of events is also uncertain. Supposedly the Narrator has returned to take the Heroine away after an agreed-on year's separation following their initial meeting. Yet in the scene at the end when they do leave together, the Narrator's voice is still describing this event as if it had taken place in the past—as if it were one of the things he is trying to recall to her mind. At the beginning of the film (which apparently coincides fairly closely with the Narrator's arrival at the hotel) the Heroine is watching a play called *Rosmer*. At the end of the film, she stays away from the same performance in order to leave with the Narrator. (The actions of the Heroine and Narrator in this scene also duplicate those in the scene from *Rosmer* as we see it near the beginning of the film.) If the play occurs only once in the story, all of the events involved in the Narrator's attempt to convince the Heroine to leave somehow take place between the two presentations of *Rosmer* in the plot. The temporal status of all of the events of the film becomes undeterminable.

*Marienbad* presents many varied combinations of ambiguous space, time, and causality. An action may carry from one time and space to a different time and space. This happens several times when "matches on action" cuts occur with a change in locale. The first such "match" gives us our first really contradictory cue in the film. A series of shots after the *Rosmer* performance shows small groups of guests standing around the hotel



Fig. 10.54



Fig. 10.55

lobby; one medium shot frames a blonde woman beginning to turn away from the camera (Fig. 10.54). In the middle of her turn, there is a cut to a different setting. The woman is dressed identically, and her position in the frame is matched precisely (Fig. 10.55). This cut also uses a device common throughout the film—a sudden start or cessation of loud organ music. The abrupt changes on the sound track accentuate the film's discontinuities and startling juxtapositions. A similar "match" on action occurs later as the Heroine walks with the Narrator down a hallway. In the first shot there are several people in the background; after the cut, the couple are alone in a different hallway—yet converse without a break.

At other moments, a scene's space and time may remain continuous while actions occur that contradict each other. Several times the camera begins a shot on one or more characters, moves away from them across considerable space, and picks up the same characters in a different locale. This happens as the Narrator confronts the Heroine after the first pistol-range segment. They stand in medium shot as he talks. Then the camera tracks away right, past a series of other people. It reaches the Narrator, who is now standing at the other end of the room, looking off right. A pan right reveals the Heroine coming in a door at the top of a flight of stairs. At several other points, the camera passes over characters who will reappear elsewhere at a later stage of the same shot.

*Marienbad* combines contradictions of space, time, and causality in many variations. The Narrator's voice-over account of events seems at first to make sense, but soon it comes into conflict with the image. In one shot (the night/day segment already mentioned), we see a "flashback," apparently illustrating the Narrator's account of a night he had seduced the Heroine. At first the images and his internal past-tense narration tally closely. But then discrepancies begin to creep in. He says that she went to the bed, yet in the image she remains standing by a wall made of mirrors near the door. He concedes, "It's true, there was a large mirror by the door . . . a huge mirror which you avoided." Yet the Heroine continues to move along the mirror, pressing herself to it.

At other times the Narrator declares that entire sequences are false. We see the Other Man shoot the Heroine, apparently in jealousy over her affair with the Narrator. In the "present," the Narrator continues to describe the scene to the Heroine, trying to get her to remember it. But then he says, "That's not the right ending. It's you alive I must have." At other

points he describes having entered the Heroine's bedroom and raped her, then denies that he had used force to seduce her. The images present several versions of the scene, with the Heroine sometimes cringing in fear, sometimes opening her arms in welcome. The Narrator's descriptions of the supposed events "last year" are unreliable, since he several times offers incompatible versions of scenes.

The film is careful not to give us clues to help establish clear connections. The title itself is purely arbitrary. It seems to imply that an important narrative event has occurred at a specific time and place. But in fact, the Narrator states several times that he had met the Heroine a year ago at Friedrichsbad. Only when she denies ever having been there does he reply, "Perhaps it was elsewhere . . . at Karlstadt, at Marienbad, or Baden-Salsa, or in this very room." Nor can we tell what the relationships among the characters are. The Narrator says that the Other Man is "perhaps" the Heroine's husband. He may also be her brother, friend, or lover, but we have no way of determining which. All of the characters invariably use the formal *vous* (you) to one another rather than the more intimate *tu*. As a result, we never get a sense of how close the Heroine's relationship to either of the two men is supposed to be.

*Marienbad* teases us to try to fit its parts into a coherent whole, yet at the same time it provides several indications that such a constructed unity is impossible. First, there is the statue beside which the couple often stands. The Narrator describes how they had discussed the figures of the man and woman in the statue, offering different interpretations. He says that the man is trying to keep the woman back from something dangerous, whereas she believes that the woman is pointing something out to the man. Each hypothesis is equally reasonable as an explanation for the gestures of the stone figures (as are still other explanations). The Narrator's voice-over says, "Both were possible," but goes on immediately to elaborate on his own explanation. Finally, he tells how the Heroine had insisted on identifying the statues: "You . . . began naming them—haphazardly, I think. Then I said, they might just as well be you and I or anyone. Leave them nameless, with more room for adventure." Yet the Heroine still persists in trying to interpret the statue and invent a story to go with it. Later, the Other Man offers a precise explanation of the statue as an allegorical figure representing Charles III. Here we have an apparently correct interpretation, for the Other Man seems to have special information that the others lack. But by this point in the film we are suspicious of everyone—perhaps he is only making it up. The statue resembles the film as a whole in several ways: Its temporal and spatial situation shifts without explanation, and its meaning ultimately remains elusive.

Another clue to the ultimate undecidability of the film is offered by the locale. The ending of the film leaves the Heroine lost in the gardens of the hotel with the Narrator. The mazelike hotel and gardens suggest the windings of the narrative itself. The space, both inside and outside, is impossible; we can never reconstruct it. The Narrator's voice is heard over the ending, describing the locale: "The gardens of this hotel were in the French manner, without trees, without flowers, without plants, nothing. Gravel, stone, marble, straight lines setting rigid patterns of space, surfaces without mystery." The space as he describes it is stable and unambiguous;

yet, as we have seen, contradictions and impossibilities abound here. The Narrator goes on: "It seemed impossible—at first—to lose one's way there. At first. Among the stones, where you were, already, losing your way forever, in the quiet night, alone with me."

This ease of losing one's way in a deceptively straightforward path applies to the spectator's attempts to construct the film's story as well. "At first" it seems possible to piece events together in a chronological fashion. Only gradually do we realize that the task is hopeless.

A major motif in the film is the game that the Other Man plays against several opponents, always winning easily. The game is not a symbol in the sense of representing some hidden meaning, but it does present yet a third image of impossibility. It is impossible to win the game without knowing the key. One onlooker suggests that perhaps the one who starts the round wins—but the Other Man wins whether he goes first or second. The Narrator struggles to learn the key, but the film offers no solution. Instead, the game helps to suggest to the spectator the nature of the film he or she is watching. The narrative, too, has no key that will enable us to find its hidden coherence; it is a game that we must lose. The whole structure of *Marienbad* is a play with logic, space, and time which does not offer us a single, complete story as a prize for winning this "game."

This is why *Marienbad* fascinates some people but frustrates others. Those who go expecting a comprehensible story and refuse to abandon that expectation may come away baffled and discouraged, feeling that the film is "obscure." But *Marienbad* broke with conventional expectations by suggesting, perhaps for the first time in film history, that a narrative film could base itself entirely on a gamelike structure of causal, spatial, and temporal ambiguity, refusing to specify explicit meanings and teasing the viewer with hints about elusive implicit meanings. Critics have too often tried to find a thematic key to the film while ignoring this formal dynamic. Much of *Marienbad's* fascination for the spectator rests in the process of discovering its ambiguity. The film's Narrator gives us good guidance when he resists interpreting the statue. Of the film's characters and other devices we might also say, "Leave them nameless, with more room for adventure."

### ■ TOKYO STORY (TOKYO MONOGATARI)

1953. Shochiku/Ofuna, Japan. Directed by Yasujiro Ozu. Script by Ozu and Kogo Noda. Photographed by Yuharu Atsuta. With Chishu Ryu, Chieko Higashiyama, So Yamamura, Haruko Sugimura, Setsuko Hara.

We have seen how the classical Hollywood approach to filmmaking created a stylistic system ("continuity") in order to establish and maintain a clear narrative space and time. The continuity system is a specific set of guidelines which a filmmaker may follow. But some filmmakers do not use the continuity system. They develop an alternative set of formal guidelines, which allows them to make films that are quite distinct from classical narratives.

Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu is one such filmmaker. Ozu's approach to the creation of a narrative differs from that used in more classical films