

Heard and Seen

THE UNHURRYING CHASE

When *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the first full-length film directed by Alain Resnais was shown at Cannes in 1959 (not in competition it may be noted), a friend wrote that 'three hours after they had left the hall people were still muttering to themselves about it.' More than three days after seeing his second film, *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, one was too spellbound even to mutter. Adrift in the timeless, nameless yet aggressively actual roomscape and landscape, bemused by the Robbe-Grillet dialogue which, crammed with facts, yet never made anything quite explicit; above all haunted by the counterpoint between the stone faces of statues in the park and the faces, hardly less calm, of guests in the hotel, it was not surprising that, as they say in the West Country, one did not know where one was to.

Hiroshima, it will be recalled, was a neo-Proustian exercise on the themes of time, memory and love, crosscut with savage documentary references to the violence done to humanity by war. The scenario was by Marguerite Duras, one of the 'new novelists,' but a poetic writer for all that. The film, quite apart from its brilliance of technique and its masterly performances, had a poignant beauty that owed a great deal to the almost incantatory effect of the evocative dialogue, as is proved by a reading of the published scenario (NRF, 750NFs). *Marienbad* has been made from a script by Alain Robbe-Grillet, another of the new novelists, but one whose work differs radically from that of Marguerite Duras, except that they both have revolutionary ideas about the *shape* of novels and the method of narration. Robbe-Grillet tells his stories almost exclusively through the enumeration of visual detail. His characters often do not have a name, merely an initial, though the effect is far from Kafka-esque, and you may well find that you only learn about the people involved in a situation, and the situation itself, from one of the characters who cannot tell you more than he knows himself, and will not always tell you that. About him the reader has to pick up what he can by his own wits: see *La Jalousie* passim. In *Marienbad* this character is the camera, and through its roving, impartial and fundamentally incurious eye we examine the infinitely imprecise situation.

A baroque German schloss—'Frederiksbad, Karlstadt, Marienbad où Bad-Salsa; celà n'a aucune importance', as the script says somewhere—set in a formal park, has been turned into a luxury hotel full of well-bred, well-dressed anonymous guests, handsome members of a sufficiently limited society. The three main characters are A., a beautiful composed, abstracted young woman played by Delphine Seyrig; M., her husband or lover, we never know which, but I incline to husband, played by Sacha Pitoëff, son of the great Franco-Russian actor, whose thin, taut body is topped by a narrow face with extraordinary

planes which form as memorable an ideogram as that of Sweden's Max von Sydow; and X., an unexplained intruder played by an Italian, Giorgio Albertazzi, who is the catalyst in the drama, and who in harsh Italian French delivers what is virtually a running commentary on the events, if so they can be called. But this commentary does not only run straight on, it casts back and forth like a questing hound on the trail of the film secret. Did X, as he insists, meet A last year in Marienbad, or is he, as she insists, quite mistaken here? He tells her, pressing inexorably, the details of where and how they met, what they said, what they did; now, he says, she can have no excuse for not coming away with him. We never learn what the truth is; no straight dénouement is given—she may have gone away with him, she may just have gone away. She may have reluctantly come to agree, or she may have joined him knowing that he has been making the whole thing up just to ensnare her. Whether or not she has gone off with her new love, she has certainly left her old one. Of major importance throughout the beginning of the film is a game of chance, played with cards or matches or whatever, in which the loser is he who takes the last piece from the rows of seven, five, three and one laid out on the polished table. This is M's game and though, as he says, he *can* lose he always wins. He beats X at the game but it is clear that in the game for A it is X who has won and M who has lost. The plot, then, is little more than the disposition of pieces upon a board; or rather, it is the deployment of figures in a landscape. For the most important ingredient is yet to be mentioned, and this is the *décor*. The credit titles open upon a lengthy—apparently endless—tracking shot along the corridors, through the rooms and halls of the hotel and, as they fade, the camera lingers lovingly upon the details, baroque or rococo, of the ornaments as the voice of X (as we later learn) describes what we have seen or what we are about to see, but almost never what we are actually looking at. Technically, the triple game of hide-and-seek for eye, ear, and mind is almost cruelly difficult, and gives to the film a great deal of its cinematic fascination. We wander through the ornate interior, or the wide empty distances of the flowerless garden; we confront the agitated statues or see the guests, frozen for long seconds into attitudes far more relaxed than those of the stone figures. The situation is one of great potential danger for the protagonists, but the method by which it is presented is detached to the point of inhumanity. The occasional moments of violent action—the breaking of a glass, shot from high above, a sudden fiercely surprising cut to a shooting match in a dark gallery—gain immeasurably from their rarity. It is the sliding, elliptic camera that suggests the action, and the breathless mind of the beholder trying to relate what it sees to what it hears is as exercised as by a medieval disputation which, in point of fact, this film often greatly resembles. *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* represents, I am persuaded a revolutionary technical advance in the method of presenting an emotional situation in plastic terms; visually it is one of the most exquisite works ever to appear on a screen and intellectually it is absorbing to a degree. But in spite of what Robbe-Grillet and Alain Resnais say about its being the way in which

most people apprehend such situations, I cannot see the average cinema audience—even a French one—getting down to the real cerebral effort needed to come to terms with all its surprises.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

Reviews

RELIGION IN THE SOVIET UNION, by Walter Kolarz; Macmillan; 50s.

GOD AND THE SOVIETS, by Constantin de Grunwald, translated by G. J. Robinson-Paskevsky; Hutchinson; 30s.

Mr Kolarz has produced the best documented work to appear so far on the history of religion under the Soviet government. His enumeration of even the wildest sects is exhaustive, and he provides a careful estimate of the present strength of each religious body, the losses it has undergone, and its chances of survival or increase.

Mr Kolarz argues that there has been as yet no real change in the direction of communist policy. The kinder attitude of Stalin's post-war years and of the collective leadership after his death has won for the Soviet government far more than it has lost. After the war the co-operation of at least the vocal parts of the Patriarchal Church made easier the absorption into the Union of countries with an Orthodox population. Since then loud claims and very limited concessions to the freedom of religious worship have provided Soviet diplomacy the appearances it needed so badly for its work abroad.

Inevitably some cry that the leopard has changed its spots. One such is M. de Grunwald. A Russian by birth, with his home in Paris, he has made a tour of the Soviet Union and now records the conversations he has had in railway carriages or across the luncheon table with church officials and pious believers. It is a flash photograph, not a study in depth. Of course it would be foolish to suppose that M. de Grunwald's fairly rosy picture of life in Russia comes from informants who were altogether and consciously insincere. Conditions are better now than they have been within most people's memory, and it is possible to hope for improvement. Besides, standards of religious freedom are different *toto caelo* from what they are here or in France.

It is difficult to do more than sound this general warning about M. de Grunwald's book without going into detail. One small example may be enough to show how easy it is for a casual observer to give, or be given, a false impression of the facts. M. de Grunwald is duly impressed with the *Journal of the Moscow*