

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Alain Robbe-Grillet



JOHN PHILLIPS

Alain Robbe-Grillet



Manchester University Press

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

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Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent upon national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about auteurism. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the auteur perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly

skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already well known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the formal and informal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

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Introduction

My books were not real novels, but sort of failed films, aborted films.
Robbe-Grillet, *Préface à une vie d'écrivain*

Alain Robbe-Grillet was born in Brest in 1922. Having studied agronomy and worked as a research biologist for a number of years in Africa and the French Caribbean, he began to write novels in the late 1940s, and film scripts a decade later. He died suddenly of a heart attack in February 2008, leaving behind a corpus of eleven novels, four 'romanesques', or creative autobiographies, essays on the novel, photography and sculpture, and a not insubstantial corpus of films. He scripted a total of eleven films, all but one of which he also directed. In spite of his claim that his work ended in 1996 (Waters 2000: 189), his artistic career therefore spanned six decades, and his novelistic work has had a profound impact in literary circles, although this intellectual influence has not always been matched by public acclaim. While his cinema has attracted numerous awards, and has been the subject of many international film festivals (such as the ten-day-long festival of his films held at the Institut Français in London in 1996), they have not attracted the same amount of attention in the English-speaking world as his novels.¹ This is partly due to a general reluctance on the part of English speakers to view French films, but there may be other reasons for this neglect, including a growing erotic, and some might claim, pornographic content.² Whatever the truth of such claims, it is one of the main aims of this book to demonstrate that, both in

1 'In the Temple of Dreams: The Writer on the Screen (The Complete Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet)', French Institute, London, 18–28 September 1996.

2 The 'pornography' question will be considered in detail in [Chapter 5](#).

terms of the innovative qualities of the work and the influence he has exerted on other film-makers and artists, Robbe-Grillet's contribution to the cinema deserves the same degree of critical attention as that accorded to his novels.

It is as *chef de file* of the French New Novel movement that Robbe-Grillet came to public attention in the 1950s, his first novel, *Les Gommages* (*The Erasers*), published in 1953 by Les Éditions de Minuit, the small publishing house of which he was the literary director, attracting considerable interest in Parisian intellectual circles, if not among the wider public. With the exception of Marguerite Duras, who always remained on the fringes of the movement both artistically and in more concrete ways, the New Novelists have never won a mainstream readership, but they have exerted an undeniable influence on theories of novel-writing and of artistic representation in general. Both Duras and Robbe-Grillet extended their work into the cinema in the early 1960s, and to a limited degree their respective careers ran along parallel tracks throughout that decade.³ Duras's filmic work consists of a number of experimental projects in collaboration with established film-makers such as Alain Resnais and on her own account, by far her best known and arguably most artistically satisfying contribution to the genre being the iconic *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) which she scripted and Resnais directed. Robbe-Grillet's first foray into cinema was also a collaboration with Resnais, *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), a film that has achieved an equally iconic status. Resnais directed *Marienbad*, but the initial idea was Robbe-Grillet's and the script was his. The question of the film's paternity will be addressed in [Chapter 1](#).

There is thus a discernible synchronicity in the work of at least two major figures on the intellectual scene of the 1960s, which argues for a certain historical rootedness, and indeed, some critics have made a plausible case for reading both Duras and Robbe-Grillet as emerging from a very specific historical context, readings which to some degree appear to militate against the claims of the New Novel school to have evacuated all historical or political elements in their quest for art forms expressing internal rather than external forms of reality. It is worth stressing here that such readings may form part of a wider approach to Robbe-Grillet, according to which the work

3 Julia Waters (2000) has argued that the parallels are considerably more extensive, relating to theme and form, as well as to choice of genre.

may sometimes be read against its author, and this approach will be considered in the following chapters, especially in [Chapter 4](#). A brief overview of the entire filmic corpus and its critical reception will help the reader to gain an approximate view of his status and importance as a film-maker before we look more closely at the films and their themes and forms.

Critical reception

After *Marienbad*, Robbe-Grillet made his directorial debut with *L'Immortelle* (1963). This film was not well received by most reviewers, as Robbe-Grillet himself recalls in an essay written in the year of the film's release, 'Temps et description dans le récit d'aujourd'hui'.⁴ Predictably, he notes, the actors' performance was criticised as being 'unnatural', critics bemoaned the difficulty of distinguishing between what was 'real' and what was memory or fantasy, and disliked the tendency to stereotype both the city of Istanbul and the emotions of the characters (*ibid.*:129). What all these criticisms boiled down to, in his view, was the absence of 'objective truth'. His response provides a summation of the entire basis of the 'new cinema':

toute œuvre moderne [...] au lieu d'être un prétendu morceau de réalité, se développe en tant que réflexion sur la réalité (ou sur le *peu de réalité* comme on voudra). Elle ne cherche plus à cacher son caractère nécessairement mensonger, en se présentant comme une «histoire vécue». Si bien que nous retrouvons là, dans l'écriture cinématographique, une fonction voisine de celle assumée par la description en littérature: l'image ainsi traitée [*sic*] (quant aux acteurs, au décor, au montage, dans ses rapports avec le son, etc.) empêche de croire en même temps qu'elle affirme, comme la description empêchait de voir ce qu'elle montrait.⁵ (*ibid.*: 129–30)

⁴ Robbe-Grillet 1963c: 123–34.

⁵ 'any modern work [...] rather than being presented as a slice of real life, is constructed as a reflection on reality (or on the *lack of reality* if you wish). It no longer seeks to hide its necessarily mendacious character, as the presentation of a "real story". The result is that the filmic text functions in a similar manner to that of the literary description: treated in this way (as regards actors, set, editing, sound, etc.) the image prevents the spectator from believing at the same time as it affirms itself, just as literary description prevented us from seeing what it showed.' This and all subsequent translations in the book are my own, unless otherwise stated.

René Prédal argues that it was not the case that Robbe-Grillet's films were very poorly received – Prédal cites a number of glowing reviews in the French press – but reactions, often prompted by Robbe-Grillet's own interventions in the critical debate, were complex.⁶ Prédal points out that the 1960s were the golden age of film magazines in France, the most popular being *Cinéma* and *Image et Son*, though the most famous were *Les Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*, the latter two able to make and break reputations and leading the theoretical debate: 'Gare aux cinéastes excommuniés par *Les Cahiers*, surtout s'ils ne sont pas récupérés à *Positif*! Or c'est exactement la mésaventure qui arrive à Robbe-Grillet qui n'a jamais été apprécié ni par l'une ni par l'autre des publications'⁷ (Prédal 2005: 93). No *Cahiers* critic wrote a long review that was favourable. Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, the then editor-in-chief, was one of the few critics of the time to understand what *L'Immortelle* was about: 'remplacement du référent extérieur par une réalité intrinsèque au film, perpétuel présent du temps mental d'un narrateur qui n'interprète pas mais se raconte lui-même une histoire nourrie de fantasmes'⁸ (1963: 143; quoted by Prédal, *ibid.*).

Robbe-Grillet's next film, *Trans-Europ-Express* (1966) suffered a worse fate at the hands of the critics who were generally hostile to the film's erotic character. The editor-in-chief of *Image et Son* published a long and entirely negative review of the film: 'petit film médiocre et prétentieux [...] tourné par un amateur incapable de conduire un récit filmique'⁹ (Chevassu 1967: 203). As Prédal acutely observes, 'Décidément Robbe-Grillet dérange!'¹⁰ (2005: 97). With *L'Homme qui ment* (1968), on the other hand, critics were more divided, Dominique Noguez, for instance, calling the film a 'Marienbad without Resnais', while Doniol-Valcroze underlined the radicality of an author-director

6 The following summary owes much to René Prédal's invaluable survey of the films' critical reception (2005: 91–104). Prédal focuses on specialised film magazines.

7 'Woe betide those film-makers excommunicated by *Les Cahiers*, especially if they are not rescued by *Positif*! Now, this was precisely the misfortune that befell Robbe-Grillet who has never been appreciated by either of these publications.'

8 'the replacement of an external referent by a reality intrinsic to the film itself, the perpetual present of the psychological time of a narrator who does not interpret but tells himself a story filled with fantasies'

9 'a mediocre and pretentious little film [...] shot by an amateur incapable of putting a film together'

10 'Robbe-Grillet was clearly making waves!'

who questioned the nature of reality (see Prédal 2005: 95). In the late 1960s, Robbe-Grillet's films suffered to some degree from the growing leftist focus of *Les Cahiers*, especially in the wake of May 1968. This was no time for the evacuation of the referent!

Positif either completely ignored Robbe-Grillet's films or allocated a few negative comments to them in the magazine's 'A to Z' section. Michel Grisolia in *Positif* condemned *L'Eden et après* (1971) as a 'bric-à-brac usé provoquant l'ennui'¹¹ (1970: 118). As for *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (1974), 'Robbe-Grillet, c'est l'homme qui ment'¹² (Bolduc 1975: 167).¹³ Alain Garsault was similarly negative about *Le Jeu avec le feu* (1974; see Prédal 2005: 96). All these adverse reactions are to be explained in terms of the ultra-conservative position of *Positif* in the 1960s, a journal that rejected any innovative approaches, having already condemned the entire *nouvelle vague*. *La Saison cinématographique*, on the other hand (an annual publication of reviews of all the films appearing on French cinema screens from 1 January to 31 December) judged none of Robbe-Grillet's films negatively (despite the fact that the team writing them was made up of the same editors as *Image et Son*). Raymond Lefèvre, writing for this magazine, singled out *Trans-Europ-Express* for its qualities which he listed *inter alia* as a reworking of the traditional narrative, the deconstruction of the notion of character, and an attack on clichés and stereotypes (ibid.: 98).

Gradually, then, individual critics rebelled against the magazine's hegemony. Noël Burch, for example, wrote some very subtle things in 1967 about *Marienbad* and *L'Immortelle*. Burch and Labarthe made several TV programmes together for the prestigious series, *Cinéastes de notre temps*, produced by Labarthe and Janine Bazin (1964–72), one of which was devoted to Robbe-Grillet in 1969. Prédal lists a number of other magazines and networks of admirers of Robbe-Grillet's films: *Télé Ciné*, *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma*, etc. (ibid.: 99). But it was above all *Cinéma*, founded in 1954, which has most consistently supported Robbe-Grillet, in particular, his first two films. *L'Immortelle* was very positively received in this magazine, and *Trans-Europ-Express* was rated a masterpiece (March 1967: 114). *Glissements*, however, was not well received in *Cinéma* (March 1974: 185), but the following year, *Le*

11 'a worn-out antique generating boredom'

12 'The man who lies is Robbe-Grillet'

13 Albert Bolduc does not exist, this being a pseudonym of the editorial committee.

Jeu avec le feu (1975) was defended for its technical mastery, humour and playfulness (April 1975: 197).

In the next quarter century, Robbe-Grillet made only two films, *La Belle captive* (1983) and *Un bruit qui rend fou* (1995). Both suffered at the hands of *Positif* and *Cahiers* reviewers. The latter film, for instance, was condemned in *Les Cahiers* as 'sans surprise, plein de passé'¹⁴ (1995: 496).

In academic circles, the warmth with which his films have been received has generally depended on the theoretical perspective of the critic. In the 1960s, structuralists such as the early Roland Barthes tended to play down the sexually disturbing elements of the work to focus on it as text, divorced from any social or political reality. On the other hand, even early films such as *L'Immortelle*, which cannot be said to contain any explicit sexual references, attracted a degree of negative criticism from morally minded critics, as evidenced in what came to be known as 'la querelle du *Voyeur*' (Waters 2000: 58–9). Such critics constituted a growing number from the 1970s onwards, as Robbe-Grillet's novelistic and cinematic work began to make those hitherto muted themes of perversion and sadomasochism increasingly explicit. That such criticism already existed in the 1950s is evident from Barthes's defence of *Le Voyeur* against the charge of obscenity. Barthes retaliated by characterising such views as stemming from a confusion between reality and the imagination. The novel, Barthes argued, was formal experimentation, and not a symbolic expression of the real (1955: 67).

From the 1970s on, feminist critics insisted on the presence of a female body in the text, on the political and ideological implications of this presence, and the manner in which it is represented. Given the increasingly explicit eroticism of both his novels and films, Robbe-Grillet's work was especially vulnerable, of all the New Novelists and New Film-makers, to hostile feminist readings. Sadomasochistic themes and motifs are found to varying degrees of explicitness in all his films. Rape, murder, bondage, lesbianism, prostitution, the torture of naked young women, and imagery with strong fetishistic components have proved problematic for some critics, who have pointed to its personal origins in the author's own self-avowed sexual fantasies.¹⁵ Conversely, others have repeated the authorial view that

¹⁴ 'passé and lacking originality'

¹⁵ Such an intensely personal investment seems to be at odds with Roland

the female characters in his films can generally be said to stand up to male authority. Alice, in *Glissements*, resists patriarchy, as represented by the law and the church, while in *La Belle captive*, the evocatively named Sara Zeitgeist is seen to be sexually and psychologically dominant over the film's male protagonist. However, Sara, and to a lesser extent, Alice, are vulnerable to the charge of fulfilling a common male fantasy, and one certainly shared by their creator: the dominatrix. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to his novels, Robbe-Grillet's use of such material is complex, and inseparable from his experimental representation of an internal reality, informed by dreams, fantasies and nightmares (see Phillips 1999: 129–48). Moreover, the sexual is always *mis en scène* in both novels and films within an ironic frame that implicitly questions the stereotypes of sex and gender found in more conventional narratives.¹⁶

Such an approach is essentially ideological, and in this and other ways, the films can be said to have a political dimension in the broadest sense of the word that seems to contradict their author's aim to produce an art disengaged from a socio-historical context. My position in this regard is close to that of Lynn Higgins who has argued in relation to the New Wave cinema in general that Robbe-Grillet's films exhibit a tension between, on the one hand, a pursuit of formalism that eschews the socio-political, and on the other, implicit if not explicit responses to the sexual politics and permissiveness of the 1960s and subsequent decades (see Higgins 1996: 83–111).¹⁷ Higgins rejects the alleged eclipse of the social in the *nouveau roman* and in cinema of the *nouvelle vague*, arguing that such works are inevitably shaped, even in their formal aspects, by the political events and ideas of the period (*ibid.*: 2). In Robbe-Grillet's case, this was in particular the climate of sexual politics that dominated the 1970s and 1980s. The films he made in those decades both take advantage of a more permissive society and contain themes that help us to understand the sexual

Barthes's view of the work as an exemplary case of authorless writing (see, for example, 1964, 1984).

¹⁶ See Chapters 5 and 6 for a more detailed discussion of the sexual themes and images in the films. The representation of stereotypes will also be treated in detail in Chapter 5.

¹⁷ The '*nouvelle vague*', or 'New Wave' was an avant-garde movement in French cinema, christened by François Truffaut and practised by Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Agnès Varda and others in the 1950s and 1960s. For a fuller discussion, see the beginning of Chapter 1.