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and the Cartography of an
Orphic Life-in-Death: The
Modern *Katábasis* of Resnais

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'Where is the land of the dead?
Is it everywhere?
Or nowhere?'¹

Ted Hughes, *Orpheus*

1.0 The Labyrinth of *Marienbad*

L'Année Dernière à Marienbad, hereafter referred to as *Marienbad*, is a French-Italian black and white co-production of 1961, directed by Alain Resnais to the script of Alain Robbe-Grillet.² In an interview, dated November 1999, Resnais stated that Robbe-Grillet and himself "were very impressed by surrealism".³ In Robbe-Grillet's words, "The essential characteristic of the image is its presentness ... verbs are always in the present tense ... by its nature, what we see on the screen is in the act of happening, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it".⁴ Time and memory are used to construct the plot.⁵ His script becomes "symbolist

1. Hughes, Ted. *Orpheus in Collected Plays for Children* (Faber; London 2001) 99.
2. Photographed by Sacha Vierny, edited by Henri Colpi and Jasmine Chasney. Music by Francis Seyrig. Film won the grand prize at the 1961 Venice Film Festival.
3. Dupont, Joan. "Resnais Reels 'Em! Interview".
[online] http://www.findarticles.com/cf_o/m1285/11_29/57590217/print.jhtml, (1999), 2.
4. Quoted in Monaco, James. *Alain Resnais: The Rôle of Imagination* (Secker and Warburg; London 1978) 66.
5. Rhode, Eric. *Tower of Babel: Speculations on the Cinema* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson; London 1966) 137.

in Resnais' treatment".⁶ Bragan Thomas states⁷ that "What *Marienbad* dramatizes is the relative quality of human memory ... but memory is non-linear, collapsing past and present into a single entity".⁸ Robbe-Grillet states that the film is "the story of a conviction: it has to do with the reality the hero creates out of his own words and vision".⁹

The film has got three nameless characters, an attractive woman 'A' and two men, 'X' and 'M'. A is M's wife or mistress while the other man is X, the main

6. Ibid., 146.

In an interview in 1977 Resnais stated that he "always refuses the word 'memory' à propos my work. I'd use the word 'imagination'" [Yakir, Dan "In the Twilight Zone: 1000 Eyes Talks to Alain Resnais", *1000 Eyes* (March 1977), quoted in Leo Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Harvard University Press; Massachusetts 1993) 181]. Bersani and Dutoit argue that having a former director of historical documentaries like Resnais, putting forth such an argument sounds perverse (Ibid., 181).

The early career of Resnais in the film industry was as a director of art films and documentaries with a socio-political tinge. These include *Gunerica* (1950), *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1950-3), *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) and *Toute la memoire du monde* (1956). *Gunerica* is a reminder of violence and the brutality of war, a reality which is easily forgotten with time, a reality which could happen again. 'Eighty thousand wounded in nine seconds. It will happen again'. *Les Statues meurent aussi* is anti-colonial propaganda presented as research in African art. *Nuit et Brouillard*, is a reminder of Nazi atrocities in concentration camps which took place a decade earlier, atrocities that somehow society has forgotten that they have happened. *Toute la memoire du monde*, is a study of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the guardian of all memory of history and science, the psyche of civilization.

The feature film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) is about time and memory and the tragic ability for the human mind to forget. The setting is post war Japan, precisely the location where one of the atomic bombs took off. Resnais' film, to use the words of the heroine, is a film about peace: 'What else can one make in Hiroshima but a film about peace?' The ability of the human mind to forget is a killer in disguise. "We forget the true meaning of Hiroshima as easily as we forget our past loves" [Stanbrook, Alan. "The Time and Space of Alain Resnais" in Patrides, C.A. (ed.) *Aspects of Time* (Manchester University Press; Manchester 1976) 97].

7. See review of film of 21 April 2001 (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1572522240>). Cited in Horsley, Carter. "Last Year at Marienbad". [online] <http://www.thecityreview.com/lastyr.html>, 2.

8. Ibid.

"Memory and the corrosive effects of time are the twin poles of Resnais' world. On the one hand there is the desire and obligation to remember the past if mistakes are not to be repeated ('Eighty thousand wounded in nine seconds. It will happen again') and working against this is the inevitable decay in once burning thoughts and feelings brought about by time and distance ('I shall forget you. Look, I am forgetting you already'). The positive and the negative, the forces of light and dark, of life and death are engaged in mortal conflict in Resnais' work and out of this conflict comes a compulsion for truth and the need to perpetuate it before it is too late" (Stanbrook, 92-3).

9. Rhode, 146.

voice in the film. X is the hero, A the heroine and M the stone-faced man, the vampire figure. The relationship between the three involves other guests, who apart from X, the outsider, seems sterile, clinical, cold and without feelings.

The story is seen through X's narrative. What is presented is through his perspective. X reminds A of their encounter a year before at a spa at Marienbad¹⁰ or a similar one, where she had promised him that a year later, she would leave M to elope with X.¹¹ A denies this claim but ultimately is convinced by X and leaves M for him. A and M are "cycling endlessly in a film that never ends. X offers her a way to freedom".¹² A elopes with X and they end up in a new labyrinth.

The film takes place within the perimeters of a Baroque hotel, a maze, with sterile gardens. Its architecture and interior design "become inter-active participants in the action".¹³ X's monologue opens the film with a description of the setting where the 'event' is taking place: "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 corridors overloaded with a dim, cold ornamentation of woodwork, stucco, mouldings, marble, black mirrors ...".¹⁴ John Russell Taylor interpreted the hotel as a luxurious mental home with A as patient,

10. The real Marienbad, in Western Bohemia, was a spa famous for the healing powers of its natural springs, known since the 13th century (<http://www.royal-spas-of-europe.de/english/marienbad.htm>). It was founded in the nineteenth century and most of its architecture was erected in the second half of the century. King Edward VII went to Marienbad nine times between the years 1899 to 1908 (<http://www.royal-spas-of-europe.de/english/marienbad.htm>).
11. The strange relationship between X and A takes place in the film in circumstances very similar to the relationship of Halvard Solness and Hilda in Henrik Ibsen's play, *The Master Builder* [Meyer, Michael, *Ibsen* (Doubleday & Co.; New York 1971)]. Besides similarity in the plot, the play, as per poster attached to the theatre of the hotel where it was to be shown, is *Rosmer*, an allusion to Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* published in 1886.
12. Beltzer, Thomas. "Last Year at Marienbad: An Intertextual Meditation". [online] <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/10/marienbad.html>, (2000), 1.
13. Kirsch, Walter. "'Marienbad' Revisited". [online] <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Academy/7909/Marienbad.htm>.
14. It continues such "... dark paintings, columns, heavy hangings – sculptured door frames, series of doorways, galleries – transverse corridors that open in turn on empty salons, rooms overloaded with an ornamentation from another century, silent halls where the sound of advocating footsteps is absorbed by carpets so thick and heavy that nothing can be heard, as if the ear of the man walking on once again, down these corridors – through these halls, these galleries, in this structure of another century, this enormous, luxurious, baroque, lugubrious hotel – "[Robbe-Grillet, Alain, *Last Year in Marienbad*, translated by Richard Howard (Grove Press, Inc.; New York 1962) 18].

M as her partner and X as the psychiatrist.¹⁵ In the last scene together, M tells A “You should get some rest. Don’t forget, that’s why we’re here”.

For its inhabitants this baroque hotel is the world; they never leave it and are trapped in a time warp. None of them can leave. They appear statuesque, seemingly without emotions. They rarely speak or move. X is the only character who talks to others rather than at them. The main action taking place is to understand a parlour game¹⁶ which is always won by M. There are various shots where X and M confront each other in the game. The roots of the confrontation between M and A is on a photo of A taken the year by X, X’s best proof that he is telling the truth. M, A’s guardian, always wins; he never loses. M’s contact with X is through this macho game.¹⁷ The game is one “of skill not chance”,¹⁸ “of controlled dominance rather than one of sport.”¹⁹ Still X manages to convince A to leave M for him and thus M “emerges as loser in the struggle for A’s mind”.²⁰ By the end of the film, one knows a lot about X but hardly anything about M or A; “what we do know is not really about them but about what X thinks about them”.²¹

These nameless characters²² and their inter-relationships has been the subject of various interpretations in film theory. A publication by René Prédal in 1968 includes a list of sixteen major interpretations of the film.²³ Translations of them are given by Sweet.²⁴ The interpretation of the film has varied widely since first viewed. It ranges from identifying X as Death²⁵ to stating that the whole film is an

15. Taylor, John Russell. “Alain Resnais” in *Cinema Eye, Cinema Ear: Some Key Film-Makers of the Sixties* (Methuen; London 1964) 225.

This opinion is shared by Stanbrook who interpreted the baroque hotel as “a mental asylum to which M has brought his ailing wife”. (Stanbrook, 101).

16. This parlour game is Chinese, dating several thousand centuries. The game is quite simple if one knows the secret of winning [Sweet, Freddy. *The Film Narratives of Alain Resnais* (UMI Research Press; Michigan 1981) 40].

17. Throughout the film A plays the parlour game twice by herself. First, using identical photographs and later when she tears a paper and places it in rows of 1-3-5-7.

18. Armes, Roy. “In the Labyrinth: *L’Année Dernière à Marienbad*” in *The Cinema of Alain Resnais* (Zwemmer; London 1968) 98.

19. Sweet, 40.

20. Armes, 98.

21. Ward, John. *Alain Resnais, or the Theme of Time* (Secker and Warburg; London 1968) 45.

22. The cast includes Delphine Seyrig as ‘A’, Giorgio Albertazzi as ‘X’ and Sacha Pitoëff as ‘M’.

23. Prédal, René. “Alain Resnais”, *Etudes cinématographiques*, nos. 64-68 (1968) 87.

24. Sweet, 43-4.

essay on the sexual awakening of A and on sexual perversions of rape and incest.²⁶ Probability and calculus had also been applied to solve the riddle of the characters of the film.²⁷ Two possibilities exist, that is, either $X + A + M = 1$ or $X + A + M = 0$, which corresponds to the interpretation that either each character is a part of the same personality or that none of the characters do actually exist. Gaston Bounoure had applied calculus whereby he assigned the first derivative of X, A and M to death, patient and fairy king respectively.²⁸ Irrespective of the various interpretations of the film, one proposition is definite. "Time is a theme, as its contemplation and its escape".²⁹

Reality and time appear as the main themes of the plot as per script. This is reinforced in the film by actors changing clothes in the same scene thus blurring distinctions between past, present and future. Despite the various interpretations of the film, it is justified to read it as though a thought with no actual or imaginary plots. Past, present and future take place within the same space. Time is planar and static. It is fixed. "... The event which the narrator describes as being in the past (Last Year) and in another place (at Marienbad) is in fact taking place here and now".³⁰ The film unfolds as the narrator talks, making it all seem to happen "on one level, at one time and at one place",³¹ for there is more than one tense in Robbe-Grillet's suggestion of absolute presentness.

25. Taylor, 226. The grounds of the hotel, with no grass but stones, are suggestive of a graveyard.

That A possibly has asked X for "a year's grace before they should meet again" is a clear reference to an ancient Breton myth where "Death comes to claim a maiden but allows her a year's respite until ultimate reckoning" (Stanbrook, 101). Resnais was born in Brittany and thus most likely knew this legend.

26. Kline, T. Jefferson. *Screening the Text: Intertextuality in New Wave French Cinema* (John Hopkins University Press; Baltimore 1992) 54-86.

27. Monaco, 69.

28. Ibid.

29. Horsley, 1.

30. Armes, 95.

31. Ibid., 103.

2.0 *Marienbad*: An Orphic Love Affair?

2.1 The Orphic path to *Marienbad*

It is an axiom of film criticism that no single explanation, however intricate, can penetrate the heart of *Marienbad* for the simple reason that both Alain Robbe-Grillet and Alain Resnais, who respectively wrote and directed it, conceived its ménage à trois plot in terms of what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson call “a story [that] is impossible to determine.”³² This cryptic effect recalls Henry James’ claim about his tale ‘The Turn of the Screw’ which is in fact equally applicable to Resnais’ film³³ – that it is ultimately an exercise in “exquisite mystification”.³⁴ That *Marienbad* accrues a Jamesian enigmatic dimension is cogently attested by John Russell Taylor’s acute observation: “There is no simple, complete equivalence for anything, and yet meanings hover in a cloud and each object presented to our attention – the hotel, the garden, even the curiously depersonalised characters – gradually accumulates significances which our minds hold simultaneously in suspension.”³⁵ Any interpretation of the film is therefore inevitably doomed to be at best mere grist to Resnais’ mill, or to what Taylor terms his “intellectual trap.”³⁶ The film’s interpreter is really in a position not unlike X’s who keeps playing for A with M knowing that he can never win the triangular nim game. Given this hopeless challenge, the temptation to interpret grows stronger however; and even Taylor concurs by intimating solutions to an insoluble case. Indeed, a most alluring Taylor guess is that the *Marienbad* “hotel might be Hell.”³⁷ A hell perhaps, but not exactly of the Sartrean type that he suggests, though Huis Clos’ roots in the Greek concept of Hades could have inspired Resnais.

An intriguing possibility, and one which enriches Roy Armes’ suggestion that Resnais might be reworking the ancient Breton legend of Death and the maiden³⁸,

32. Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill; New York 1979) 324.

33. Like most critics, the authors consider Resnais to be the *metteur-en-scène* of Robbe-Grillet’s script, and hence the *auteur* of what distinguishes *Marienbad* as film narrative: the speculative spectrality of its spatio-temporal dimension.

34. James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (Scribner’s; New York 1934) 172-173.

35. Taylor, 226.

36. *Ibid.*, 224.

37. *Ibid.*, 225.

38. See Armes, 103.

is that *Marienbad* is a love story of the Orpheus-Eurydice kind – one that twists the myth of the Argonautic minstrel into that of X who descends into M's realm for A and stays there to tell the tale. Admittedly, the *Marienbad* experience is nowhere specifically cited by Resnais or Robbe-Grillet as Orphic. Nor does Erling B. Holtmark include *Marienbad* in his analysis of the *katábasis* or descent theme in modern film.³⁹ It can hardly be denied, however, that the film does evoke the modernist Orphic *katábasis* by creating what seems to be a variant of Maurice Blanchot's vision of an Orphic nether region of fragmented integration and cyclic staticism⁴⁰ through what Bordwell describes as "a style of editing and camerawork that destroys the representation of phenomenal space and time."⁴¹ No less crucial to *Marienbad*'s antithetical labyrinth, which Geoffrey Wagner evocatively labels "the stuff of nightmare"⁴², is the film's *mise-en-scène* whose equally contradictory properties likewise connote a descent into a Blanchot-like spatio-temporal 'discontinuum' where paradoxically what gives birth to the Orphic dirge is the "dismembered, endlessly dying"⁴³ poetic self. Consequently, since *Marienbad* is "truly open to all 'myths'"⁴⁴, as Guido Aristarco clearly acknowledges, one could possibly shed some mythic light on its mystery by considering how it reworks in modernist terms such proposed classical Orphic sources as Virgil's and Ovid's through what is arguably one of the most radical ruptures of Hollywood cinematic representation – its inscrutable interplay of oxymoronic editing, camerawork and *mise-en-scène*.

Although most critics of *Marienbad* tend to view Resnais as a cartographer of an unknown world – a "terre[...] inconnue[...]"⁴⁵, to use T. Jefferson Kline's phrase – some have dared to be less geographically vague. To Joseph Milicia, for instance,

39. See Holtmark, Erling B. "The *katábasis* Theme in Modern Cinema" in Winkler, Martin M. (ed.), *Classics and Cinema* (Brucknell University Press; Lewisburg 1991) 60-80.

40. See Blanchot, Maurice. "Orpheus' gaze" in Josipovici, Gabriel (ed.), *The Sirens' Song: Selected Essays by Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (Harvester Press; Sussex 1982) 177-181.

41. Bordwell, David. *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*. (University of California Press; Berkeley 1981) 109.

42. Wagner, Geoffrey. *The Novel and the Cinema* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Rutherford 1975) 282.

43. Blanchot, "Orpheus' gaze", 178.

44. Aristarco, Guido. *I Sussurri e le Grida: Dieci Letture Critiche di Film* (Sellerio; Palermo 1988) 65.

45. Kline, T. Jefferson. "Rebecca's Bad Dream: Speculations on/in Resnais's *Marienbad*" in *Screening the Text: Intertextuality in New Wave French Cinema* (The Johns Hopkins University Press; Baltimore 1992) 54.

Marienbad's "baroque palace setting with its eerie formal gardens [evokes] Poe's Haunted Palace"⁴⁶ and hence, by implication, its unearthly Usher association. Again, *Marienbad*'s unearthliness is what strikes Freddy Sweet who, while considering the possibility of its characters "carrying on their activities in a realm of the dead"⁴⁷, actually suggests what kind of underworld it might be: "It is interesting to note Resnais' ironic use of abundant camera movement within an atmosphere of death."⁴⁸ To Sweet, then, *Marienbad*'s death-zone transcends James Monaco's vision of it as merely "an opera of statues [in which] the people are sculptural volumes."⁴⁹ For Resnais breathes motion into his characters' statuary postures. A case in point is the ambivalent 'rape' scene where the successive repetition of nine flashing shots of the camera tracking in on a statuesque A conveys the startling effect that, to quote Armes' words, it is "A [who is] coming to meet X with arms outstretched over and over again."⁵⁰ Sweet is, therefore, thematically accurate when he suggests that, whether the *Marienbad* play, *Rosmer*, alludes to Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* or not, Resnais' "very active camera"⁵¹ creates what is evidently a 'life-in-death' preoccupation by animating the Ibsen-like "figé[...] [or] frozen"⁵² characters. What both Sweet and Armes overlook, however, is that this reiterative visual effect which could be termed 'the animation of the dead', integrates two crucial concepts – moving motionlessness and endless repetitiveness – both of which are seminal features of the underworld as Homer conceives it. Worth quoting here is what Kathie Carlson says about Hades: "What is particularly striking about existence in the underworld is how static it was; everything happened over and over again and was perpetually the same. Nothing grew and developed, and nothing was transformed. Nor was there meaningfulness to the cyclicity; everything simply repeated."⁵³

To the objection that *Marienbad*'s ending subverts any such speculation on the Homeric cyclic thematics of the 'rape' scene by showing X and A leaving the château together, one should raise the more thematically convincing argument that the

46. Milicia, Joseph. "L'Année Dernière à *Marienbad*" in Lyon, Christopher (ed.) *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers Vol. I: Films* (Papermac; London 1987) 31.

47. Sweet, 42.

48. *Ibid.*, 62.

49. Monaco, 63.

50. Armes, 100.

51. Sweet, 63.

52. *Ibid.*, 42.

53. Carlson, Kathie. *Life's Daughter/Death's Bride: Inner Transformations Through the Goddess Demeter/Persephone* (Shambhala; Boston 1997)108.

conclusion is deliberately left open-ended to endlessness. What John Ward says about “the final ‘happy’ ending”⁵⁴ – that X “significantly narrate[s] [it] in the past tense, as if to convince himself that it really did happen”⁵⁵ – reinforces Joan Dagle’s impression that X’s is a ‘no exit’ kind of narration which his very first words pivot on endless repetitiveness: “‘Once again – I walk on’ describes the immediate present while implying the continuation of the action, the repetition of the past.”⁵⁶ Armes’ view, then, that *Marienbad* ends with X and A “still trapped in a new labyrinth”⁵⁷ seems only partially correct, since there is only one labyrinth in Resnais, but a labyrinth which, like the Borgesian Book of Sand, has neither a beginning nor an end. The beginning of *Marienbad* signifies its end, the end its beginning, and so on infinitely. Such a ‘no way out’ interpretation of *Marienbad* is also, in Sweet’s opinion, thematically consistent with Robbe-Grillet’s constant concern in fiction like *In the Labyrinth* with “characters confined in a space which does not allow for escape.”⁵⁸ X and A do actually proceed, but to nowhere spatially. The spatiality of the *Marienbad* ending, like that of the ‘rape’ scene which it mirrors, is spaceless in its never-ending repetitiveness – a theme central to that key modernist text: Blanchot’s article ‘Orpheus’ gaze’, with its vision of an Orphic fate marked by “the absence of an end.”⁵⁹ Fundamental to our understanding of the Orphic basis of the *Marienbad* proceedings are such modernist influences like Blanchot’s and Borges’ through which Renais filters the Homeric notion of eternal sameness in moments like the ‘rape’ scene, since its repetitive tracking shot moving A and/or X to nowhere closer in particular does echo the static activity of such Erebus spirits as Sisypheus, constantly rolling a descending rock uphill.

54. Ward, 50.

55. Ibid.

56. Dagle, Joan. “Narrative Discourse in Film and Fiction: The Question of the Present Tense” in Conger, Syndy M. and Janice R. Welsh (eds.) *Narrative Strategies: Original Essays in Film and Prose Fiction* (Western Illinois University Press; Macomb 1980) 57.

57. Armes, 101.

58. Sweet, 54.

59. Blanchot, “Orpheus’ gaze”, 178.

2.2 The cyclic staticism of gazing statuary

While cyclic staticism is essential to both the *Marienbad* world and the Odyssey's 'Book of the Dead', more vital to Resnais is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and specifically the description in 'The Death of Orpheus' of an equally static activity which is however, as in the case of X and A, ceaselessly shared by a tragic pair:

There hand in hand they stroll, the two together,
Sometimes he follows as she walks in front,
Sometimes he goes ahead and gazes back –
No danger now – at his Eurydice.⁶⁰

Although Orpheus and Eurydice constantly change positions nothing changes their basic situation which Ovid pivots on the act of endless gazing. But so does Resnais who conceives of X and A as interacting repeatedly in terms of gazing statuary. Consider, for example, the justly celebrated statue sequence, where, while X's voice interprets the sculptural figures as a couple on a cliff edge facing a limitless sea, Resnais cuts to a crane shot up the statue's back to reveal the garden lake beneath. Resnais' choice of a high-angled camera movement unerringly captures the stone figures' precipitous perspective as they literally enact what X attributes to them. To say, as Sweet does, that "[t]his camera movement animates the figures of the statue"⁶¹ is however only half the point. Equally important is the implication of the preceding frontal crane shot, and the subsequent frontal and profile ones, that no matter how many viewpoints the camera changes, the sculptural figures remain in the same position – and always gazing. The Ovidian Orphic echo seems unmistakable especially when viewed in the light of what X tells A after she keeps changing frontal, rear and profile postures near the statue on the balustrade: "Then I said that it could just as well be you and I ... Or anyone."⁶²

Quite understandably, then, Thomas Beltzer says: "As they discuss the sculptures in the garden, we suspect that 'X' and 'A' are sculptures themselves."⁶³ And sculptures of Hades' suggestiveness, one might add, tableaux vivants which Resnais'

60. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville, (Oxford University Press; Oxford 1986) 251.

61. Sweet, 37.

62. Robbe-Grillet, 65.

63. Beltzer, 2.

moving camerawork paradoxically animates into an Orphic tragedy of eternal sculptural gazing. Resnais' Orphic underworld is also Medusa's lair, since his gaze is as petrifying as hers. Perhaps this is why, in an interview with Joan Dupont, Resnais cites "the pictorial impact of Magritte"⁶⁴ as one of the major influential sources of his film – for he shares the Magrittean taste for petrification as evidenced in such paintings depicting bowler-hatted statuesque male figures. Unlike Magritte, however, whose *Domain of Arnhem* (1938) typically transforms an eagle into a rock, Resnais prefers to render inanimation animate. In fact, rather than "a documentary on a statue"⁶⁵, as Robbe-Grillet suggests, Resnais' *Marienbad* is evidently a meditation on antithetical living statuary. That for Resnais statues live is inversely implied by the fact that they also die, as the title of the 1953 short film he co-directed with Chris Marker – *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* – clearly signifies. Significantly, unlike the château guests whom Robbe-Grillet terms "frozen characters"⁶⁶, X and A are evidently sculptural zombies whose death makes them live again and again through their tale of the endless gaze. Their ceaseless gazing perpetuates the creative potential which Ovid attributes only to the living Orpheus' initial gaze with its paradoxical result of Eurydice's second death and the birth of the Orphic chant. But again, as perpetual 'living dead' gazers X and A seem closer to Blanchot's Orphism than to Ovid's – for theirs is an antithetical condition that matches Blanchot's definition of the creative act as "an endless gaze [...] a dead gaze, a gaze that has become the ghost of eternal vision."⁶⁷ That Blanchot's concept of art, which he defines as the "endless gaze of a seeing blindness"⁶⁸, is essentially Orphic is quite evident from statements like the following: "It is as though by disobeying the law and looking back at Eurydice Orpheus had done no more than obey the profound necessity of art."⁶⁹ For Resnais, as for Blanchot, the cyclic staticism of Orphic gazing is endlessly creative. Hence the oxymoronic effect of

64. Dupont, 2.

65. Quoted in Armes, 113, from Labarthe, André S. and Jacques Rivette. "Entretien avec Resnais et Robbe-Grillet", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 123 (1963) 3.

66. Robbe-Grillet, 60.

67. Blanchot, "The essential solitude" in Josipovici (ed.) 107.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Blanchot, "Orpheus' gaze", 179.

Resnais' ever-shifting perspective of X's and A's sculptural mirror images which changes their changeless gazing into a filmic act of creation. As in Blanchot, where "Orpheus' gaze links inspiration to [the] desire"⁷⁰ without which the Orphic "song [of] lost Eurydice [...] cannot do"⁷¹, so in Resnais the source of X's tale is his desirous gazing at lost A. The *Marienbad* experience becomes in this respect a modern katábasis journey as Holtsmark understands it: not "a literal descent into the actual underworld, as in book 11 of the Homeric *Odyssey* or book 6 of Vergil's *Aeneid*"⁷², but "a displaced trek"⁷³ through what seems to be a Blanchot-like Orphic territory where X's apparent failure to reclaim A perpetuates itself into an act of creative endlessness.

2.3 The garden lake of contiguous (un)realities

Again, true to their proposed Orphic origin, X and A also accrue the modernist sensibility of existential disintegration by appropriating the fragmented fate which the Thracian bard suffers at the tearing fury of the Dionysian Mainads. This statement can be viewed in truer perspective if we consider another oxymoronic aspect of the statue sequence: its integrated spatio-temporal fragmentation. What is so peculiar about Resnais' surveillance of the statue is that, out of a series of what Sweet calls "flowing tracking and crane shots"⁷⁴ (there are, in fact, four in all), only the second, to which we have already referred, depicts the garden lake. Such intricate camera movement, while suggesting by its integral fluidity a holistic spatial continuity, concurrently affirms by the second pivotal cut, showing a lake where there is none, that this is also a fractured spatiality, clearly non-Bazinian in its visual opacity.⁷⁵ Stranger still, the third in another series of statue shots (three static ones, this time) actually reveals X and A on a balustrade overlooking the elusive lake. Given such disquieting dislocations, shades of Tantalus' pool flowing in and ebbing away in

70. *Ibid.*, 181.

71. *Ibid.*, 178.

72. Holtsmark, 63.

73. *Ibid.*

74. Sweet, 36.

75. Resnais invokes here, as elsewhere, André Bazin's 'realist' notion of homogeneous cinematic spatiality only to subvert it. On Bazin's "spatial unity", see *What is Cinema?* Vol. I, trans. Hugh Gray. (University of California Press; Berkeley 1967) 50.

the Homeric Hades, one inevitably asks: but what, and where, is the garden lake at Marienbad? There are no easy answers to such questions, since the château's neo-classical park is not in any way less imponderable than its baroque halls and corridors. In describing this place as "brighter, more comprehensibly ordered than the dim interiors of the hotel"⁷⁶, Graham Parkes overlooks the essential paradox of X's description of its "straight lines [as] surfaces without mystery [...] where [one] get[s] lost, forever."⁷⁷ The château garden is arguably a Zeno-like straight-line labyrinth – a realm rooted antithetically in an obscure transparency. Bordwell and Thompson rightly stress its paradoxical *mise-en-scène*: "The people scattered across the flat expanse in the center cast long, dark shadows, yet the pointed trees that line the promenade cast none. The sun is simultaneously shining and not shining."⁷⁸ As in Magritte's *The Empire of Light* (1954), with its parallel paradox of a nocturnal landscape beneath a sunlit sky, the effect is of a waking nightmare.

More bizarre, however, than Bordwell and Thompson describe it, the *Marienbad* garden blossoms into a proliferation of paradoxes, for it keeps reversing reversed expectations to confuse us even further. At one point, for instance, the ornamental trees suddenly acquire shadows, while X and A lose them on the balustrade to regain them in another scene where, except for the statue, everything else is visibly shadowless. More simply put then, the feeling conveyed is of X and A drifting unbound in fragmented space and time. Once again, the Orphic myth is recalled here, and specifically Virgil's account in Book 4 of the *Georgics* where Eurydice shares Orpheus' dispersed self by her second death as a shattered shade that "thins and scatters/In the breeze."⁷⁹ But so pervasively fragmented is X's and A's spatio-temporal depiction that it comes to embody paradoxically the disembodiment of Virgil's Orpheus and Eurydice in terms of Walter A. Strauss' modernist interpretation of the Orphic *sparagmós* or dismemberment as a "'displacement' of Orphic forces [from] the unifying power of [...] Renaissance Orphism [...] to the dislocations characteristic of all aspects of modern life."⁸⁰ That *Marienbad* keeps alluding to

76. Parkes, Graham. "Phantasy Projections of the Multiple Psyche in *8½* and *Last Year at Marienbad*." [online] [\(http://www.hanover.edu/philos/film/vol_01/parkes.htm\)](http://www.hanover.edu/philos/film/vol_01/parkes.htm). (1994), 6.

77. Robbe-Grillet, 165.

78. Bordwell and Thompson, 324.

79. Virgil's *The Georgics*, trans. Robert Wells. (Carcanet New Press; Manchester 1982) 93.

80. Strauss, Walter A. *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge 1971) 269-270.

modern versions of Orphic fragmentation is also evident from its evocation of Rainer Maria Rilke's vision in the Sonnets to Orpheus of the Doppelbereich or "Double Realm"⁸¹ where the earlier Orpheus of the "divided senses"⁸² becomes the poetic embodiment of Hegelian existential dialectics: "Be – and know at the same time Not-Being."⁸³ Disintegrating into the Rilkean realm of the Orphic being of non-being, *Marienbad* epitomises Resnais' dictum: "We are but fragments."⁸⁴ What Sweet labels *Marienbad*'s "different strata of existence"⁸⁵, and which Sweet traces to the acknowledged influence on Robbe-Grillet of the contiguous worlds of Alfonso Bioy Casares' *The Invention of Morel*,⁸⁶ are therefore fragmented times and spaces that interact in ways similar to Borges' parallel garden of Ts'ui Pen where forking paths create "an infinite series of times [that] contains[...] all possibilities."⁸⁷

Hence the impossibility of determining where, and hence what, the Marienbad garden and its lake stand for. The lake, for instance, could be Lethe, the hellish river of oblivion where A, like Virgil's Eurydice, drowns her memory; and it might equally be Cocytus, Virgil's sullen stream, which Dante "lock[s] in the deep frost"⁸⁸ – for it is claimed that all lakes were frozen 'last' summer when X allegedly met A. Or again, as already noted, the lakes' disappearing and reappearing act could likewise denote that it is the Homeric Tantalus' pool. Such are the lakes' concurrent possibilities of being and not-being that it becomes a kind of Rilkean Orphic "death space"⁸⁹ as Blanchot defines it, where everything "tear[s] apart [into] endless metamorphosis."⁹⁰ Plunged into this contradictory shifting spatiality, X and A fragment into what Blanchot elsewhere terms "the time of timelessness."⁹¹ Armes seems to overlook completely the (non)spatio-temporality of *Marienbad*'s *sparagmós* narrativity when he quotes Robbe-Grillet's claim that "the film takes place [in] a perpetual present which makes any recourse to memory impossible"⁹²

81. Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Between Roots*, trans. Rika Lesser. (Princeton University Press; Princeton 1989) 7.

82. *Ibid.*, 3.

83. *Ibid.*, 56.

84. Cited in Kline, 83.

85. Sweet, 46.

86. *Ibid.*

87. Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Works*, trans. Andrew Hurley. (Allen Lane; London 1999)127.

88. Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Laurence Binyon in *The Portable Dante* (Penguin; Middlesex 1989)169.

89. Blanchot, "Rilke and Death" in Josipovici (ed.) 152.

90. *Ibid.*

91. Blanchot, "The essential solitude", 105.

92. See Armes, 95.

as evidence of his belief that “[d]espite Resnais’s reputation as the ‘cinéaste of memory’ and despite the title ‘Last Year’, the film has nothing to do with the past or forgetfulness.”⁹³ Rather than simply spatialising the possibility of a weird eternal presentness, the film spatialises as well the possibility of a weirder timelessness: last year there is simultaneously this year here and next year wherever – and forever. *Marienbad* propels the imagination onto fabulous tenses, since its spatio-temporal (dis)continuum is anything but fixed and specific. Significantly, when A denies having ever been at Friedrichsbad, X replies: “Well, then it was somewhere else, maybe [...] at Karlstadt, at Marienbad, or Baden-Salsa, or even here, in this salon.”⁹⁴ Consequently, Keith Cohen too misses this crucial (non)spatio-temporal point when he says that X and A “are physically here and mentally there”⁹⁵, since they are both physically and mentally here and there concurrently, and therefore nowhere specifically. In spatio-temporal terms X and A are permanently impermanent or, conversely, cyclically static – for as the Orphic Rilke puts it: “What shuts itself into permanence is already petrified.”⁹⁶ Rephrasing Virgil then, theirs is an abode where “hearts are [living] dead stones.”⁹⁷ Hence the thematic centrality of the statue sequence where, through an oxymoronic vision of integrated fragmentation, Resnais succeeds in breathing sculptural life into the *disjecta membra* of Orphic *Marienbad*.

2.4 Corridors and chambers of disjunctive coordinates

It is in this most vital respect that, as Sweet states, “the statue sequence [...] is in many ways a microcosm of the entire film”⁹⁸, since it clearly demonstrates, to quote Sweet again, that “there is no fixed point of reference and no identifiable continuity to the [*Marienbad*] setting.”⁹⁹ At no time, in fact, do the château’s interiors

93. *Ibid.*, 94-95.

94. Robbe-Grillet, 67.

95. Cohen, Keith. *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (Yale University Press; New Haven 1979) 101.

96. Rilke, in Forster, Leonard (ed.) *The Penguin Book of German Verse* (Penguin; Middlesex 1972) 405.

97. Virgil, 93.

98. Sweet, 39.

99. *Ibid.*, 61.

fail to reflect its exteriors' disjunction of time and space. For just as now is then, and then is now, so is out in and in is out in the spatio-temporal discontinuum of *Marienbad*. Thus, for instance, Resnais once again ruptures the Bazinian cinematic spatio-temporal coordinates by allowing what Beltzer calls the "surreal loop"¹⁰⁰ of disjunctive space-time to filter from the garden into A's chamber through the contradictory evidence of windows showing what may be termed a Magrittean 'night-in-day.' Since Resnais pivots the shot here on a continuous pan with A as she moves from one left window to another, he achieves a spatio-temporal disjunction that recalls once more Magritte's *The Empire of Light* and its antithetical contrasts of a unified day and night. Still, such oxymoronic juxtapositions of sunlight and darkness also loom largely in both Ovid's and Virgil's respective renditions of the sparagmós of Orpheus and Eurydice. Significantly, while Virgil's Eurydice dissipates into "a huge darkness [...] on the verge of day"¹⁰¹, Ovid's Orpheus succumbs to the same fragmented fate when the Maenads "flock[...] [on him] like/Birds that have seen a midnight owl abroad/By day."¹⁰² As in Virgil and Ovid then, so in the Magrittean Resnais: space-time fragments into the 'dark light' of a scene that functions like an oneiric flashfantasy. That A dons a white-plumed costume in this sequence underlines further the latter's Orphic significance not merely because such a feather negligé echoes the avian simile through which Ovid conveys the frenzy of Orpheus' butchering, but also because it evokes Mallarmé's Orphic swan-poet caught in the frozen fate of a frost-bound lake.¹⁰³ Hence the washed-out texture of the 'rape' sequence where the Mallarméan sense of immobilised flight is conveyed through nine successive flashing shots of a white-feathered A stretching out her winglike arms. As in Rilke then, where the Orphic swain cannot "separate/the whiteness of the garment from the white itself"¹⁰⁴, Resnais infuses A with the frozen whiteness of the Mallarméan Orphic lake. Evidently then, the exteriors and interiors of the *Marienbad* hotel somehow bizarrely interchange – for whether A walks in the garden, whose lake unseasonably freezes in summer, or paces in her chamber, she remains a swan in frozen feathers. Resnais seemingly intermeshes here the Orphic

100. Beltzer, 1.

101. Virgil, 93.

102. Ovid, 249.

103. See Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Oeuvres Complètes* (Gallimard; Paris 1945) 67-68.

104. Quoted and translated by Strauss from one of the rejected sonnets of Rilke's second Orpheus series. See Strauss, 206.

existential antithesis of Mallarmé's "white agony"¹⁰⁵ – which Blanchot would define as that "point where 'here' coincides with 'nowhere'"¹⁰⁶ as in the spaceless spatiality of a Giacometti sculpture – with that of Rilke's double realm where, since "being here and being there"¹⁰⁷ paradoxically pale into each other, A's walk becomes the stroll of an Orphic static soul.

But this is, of course, also true of X who, as already noted, shares A's fate, whether he stands beside her by the enigmatic garden lake, or whether he tries to penetrate her equally cryptic chamber in the 'rape' sequence: his movement is always conversely static or frozen. Consider as a final example the opening sequence where the initially unseen X's monologue (a repetitious speech which, to quote Armes, "returns at several other points in the film"¹⁰⁸) initiates *Marienbad's* pervasive feeling of the Nietzschean damnation of eternal recurrence: "Once again – I walk on, once again, down these corridors, through these halls, these galleries, in this structure [...]"¹⁰⁹ Equally significant, however, is that such verbal repetitiveness accrues an Ovidian sense of Orphic cyclic staticism through the accompanying visual (re)entry into the château's lugubrious interiors. Resnais resorts here to an uptilted camera tracking fluidly beneath an overhanging expanse which Parkes describes as a "lavish ornamentation which consists mainly of representations of vegetation (gilt foliage, vines, stucco branches, leaves, and flowers), animals (birds mainly, flying across high ceilings), and human beings (frescoes between vaulted arches, bas-reliefs and statues of cherubs hovering over lintels)."¹¹⁰ The sensation is of X gliding through an ornamental cavern or grotto, and hence through the nether region, for as Holtmark notes, such openings often serve as "the entryway to the other world"¹¹¹ in classical mythology. In fact, what strikes both Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit as a château of "cavernous corridors"¹¹² could arguably be Resnais' baroque version of Virgil's

105. Our translation of "blanche agonie". See Mallarmé, 68.

106. Blanchot, "Mallarmé and literary space" in Josipovici (ed.)119.

107. Rilke in Strauss, 206.

108. Armes, 96.

109. Robbe-Grillet, 18. Quoted in full in footnote 14.

110. Parkes, 2.

111. Holtmark, 62.

112. Bersani and Dutoit, 189.

“Taenarus, the cavernous gate of Dis.”¹¹³ Its grotesque architectural designs, however, interweaving arboreal, avian and human features, are perhaps more overtly evocative of Ovid’s fantastic metamorphoses and, especially, in an Orphic context, of the Bacchic transformation of the murderous Maenads into oak trees – a fitting retribution indeed, for not only is Orpheus the lover of Eurydice, a Dryad or wood nymph inhabiting a tree, but “forest trees cast down their leaves”¹¹⁴ in doleful imitation of his scattered limbs. But Virgil too often resorts in his Orphic account to elegiac images intermeshing human, avian and arboreal elements. Thus Eurydice’s requiem becomes an Orphic lament which Virgil compares to that of a grieving bird covertly perched on a branch: “He sang as a nightingale sings in the poplar shade/Keening for her lost brood of unfeathered young.”¹¹⁵ Again, a Virgilian simile integrates these elements in its ominous description of the Erebus spirits whom Orpheus enchants by his mesmerising music: “They flocked about him like birds that hide in the leaves/When dusk or breaking weather drives them from the hills.”¹¹⁶ But it is Virgil’s depiction of this hellish crowd as “an audience of shadows”¹¹⁷ that anticipates most suggestively X’s entry into Marienbad whose motionless occupants are initially either completely invisible or hardly distinguishable from its sculpted mythological figures. By reworking Kafka’s castle and Welles’ Xanadu into a modernist version of Virgil’s Hades, Resnais creates a living dead place – for what haunts this mansion of year last and yet to come is the ghostliness of life. Hence the aptness of the organ mourning on the soundtrack. It is the incessant cry of mournful Marienbad.

Significantly, since what Resnais’ tracking camera keeps recording is a seemingly endless series of, to quote Parkes again, “frescoed ceilings, ornate chandeliers, stucco-encrusted lintels and arches of vast interiors,”¹¹⁸ the impression conveyed is that *Marienbad* is about Marienbad itself. What comes to mind as referent is the House of Fiction at the end of *Out One Spectre* where, as Jacques Rivette himself says, “nothing takes place but the place.”¹¹⁹ Or as Alan Stanbrook contends: “We

113. Virgil, 92.

114. Ovid, 250.

115. Virgil, 94.

116. *Ibid.*, 93.

117. *Ibid.*

118. Parkes, 2.

119. Quoted in James Monaco. *The New Wave* (Oxford University Press; New York 1976) 328.

are effectively disorientated in time and space and wonder whether this is not, after all, a documentary about architecture."¹²⁰ But the spectator's spatio-temporal disorientation is equally the still unseen X's – for what really interests Resnais is not physical materiality per se but its ocular distillation through which character is suggested. As in Robbe-Grillet's chosiste vision, X has no identity apart from what he perceives physically. And what X perceives here is so much more of the same that his tracking tour of Marienbad's baroque interior seems to be constantly reverting to its apparent commencement. As in A's case then, there is no spatio-temporal progression for X; nor is there, it seems, for M whose initial might aptly stand for 'Mort' or 'Death' since, by always failing to lose the nim game, he always finds himself back where he began. In *Marienbad* then, to begin is to end, and to end is to begin: the cycle is of coextensive or parallel spatio-temporal (un)realities as in Rilke's Orphic double realm, which is also Mallarmé's; for as Strauss rightly observes, both poets plunge into this spatio-temporal paradox through "a convergence of opposites – [a] whole Orphic union of contraries."¹²¹ So does Resnais who keeps turning modernist screws of Orphic interpretation by treating mythological tradition as an invitation to endless transformation, thereby outmorphosising Ovid. Thus the Bohemian health spa of Marienbad, a nineteenth-century creation of the doctor Josef Jan Nehr and the abbot Karl Laspas Reitenberger, accrues in Resnais' film shades of the classical underworld where, through the systematic dismemberment of time and space, Virgil and Ovid coalesce with Mallarmé, Rilke and Blanchot into a fragmented whole: the 'being there' and 'being beyond' of a modernist Orphic soul. Through what Gilles Deleuze calls "a general dissolution of the action-image"¹²² – the result of "wanderings, immobilizings, petrifications and repetitions"¹²³ – Resnais creates, to use Armes' phrase, "a pre-creation chaos"¹²⁴ that is paradoxically an aesthetically holistic creation.

120. Stanbrook, 99.

121. Strauss, 185.

122. Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (Athlone; London 1989) 103.

123. Ibid.

124. Armes, 97.

3.0 Final remarks on eternal recurrence

That *Marienbad* is unified in its disunity is perhaps the only certainty that it offers; but to view its modernist *sparagmós* aesthetics in the light of the classical Orphic myth is somehow to limit what Kline calls its “allegory of uncertainty”¹²⁵ to a single interpretation. Stanbrook rightly warns, in fact, that “the film [...] has not one meaning but many, all of which are equally viable.”¹²⁶ It should be emphasised, however, that the Orphic interpretation in no way contradicts the essential *Marienbad* principle of ‘uncertainty’. As Blanchot observes: what really distinguishes Orphism aesthetically is the only residue of its fundamental disintegration – “all that is left is the work’s uncertainty.”¹²⁷ This makes the allure of a *katábasis* interpretation to *Marienbad*’s puzzling proceedings even more irresistible especially in moments like the ‘rape’ scene where the sight of X and A clutching at flashing insubstantialities lends itself enrichingly to an evocation of Virgil’s Orpheus and Eurydice “catching at shadows”¹²⁸ in the nether region. But the most subtle, and poignant, of *Marienbad*’s Orphic moments occurs perhaps in that scene where Resnais injects human empathy in this most enigmatic of Cartesian labyrinths. Indeed, the scene where X compels tears from the statuesque A gains considerably in thematic subtlety by its Virgilian and Ovidian suggestion of yet another Orphic attempt to imbue with feeling the unfeeling elementals of Hades. Such aesthetic merits notwithstanding, the Orphic approach to *Marienbad* remains ultimately only an enticing possibility. Too many roads lead to *Marienbad*, and the Orphic path is only one. And like the others, it is perhaps a cul-de-sac, albeit one that thrives on the elusive essence of *Marienbad*. To enter *Marienbad* is like entering T.S. Eliot’s chapel perilous to confront “only the wind’s home.”¹²⁹ Or again, it is like embarking on as elusive a grail-like quest as Orion’s hunt for the ghostly deer in the Homeric underworld.

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125. Kline, 78.

126. Stanbrook, 100.

127. Blanchot, “Orpheus’ gaze”, 180.

128. Virgil, 93.

129. Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems*, 1909-1962 (Faber; London 1974) 78.