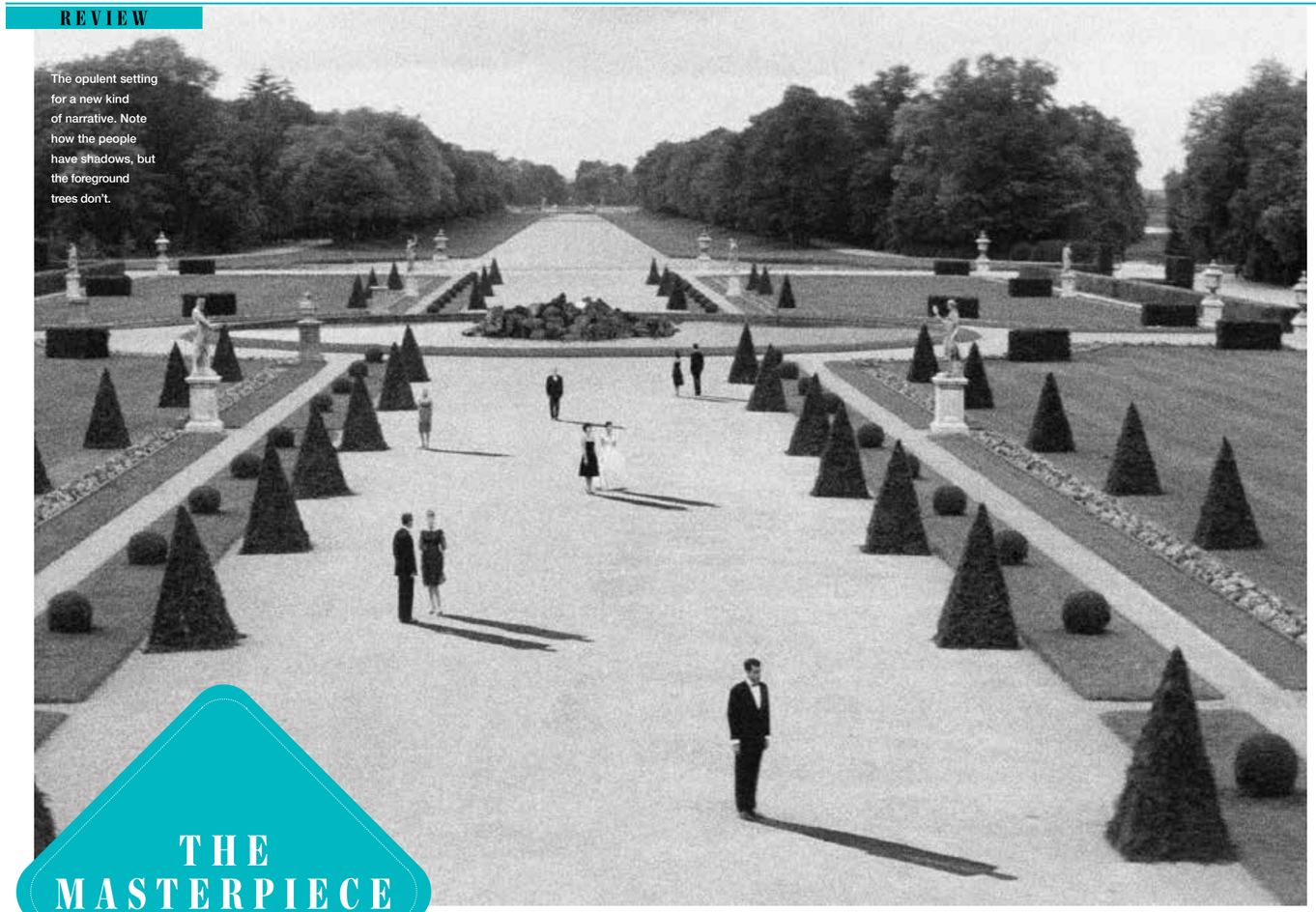


The opulent setting for a new kind of narrative. Note how the people have shadows, but the foreground trees don't.

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest films of all time, one film at a time

Last Year At Marienbad

WHEN IT COMES TO years that shook cinema, 1959 rates pretty near the top of the Richter scale. To all intents and purposes, it marked the birth of La Nouvelle Vague, the French New Wave of directors who, over the subsequent decade, would inject a fearsome new energy into French, and then global, cinema. A trinity of this gang of celluloid disruptors shot or released their debuts in '59: Francois Truffaut with *Le Quatre Cent Coups*, Jean-Luc Godard with *À Bout De Souffle* and Alain Resnais with *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. These films challenged the fusty, middle-brow, middle-aged cinema that these young Turks railed against, but of the three, Resnais' unorthodox love story was probably the most radically disruptive. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* tested the boundaries of conventional, linear movies, with its revolutionary collapsing of time and space and its strange bleeding of characters into each other. But it was just the aperitif. If Resnais' first film was a rebuke to conventional cinema, *Last Year At Marienbad* (released two years later and written by experimental novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet) was, to quote a somewhat different classic, about to blow the bloody doors off.

Last Year At Marienbad is, to writers of 100-word plot summaries, pretty much the north face of the Eiger, but here goes: in an opulent hotel which might (or might not) be called Marienbad, an unnamed man (Giorgio Albertazzi) tries to convince a similarly moniker-less woman (Delphine Seyrig) that they met here (or maybe somewhere else) a year previously, and began an affair. Or maybe they didn't. Another man (Sacha Pitoëff), who might be her husband (he also might not), endlessly plays a game with the other hotel residents which it seems only he can win. He might shoot the woman who might be his wife. He might not. She might be dead. He might be dead. They all might be dead. Or not. The end. Cornetto, anyone?

Resnais' thrilling distortion of what we expect from a film, from a story, doesn't stop with his making it impossible to coherently answer the question: what actually happened? Points of view shift and blend into one another; conversations begin in one time and location and seem to continue, or repeat themselves with slight alterations, in an entirely different one. Our narrator (Albertazzi) describes scenes and events that he can't, under any interpretation of the 'facts' as presented to the audience, know anything about. And, all the while, Resnais' restless camera glides through the opulent, mirror-studded hallways and corridors of this strange hotel.

If nothing else, *Last Year At Marienbad* is a technical tour de force. Shot in pellucid black and white, and in widescreen, by maestro Sacha Vierny (who, unsurprisingly given his love for dense, intensely formal compositions, would much later become Peter Greenaway's cinematographer of choice), it makes use of deep focus, split diopters, smash cuts and those impossibly smooth (pre-Steadicam) travelling shots, which all work to bend, distort and finally shatter the continuities of time, place and character that audiences expect. There are reflections of reflections, sound fades in and out and, though *Marienbad* is not formally a surrealist film, its most famous image — of the characters standing in the harsh sunlight of the gardens, surrounded by geometric topiary — is subtly, unnervingly impossible. The people cast shadows; the trees do not. (And Resnais is not above a sly visual gag. Keen viewers who haven't yet stormed out in frustrated disgust might spot Alfred Hitchcock's shadow, the Master Of Suspense himself, apparently waiting for an elevator, that, as Resnais would later wryly comment, will never arrive.)

Last Year At Marienbad landed like a bombshell, delighting some critics, infuriating just as many. And its influence would still be felt decades later. The director who seems to have been most fascinated by *Marienbad* is Stanley Kubrick. There are certainly touches of its dreamlike style in *Eyes Wide Shut*. But with *The Shining*, Kubrick wrote Resnais' modernist masterpiece a gargantuan IOU. It's impossible to watch Jack Torrance wandering the hallways of the Overlook, mingling with guests who may or may not be there, becoming hopelessly lost in its formal gardens, frozen in (or outside) time, without imagining the cinematic prince of St Albans studying, shot-for-shot, Marienbad — another hotel which, in some interpretations, caters almost exclusively for the dead. (Later, Christopher Nolan found himself nodding in its direction with *Inception*, despite not even having seen the movie. "I'm ripping off the movies that ripped off *Last Year At Marienbad*, without having seen the original. It's that much a source of ideas," he said.)

Beguiling. Bewitching. Bollocks. Artsy really doesn't come more fartsy than *Last Year At Marienbad*, and it divides opinion as ferociously today as it did 60 years ago. For some, its elliptical, elusive style is nothing more than empty pretension, an unbearably extended version of those baffling adverts for posh scents that infest our TV screens at Christmas (and advertisers have enthusiastically mined its visual style for decades). What does it mean? Who knows? Freud, Jung, Descartes, all have been namechecked as possible keys to decoding *Marienbad*. Some have found in it an acid satire of bourgeois society, suspended in time, endlessly repeating its empty dramas. Others have unearthed a philosophical dissection of the nature of reality. For Resnais it was "an attempt, still crude and primitive, to approach the complexity of thought and its mechanisms".

But, as with all 'dream movies', to group it with the likes of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* (to which it also provides essential DNA), it resists interpretation. Still, if your cinematic soul belongs there, if you give it time and wander its carpeted hallways through, as the hypnotic initial voice-over intones, "silent rooms where one's footsteps are absorbed by carpets so thick, so heavy, that no sound reaches one's ear", you might find that its strange magic is finally irresistible. In some small way, once you've visited *Marienbad* you might find yourself, like its guests, unable ever to really leave.

ADAM SMITH

LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL





Above: Let the games begin. **Left:** Giorgio Albertazzi and Delphine Seyrig as the anonymous maybe couple. **Below:** Henry Winkler, Stan Lee and Spider-Man.

Getty Images

THE MISSING MARVEL

HOW ALAIN RESNAIS ALMOST MADE A MOVIE WITH STAN LEE



JUST A FEW years after *Last Year At Marienbad*, Alain Resnais struck up a seemingly unlikely friendship with Stan Lee, the legendary co-creator of pretty much any major Marvel superhero you care to name. It seemed unlikely, but Resnais was a huge comic-book fan, with a particular affinity for Spider-Man, and Lee always harboured arthouse ambitions beyond the confines of the House Of Ideas. In 1980, Lee sent Resnais a letter of note, recorded by *Letters Of Note*, in which he mentions that he had been talking to Henry Winkler about playing Spider-Man in a movie, and that Resnais' name had been mooted as director. That project never came to fruition (somewhere in the multiverse there's a world where The Fonz played Spidey, which is something we would kill to see), but it wasn't the first time Resnais and Lee talked about working together.

In the early '70s, Resnais asked Lee to write a screenplay which would tackle the theme of pollution and environmental disaster (Resnais was nothing if not ahead of his time). Lee responded with 'The Monster Maker', a sci-fi story based around a Roger Corman-esque film producer who would wind up facing off against an island of pollution and garbage that somehow turns into a monster. It was fairly swiftly nixed when Filmways, the company that Lee and Resnais turned to for financing, asked for dialogue cuts. "Stan will not touch a word of it!" harrumphed Resnais, and that was that. The duo went on to other projects, and 'The Monster Maker' never got made. Lee, incredibly, never had a screenplay produced during his career, even though he tried his hand at writing several, including one about the Silver Surfer. But of all the 'what-ifs?' of his crazy career, this remains the most tantalising.

CHRIS HEWITT

