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Another Deleuzian Resnais : *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* as conflict between sadism and masochism

Abstract

The Deleuzian reading of *Marienbad* proposed here draws less on what has become a virtually canonical concept in film studies – Deleuze’s time-image – than on a much earlier work by the same author, *Masochism*, which treats sadism and masochism as qualitatively different symbolic universes. Resnais’s film, with its deployment of mirrors and statuary and its suggestion of a contract between the characters A and X, presents striking resemblances to the world of masochism as described by Deleuze (drawing on the work of Theodore Reik). At the same time, the role of the third protagonist, M, like that of Robbe-Grillet who wrote the screenplay, has Sadean overtones, suggesting that it might be possible to read the film with its diegetic ambiguities as a Möbius strip linking the sadistic and the masochistic world not only with each other, but with the crystalline universe of the time-image.

Keywords

masochism

sadism

time-crystal

Deleuze

Reik

Resnais

Robbe-Grillet

This article offers a Deleuzian reading of Resnais. That statement might provoke a slightly weary sense of *déjà lu*, for such readings have become fairly common currency in film studies, particularly in the dozen or so years since Deleuze's death – not least because of the extraordinary range of films dealt with in the two volumes of *Cinema* and the prominence accorded by the analyses therein to the literal incorporation of time into the filmic image. Few films demonstrate this better than Alain Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad/Last Year in Marienbad* – hereinafter *Marienbad* – based on a screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet.¹ *Marienbad* centres on the attempt by the central male character, X/Giorgio Albertazzi, to persuade A/Delphine Seyrig that they had loved each other a year earlier – a version of events she resists before (perhaps) her final acceptance. Deleuze's reading of *Marienbad* as a topology of time in which different chronological strata coexist within and between images has greatly influenced writers on the film (see Leutrat 2000, Wilson 2006, and Liandrat-Guigues/Leutrat 2006).

¹ It should be noted that in extremely important respects the Robbe-Grillet text published by Les Éditions de Minuit, from which quotations in this article are taken, does not correspond to the film as released. Robbe-Grillet describes it as 'basically the text given to Resnais before shooting' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 17), and much of the dialogue does not figure in the film itself, while conversely the 'white-out' sequence to be described later is not present in the published text.

My Deleuzian reading of *Marienbad*, however, will draw comparatively little on the time-image and its ramifications, though the concept is so fundamental to the film that it would scarcely be possible to avoid it even were that to be thought desirable. My scene of action, to reprise Freud, will be different, drawing not upon *Cinema* but upon Deleuze's early *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch/Masochism* which analyses Masoch's 1870 novel *Venus In Furs* to inscribe masochism as a qualitatively different symbolic universe to that of sadism, and arguing that *Marienbad* in the light of that text can appear as a rivalry between the sadistic and the masochistic realm – a rivalry whose issue, inevitably for so hyper-ambiguous a film, is indeterminate, though tending perhaps towards the ascendancy of masochism. The images and tropes of masochism as detailed by Deleuze are so vividly and insistently present in Resnais's film that it can almost be seen as a *mise en images*² of the Deleuze text, and this is the light in which I propose to read it, without I hope doing violence to its inescapable plurality.

Deleuze argues against the widely-held view that masochism is the necessary complement of or other to sadism (as in the misleading portmanteau expression 'sado-masochism'), viewing it instead as 'a separate world, with other techniques and other effects' (Deleuze 1967: back cover). The distinctive iconography of masochism, dominated by statues, stone women and 'a suprasensual emotionality, surrounded with ice and protected by fur' (Deleuze 1967: 46-7), is not a matter of arbitrary aesthetic choice, but culturally and psychically overdetermined. Deleuze makes much of Masoch's

² Resnais has spoken of himself as a *metteur en images* rather than as the more customary *metteur en scène*.

origins at the boundary of Central and Eastern Europe. He was born in Lemberg in Austria-Hungary, now Lviv and part of Ukraine, though his adult life was lived in what is now Austria, and became an ardent pan-slavist, a disciple of Pushkin and Lermontov. The glacial imagery that pervades his work is linked by Deleuze to this Slavic fascination. Marienbad is in what is now the Czech Republic, but Resnais's film was shot in a number of Bavarian châteaux, so that its location (in so far as such a term can be used of a film so spatially elusive) echoes Masoch's ambivalent positioning at the intersection of *Mitteleuropa* and Slav territory.

More significant still to this study is the psychic determination of masochism. For Deleuze it is radically different from sadism, which ruthlessly and repeatedly imposes what Lacan calls the Law of the Father. The Law here is not susceptible to rational debate or modification (nobody argues against Sade's libertines); Deleuze describes it, in terms reminiscent of Kafka, as 'such that we do not know what it is, nor can we know' (Deleuze 1967: 73). To this blind and deaf tyranny of the patriarchal superego and its Law, Deleuze opposes the maternal and matriarchal world of the masochist, which seeks to punish and indeed to exclude the father by way of a contract between the chastising mother-figure and the chastised male. Deleuze here draws extensively on Theodore Reik's *Masochism in Modern Man*, written twenty years before Resnais made his film but a striking prefiguration of it in many ways. For Reik, '[m]asochistic practices are but an acting out of preceding phantasies, daydreams that are transferred into reality' (Reik 1941 : 49), in which 'what the person at first imagined has to be put into action in mirror scenes' (Reik 1941 : 51) – remarks surely pertinent *avant la lettre* to *Marienbad* - and he formulates the lability of the masochistic fantasy in terms strikingly evocative of the

ambiguous roles of A, M and X in the film :

‘It is not always obvious with whom the phantasying person identified. Certainly with the victim, the passive person of the scene, but also with the active cruel figure. Frequently he identifies with a nonparticipating spectator who nevertheless is mysteriously familiar with the thoughts and sentiments of the active and the passive person of the scene.’ (Reik 1941 : 54-55)

Also prominent in *Marienbad* is what Reik terms ‘the preponderance of the anxiety factor and the tendency to prolong the suspense’ (Reik 1941 : 59). Reik does not, however, allude to Masoch’s novel, whose ‘hero’, Séverin, proposes a contract to his beloved, Wanda, which will transform him from lover to slave (“‘You are my chattel, a toy I can break if that gives me a moment’s pleasure” – Deleuze 1967: 172). For Deleuze the hidden agenda of this contract is the transfer of power from the father to the mother, so that when the masochist is punished it is ‘the image of the father in him that is minituarised, beaten, ridiculed and humiliated’ (Deleuze 1967: 53). This may all appear quite alien to *Marienbad*, in many ways a decorporealised film and certainly one from which physical violence and chastisement are entirely absent. We may, however, recall that the original screenplay, by the novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet whose work is notorious for its suspect wallowing in violent sexual fantasy, included a scene in which A was to be taken by force by X. This was replaced during shooting by a sequence, of which more anon, in which A is seen, in heavily over-exposed white footage, repeatedly advancing towards X with arms outstretched – a swooningly ecstatic appearance we may think of the masochist’s fantasised mother, who is not only punitive but in another of her avatars a hetaera or consecrated courtesan. It is as if the battle between sadism and masochism

which I argue to be central to the film had been fought out, and resolved in favour of the latter, between screenwriter and director.

It is in one sense difficult to localise that battle precisely within the text of *Marienbad*, given the film's evident recalcitrance to a narrativisation it at the same time inescapably invites. As Youssef Ishaghpour says: 'There is not really a narration, but a combination of narrative units, based on a few fragments of words and a few images.' (Ishaghpour 1982: 195). Nevertheless one point – the degree zero of the film's 'plot'? – from which it would be difficult to dissent is that the film centres on a conflict of fantasy or desire involving two men – X and M (Sacha Pitoëff) – and the woman A. How far might this conflict be seen as an intertextual echo of that between sadism and masochism in the very specific senses in which Deleuze uses those terms?

There is an asymmetry between the schema just outlined and the shifting balance of forces in Resnais's film which may put us on our guard against any straightforward mapping of Deleuze's binary antithesis onto the triangular structure of *Marienbad*, making it impossible to equate any of the characters – if such they can be called – with a sadistic or a masochistic perspective. The lability of the masochist's fantasy evoked by Reik suggests rather that it might be appropriate to resort to the figure of the Möbius strip, beloved of the artist Escher, which can be made by twisting a length of paper through 180 degrees and joining its ends together. This gives a one-sided surface, so that it is possible to draw a line along it without ever crossing an edge. The topological paradox of the Möbius strip fits it particularly well for a discussion of the multiple uncertainties of *Marienbad*; Sarah Leperchey indeed uses the analogy in her reading of it as 'a film to which one can apply Deleuze's words on the crystal-image: everything has

an echo, everything turns back on itself' (Leperchey 2000: 81). The crystal-image, for Deleuze, is intimately connected with the time-image, often as in *Marienbad* manifesting itself in a mirror. Thus Deleuze says of the film that 'the two great theatre scenes are images in a mirror (and the whole *Marienbad* hotel is a pure crystal, with its transparent face, its opaque face and the exchange between them)' (Deleuze 1985: 102). To the exchange between the two faces of the time-crystal corresponds the paradox of the Möbius strip, which may appear to be two surfaces but is actually one. Using this analogy, it might be possible to say that within the film sadism and masochism, while remaining distinct universes, inhabit the same curiously-configured textual space, so that a reading of the film along these lines – or along this line – can take us endlessly from one to the other and back again. If a Möbius strip is cut in half along its central line, rather than falling into two as the topologically unwary might believe, it remains a single one-sided surface, defying 'common-sense' binary expectations much as the battle between sadism and masochism in *Marienbad* resists any definitive narrative resolution.

Yet that battle is suggested right from the start of the film, before any of the characters or indeed any human presence becomes visible. As the camera tracks across the ponderous baroque architecture of the hotel, X's voice is heard saying:-

'Once more I make my way forward, once more, through these corridors, through these salons, these galleries, in this building from another century, this immense, luxurious, baroque, lugubrious hotel, where interminable corridors succeed other corridors that are silent, deserted, burdened with a cold and sombre décor of wood, stucco, moulden marble panels, dark mirrors, dark-hued paintings, columns, heavy drapings ... ' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 22-23).

The hotel as it bears heavily down upon X can be seen as a concretisation of the superego central to sadism for Deleuze – a superego arguably represented in the film, as we shall see, by M. That superego, following Lacan and Žižek, might be called the ‘Big Other,’ the framing and ordering instance of that Law which the masochist – who strategically at least can here be identified with X – seeks to avoid and effectively to destroy. ‘To the institutional superego, he opposes the contractual alliance of the ego and of the oral mother’ (Deleuze 1967: 111). The ‘institutional superego’ may speak through M, as in the repeated game with dominoes =>the game first gets played with matchsticks doesn't it?? which he invariably wins, but it is most strikingly present in the form of that hotel which X and A, on one reading at least, escape at the end.

The play which is being performed in that hotel at the beginning suggests, in the frozen motionlessness of its actors and its audience alike, a kind of *tableau vivant* reminiscent of Deleuze’s assertion that ‘masochistic scenes need to fix themselves like sculptures or tableaux, to double sculptures or tableaux themselves, to double themselves in a mirror or a reflection’ (Deleuze 1967: 61). *Marienbad*’s opening can be viewed as a *mise en décor* as well as a *mise en images* of Deleuze’s statement, the mirrors, the sculptures – or at least carvings, in preparation for the sculpture *stricto sensu* that is to come – and the reflections all present and correct. So tableau-like is the play that even when the woman pronounces to her (presumed) lover the words: ‘There, now, I am yours’ (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 30) neither moves. This is implausible by the canons of realism, but eminently in accord with the Deleuzian masochist’s obsession with frozenness, a fixation upon fixation that does not so much deny sensual *rapprochement* as transcend it or as Monique David-Ménard puts it ‘suspend sensuality to create a supra-

sensory world of feeling' (David-Ménard 2005: 35).

The allegation made by one of the guests in the hotel: 'He was the one who had set up the whole business, so that he knew in advance all the possible resolutions' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 40) could thus apply with equal force to the Sadean 'control freak' or to the masochist's preoccupation with the fixity and reflection that shut down the prospect of mutability and the unknown – between, we might say, M and X in their rivalry, already figured by the card game. X's 'You are still the same. I feel as if I had left you only yesterday' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 47) thus works to preserve A in the 'supra-sensory world of feeling' evoked by Ménard, a world which 'explores what it means to construct a fantasy for two' (Wilson 2006: 73). That fantasy is figured most significantly by the classical statue near the terrace looking onto the hotel garden, initially not seen but described by X who says that the previous year A had asked him who the man and woman represented were, and that he had said that he did not know. Stone women are important in Masoch's iconography; he likens Wanda to 'Venus, the beautiful stone woman' (Deleuze 1967: 133), so that when X goes on to say: 'You put forward several suggestions, and I said that it might as well be you and I' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 60) we appear to find ourselves firmly in the masochistic universe. That, however, would be to underestimate the ambiguities of a film that can also be said to bring its statue to life as does Masoch's narrator ('Yes, she came to life for me. Like that statue that one day began breathing for its creator' – Deleuze 1967: 133). Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues draws attention to 'the gestural ambiguity of the two characters, one with hand raised as though to stop the other moving forward, the other's arm pointing towards something which will never be seen' (Liandrat-Guigues 1994: 46), and goes on to speak of the statue as 'the

mise en abyme of the film' (Liandrat-Guigues 1994: 47), foregrounding thereby the undecidability of movement and stasis within *Marienbad*'s Möbius-like textual space. The statue is first seen, in one of the film's many diegetically unanchored shots, with no characters in frame. Shortly afterwards X is seen standing next to it while A directs her movements ('You were alone, a little to one side. You were standing, slightly at an angle, against a stone balustrade on which your arm was resting, your arm half-outstretched' – Robbe-Grillet 1961: 71), as if she were another effigy to be brought, Pygmalion-like, to life. Control over another's movements is a fundamental feature of the Sadean universe, whose victims often have no bodily autonomy at all; this is however not entirely true of the shot just described, where at first 'A does not adopt the pose indicated by the text we hear' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 72), though she subsequently complies with X's directions, suggesting a contract between the two – thus, a masochistic relationship in Deleuzian terms – rather than the imposition of any kind of law. That interpretative contract finds fuller expression in their fantasia around the statue, in which for X the man has perceived some danger and is seeking to dissuade the woman from advancing further – thus, to remain suspended – while A conversely suggests that the woman is pointing out 'something – but something marvellous' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 74) that might await them. The statue for X at any rate might be said to constitute a masochistic fetish in the sense deployed by Deleuze – one whose 'inner force' is constituted by 'its power to suspend or to fix' (Deleuze 1967: 65).

In *Venus in Furs*, Séverin's contractual union with Wanda turns out to be a temporary one, for the repressed father returns at the end in the shape of her mysterious lover, known only as 'the Greek,' who takes over the punitive role from Wanda and

brings Séverin's parthenogenetic fantasy to a cruel end. M's intervention, coldly pointing out that the statue represents Charles III and his wife 'taking an oath before the Diet, during their trial for treason' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 79), in like vein interrupts the ambiguous dialogue between A and X, the Law of harsh fact³ breaking into their shared fantasy. This, however, marks the end of an episode rather than as in Sacher-Masoch that of the main narrative, and we are to see X several times thereafter ambiguously complying or failing to comply with A's recounting of their supposed shared past, as though the conflict between Sadean law and masochistic contract could not be definitively resolved in one direction or the other.

That formulation is itself perhaps misleading, too closely confined as it is to the narrative elements of the film. Decor and iconography are equally important in articulating its manifold ambiguities, and indeed as the key example of the statue shows it is often impossible to locate with any precision the frontier between narrative and these traditionally more static or tableau-like elements. Reik's statement that 'what the person at first imagined has to be put into action in mirror scenes' is strikingly true of *Marienbad*, in whose decor mirrors play a significant part. Lacan's crucial concept of the mirror stage (or phase as it is sometimes known) was supposedly first expounded at a psychoanalytic congress in Marienbad in 1936, though the text of that intervention is nowhere to be found – appropriately according to T. Jefferson Kline following Jane Gallop, for 'the very subject of "The Mirror Stage" is "in some way alien to the logic of chronology"' (Kline 1992 : 55). Mirrors in *Marienbad* refract and multiply action at the

³ Or what at least appears to be harsh fact; I have been unable to trace any reference to a historical monarch of whom this assertion might be true.

same time as they immobilise it, eminently in accord with the 'freeze-frame' logic of masochism and its at least implicit opposition to the logic of chronology.

This is particularly marked in the scenes that take place in A's room, described as 'the imaginary room' (Robbe-Grillet 1961 : 124) almost as if it were an antechamber to the mirror stage. The room features a painting of a hunt-scene in the snow – a trope reminiscent of that *Venus in Furs* named for the goddess of hunting, whose heroine is likened to 'a great white she-bear ploughing my body with her claws' (Deleuze 1967 : 190). We see A at one point multiply reflected in a triptych of mirrors itself reflected within a larger mirror, immediately after and in spite of which she denies even knowing X and disclaims any knowledge of 'that ridiculous bed, that mantelpiece with its mirror' (Robbe-Grillet 1961 : 127) – a refusal not only of the site of eroticism but of the need for masochistic scenes 'to double themselves in a mirror or a reflection,' to reprise Deleuze. X nevertheless insists ('If that were true, why would you be here?' – Robbe-Grillet 1961: 127), and A acknowledges that (as we have seen a moment before) 'The mirror is above the chest of drawers ... There is also a dressing-table with a mirror' (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 128). The Sadean and the masochistic universe here at once vie and coexist, through X's direction of A's memories and movements ('narrative' and control) on the one hand and the deployment of mirrors and doublings ('decor' and stasis) on the other.

One possible resolution of the love-triangle is M's shooting of A, who is then seen lying dead on the floor. François Weyergans describes this in terms strikingly prefigurative of Deleuze ('The superego is the agent of justice and the death he/it desires is that of the id, which can be reached only by way of the ego' – Weyergans 1961: 24). Given that for Deleuze masochism is the realm of the ego and sadism that of the superego

this would seem to represent the final triumph of the latter over the former, save only that this denouement is immediately and summarily rejected by X ('No, that ending is not the right one ... It's you alive I need' – Robbe-Grillet 1961: 155). Shortly after this A is seen arranging a number of identical photographs of herself in the gardens into the form of the cards in the game at which M has always beaten X. The 'original' photograph – if such a thing can be said to exist – has been seen before in A's possession, seemingly providing proof that she and X had indeed met the year before. A's disposition of its replicas serves as an almost textbook illustration of Reik's assertion that 'what the person at first imagined has to be put into action in mirror scenes,' and perhaps also as a hint that she may be able to beat the Sadean, and conceivably homicidal, superego at its/his own game.

The hypothesis of A's violent possession by X is brusquely refuted, at first verbally ('No, no, no ! That's wrong ! It wasn't by force' – Robbe-Grillet 1961 : 165) and then visually too via the over-exposed series of shots referred to earlier. Here she is clad in a white feathered *négligée* reminiscent of the 'light white *déshabillé*' (Deleuze 1967 : 134) worn by Wanda when Séverin first makes her acquaintance. The ecstatic quality of these shots is so overwhelming that it seems to go beyond the diegesis to incorporate the spectator ('she seems repeatedly to welcome the viewer with outstretched arms' - Kline 1992 : 71), marking thereby the end of X's waiting and A's transformation from 'icy-emotional-cruel' (Deleuze 1967 : 45) mother to jubilantly greeting hetaera. Has X emerged victorious not only from his battle with M, but from that masochistic universe whose ideal is to 'bring about the triumph of emotion by way of icy coldness' (Deleuze 1967 : 46) ?

The temptation is to say yes, but an important countervailing factor needs to be taken into consideration. This is the absence of X from the over-exposed shots – an absence which enables Kline to speak of A’s welcoming the viewer, but at the same time eliminates any possibility of sensory contact between her and X. Slavoj Žižek observes pertinently apropos the ending of James Cameron’s *Titanic* that when Rose/Kate Winslet exclaims, with the dead Jack/Leonardo di Caprio in her arms : ‘Nothing can take us apart ! I’ll never let you go !’ :-

‘[T]he act that accompanies these pathetic words is the opposite gesture of *letting him go*, of gently pushing him away, so that he gets sucked into the dark water – a perfect exemplification of Lacan’s thesis that the elevation to the status of symbolic authority has to be paid for by the death, murder even, of its empirical bearer.’ (Žižek 1999 : vii)

Deleted: ¶

Could A’s outstretched arms not likewise be seen as pushing X away at the same time as they welcome him, thereby ambiguously granting and denying him the ‘status of symbolic authority’ that acceding to his version of events would confer? Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay *Noli me tangere* – the risen Christ’s injunction to Mary Magdalene – dwells on the ambivalence of touching in a manner that outstrips its specifically Christological context. For him Christ’s words imply ‘do not seek to touch or to hold on to what is essentially moving away, and in so doing touches you with its very distance’ (Nancy 2003 : 30). This is later glossed, in words that could be applied to Wanda’s final abandonment of Séverin, as :-

‘You hold nothing, you cannot hold or hold on to anything, and that is what you must love and know. That is what a loving knowledge is all about. Love what

escapes you, love the one who is going away. Love their going away.’ (Nancy 2003 : 61).

In this light A’s ‘welcome,’ sensuous though it undeniably is, can also be seen following David-Ménart as ‘suspend[ing] sensuality to create a supra-sensory world of feeling’ – leaving, that is to say, X within the close-yet/because-distant world of the Deleuzian masochist rather than transcending it towards some more fusional realm. Even this, however, does not appear sufficiently ambiguous in the light of the film’s ending, in which A and X leave the hotel together observed by the crestfallen M. The Möbius-strip structure of the narrative is reasserted in the final words of the film, spoken by X:-

‘The park of this hotel was a kind of French-style garden, without trees, flowers or any kind of vegetation ... Gravel, stone, straight lines marked out rigid spaces, surfaces without mystery. It seemed, at first, impossible to get lost there ... at first ... along the rectilinear pathways, between the statues with their fixed gestures and the granite paving-stones, where you were now already in the process of getting lost, for ever, in the quiet night, alone with me.’ (Robbe-Grillet 1961: 181).

The park here, described as an entirely human-made and inorganic space, comes to resemble an extension of the chilly baroque corridors with which the film began. M the Sadean superego is unquestionably defeated, but is that to say that the ending represents the triumph of X the masochist? This would indeed be to ‘apply’ the Deleuzian dichotomy somewhat too rigidly, something I hope I have avoided thus far. Neither in Masoch’s novel nor in Deleuze’s essay is there any real sense of what ‘triumph’ for the masochist would mean, and indeed given the centrality of stasis and postponement in his desire such a notion might well appear a (psycho)logical impossibility. The best that he

might hope for would be an eternity of frozen suspension, which the film's final words and image seem to suggest. Séverin's story in *Venus In Furs* is enclosed within a rueful framing narration reflecting on the self-destructive nature of the teller's desire, reminiscent of that which encompasses the first-person narrator's tale in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, analysed by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*. In *Marienbad*'s narrative world such a linear structure of enclosure is impossible, but X's final words might appear to gesture towards it while at the same time freezing his, and the film's, desire in the 'time-crystal' evoked in *Cinema*. The Deleuze who differentiates sadism from masochism and the Deleuze who defines and analyses the cinematic time-image may appear to inhabit different conceptual spaces, but the frozenness of *Marienbad* can be seen as operating a Möbian linkage between the two texts.

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