

THE FILMS OF ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

**PURDUE UNIVERSITY MONOGRAPHS
IN ROMANCE LANGUAGES**

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Volume 6

Roy Armes

The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet

ROY ARMES

THE FILMS OF ALAIN ROBBE-GRILLET

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For Milo Pashpierry

“hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère”

Je rêve d'une création mobile où des architectures fortes, et ne laissant rien au hasard, seraient pourtant minées de l'intérieur, toujours en train de s'édifier, de s'organiser, et de s'écrouler en même temps, pour laisser au fur et à mesure le champ libre à des constructions nouvelles.

Alain Robbe-Grillet

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Robbe-Grillet's Approach to the Cinema

Alain Robbe-Grillet was born in Brest in 1922. His family was a provincial one, and his own training as an agronomist led him to spend some time living abroad. He has always emphasised that he therefore came to the Parisian literary scene as an outsider, quite unprepared for the critical controversy which his books aroused. But it is equally clear that he is of a temperament to respond more than adequately to the challenges of literary debate or the interview-ridden life of the modern film director. His first published work was a novel, *Les Gommages*, which appeared in 1953, but he had previously written unpublished prose sketches and a full-length novel, *Un Régicide*, which he completed in 1949 but which was not published in its entirety until 1978. In the 1950s he continued publishing short narrative pieces, collected as *Instantanés* in 1962, and three more novels: *Le Voyeur* in 1955, *La Jalousie* in 1957, and *Dans le labyrinthe* in 1959. At the same time, he responded to the discussion of his work (largely in terms of its alleged objectivity or subjectivity) by such critics as Roland Barthes and Bruce Morrissette with a number of articles, subsequently grouped as *Pour un nouveau roman* in 1963. These led him to become a key figure in the literary controversies of the 1950s and 1960s, a position enhanced by his role from 1955 onwards as literary director of the Editions de Minuit, the firm which has published work by most of the novelists associated with the *nouveau roman*.

Robbe-Grillet's involvement with the cinema in the early 1960s led to the scripting of one of the most controversial films of the decade, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), which was directed by Alain Resnais. Subsequently Robbe-Grillet both wrote and directed a series of highly individual films, beginning with *L'Immortelle* (1963), *Trans-Europ-Express* (1966), and *L'Homme qui ment* (1968). This film work and the preparation for publication in book form of the two *ciné-romans*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* and *L'Immortelle*, did not preclude further literary activity, and in the 1960s he wrote two further novels, *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965) and *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, which appeared in 1970. The same year he made his first colour film, *L'Eden et après*, which also marked a new stage in his filmmaking through its use of serial techniques of construction. The following

year the material shot for the film was used to make a television film, *N'a pris les dés*, but this was not shown until late in 1975. Two more films made for the cinema followed in the mid-1970s, *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (the appearance of which in 1974 coincided with the publication of yet another *ciné-roman*) and *Le Jeu avec le feu* (1975). Notes on a new film project, *Piège à fourrure*, appeared in 1976.

Robbe-Grillet's progress in the 1970s has been very much in line with the overall development of the *nouveau roman* in its second decade, and his work has proved amenable to the kind of reading proposed by Jean Ricardou, who has taken over from Robbe-Grillet the role of principal theorist of the movement. Robbe-Grillet himself has of late been more concerned with exploring the relationship of word and image and took up painting—initially in a purely private capacity—in the mid-1970s. Many of his texts relate directly to visual images. He contributed the texts of two collections of photographs by David Hamilton, *Rêves de jeunes filles* (1971) and *Les Demoiselles d'Hamilton* (1972), and one by Irina Ionesco, *Temple aux miroirs* (1977). He also produced texts for limited editions of works by Paul Delvaux (*Construction d'un temple en ruine à la déesse Vanadé*, 1975), René Magritte (*La Belle Captive*, 1976), and Robert Rauschenberg (*Traces suspectes en surface*, 1976). These texts, together with the short story *La Demeure immobile de David Hamilton* (1970), were subsequently woven together to form the texts of two inter-related novels, *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1975) and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978).

In order to understand the work of Robbe-Grillet—or that of any novelist or filmmaker of his generation—some appreciation of the development of narrative in the twentieth century is necessary. Gerald Prince observes in *A Grammar of Stories* that

Everybody may not know how to tell good stories but everybody, in every human society known to history and anthropology, knows how to tell stories, and this at a very early age. . . . Furthermore, everybody distinguishes stories from non-stories, that is, everybody has certain intuitions—or has internalised certain rules—about what constitutes a story and what does not.¹

While this may be true in general terms, contemporary developments have shown that this intuitive recognition is not infallible, perhaps because the rules that have been internalised have become unduly prescriptive. Many of the *nouveaux romanciers*, including Robbe-Grillet, have been condemned by exceedingly literate but conventionally minded critics for their “inability to tell a story” and have found their work presented and discussed under some such label as “antinovel.” The reason for this critical uncertainty as to the precise status of the work of Robbe-Grillet—or the novels of Michel Butor, the films of Marguerite Duras, and so on—lies in the narrowing down of the concept of narrative to a few nineteenth-century “classics.” Works of a single

mode—principally those of the great novelists of the last century—have become, as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg point out in *The Nature of Narrative*, “models of approved and proper literary performance.” But whatever the intrinsic value of such works, this procedure “amounts to the construction of an artificial tradition. . . . For writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required.”²

When Scholes and Kellogg put the two-hundred-year development of the novel into the context of “the continuous narrative tradition of the Western world which can be traced back five thousand years”³ and define a story in terms of epic and history, romance and fable, the achievements of Balzac, Flaubert, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and George Eliot are not lessened, but the scope for narrative of a totally different kind becomes clear. The existence of the great nineteenth-century masters in no way precludes twentieth-century developments, and forms of narrative which contest the patterns and assumptions of the nineteenth century have no less a claim to be considered as “stories.” Within this wider context it is clear that Robbe-Grillet’s work can be considered unequivocally as narrative. The director Alain Resnais has observed that a film like *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* uses many of the basic archetypes of fiction, such as Death coming to claim his victim after a year and a day or the Handsome Prince rescuing the Sleeping Beauty. For this reason, the situation of the three central figures of the film—X (Giorgio Albertazzi), A (Delphine Seyrig), and M (Sacha Pitoëff)—can, superficially at least, be very adequately described in terms of analytic categories drawn from other areas of literature. For example, in accordance with Étienne Souriau’s concept of dramatic functions,⁴ X is the Lion, and it is his desire or Will which precipitates the action. Mars, his rival or Opponent, is clearly M, and the Sun or Desired Good is equally evidently A. X wants A for himself, so that his role includes the function of Earth or Destined Recipient of the Good. The action of the film can be described in terms of an attempt by X to compel A to take on the remaining function (in the absence of any figure of Moon or helper), that of Balance or Arbiter, and so decide her own fate. Certainly the film comes to an end when she finally decides to abandon M who, if he is indeed her husband or guardian, may be said to have exercised this role initially. Equally the film can be approached in terms of the functions which Vladimir Propp uncovered in his studies of Russian folktales,⁵ and A, X, and M related to the eight character roles which Propp defines, with X as both hero and dispatcher, A as the princess, and M combining the roles of false hero and father of the princess.

To take this form of analysis further, however, we should need to be able to reduce the film to a simple but incontrovertable summary of the kind which Tzvetan Todorov offers for each of the Boccaccio stories he analyses in his *Grammaire du Décaméron*.⁶ But here an immediate problem arises, for *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* lacks the clarity and simplicity of a conventional dramatic

conflict or traditional folktale. The film, like all Robbe-Grillet's other work, is quite impossible to summarise adequately. It is true that in accordance with the customary procedures of mainstream cinematic production each of Robbe-Grillet's films was initially conceived and presented in terms of a synopsis, the nature and function of which he defines very clearly in his introduction to the *ciné-roman Glissements progressifs du plaisir*:

Le synopsis . . . est un résumé en quelques pages du contenu anecdotique et de la manière dont il sera traité. Ce document initial est proposé à un producteur en vue de lui faire prendre en charge l'organisation matérielle et la dépense d'une éventuelle réalisation. C'est le projet de base indispensable à tout accord. C'est ensuite, une fois l'entreprise mise en route, le petit texte qui servira à présenter le film aux acheteurs, français ou étrangers. C'est enfin, bien souvent, une sorte de "prière d'insérer" que l'on offre pour la sortie du film aux journalistes, voire au public, dans toutes sortes de dépliants et prospectus.⁷

In this sense, we have authoritative synopses of *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, *L'Eden et après* (the text distributed to audiences), and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (the résumé published in the introduction). But all these résumés are partial, antedate the works they purport to describe, and ignore or underestimate the complexities and sets of variants which any Proppian or Todorovian analysis would need to consider. Yet it is by no means easy to determine an adequate alternative summary for such essentially ambiguous works, as any examination of those offered by critics for *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* makes clear. In the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, for example, the reviewer describes the film as follows:

In a vast, gloomy baroque hotel a man, X, meets A, a beautiful woman staying there with M, who may or may not be her husband. X tells A that they met the previous year at Fredericksbad, or perhaps Marienbad, and had some sort of affair, but she eventually refused to go away with him, and arranged instead that they should meet again in a year's time, when she would give him her decision. She apparently does not recognise him and denies all knowledge of their supposed previous encounter, but little by little X brings her round to acceptance of what he says, and finally they leave together.⁸

By contrast, in a book-length study of Alain Resnais's films, John Ward describes what happens in these words:

A year ago a man X met a woman A at Marienbad in a château where they were both guests. Under the nose of her husband M, he began an affair with her. After trying several times to persuade A to leave with him, X is warned off by M. Finally M kills A and X is left alone to mourn.⁹

Even allowing for Ward's gross oversimplifications and misinterpretations, it is difficult to imagine any synopsis which could adequately take the place of the film for the purpose of a structural analysis.

These observations allow us to establish an initial characterisation of Robbe-Grillet's work in relation to the broad tradition of narrative. His basic material remains the embryonic or fragmentary "story," but his approach is not that of the fable, the Boccaccian short story, or the traditional novel. Stephen Heath has aptly applied to his treatment of his narrative elements the concept of "bricolage" developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensée sauvage*. *Bricolage*, as Heath points out, "is not an activity of free creation but an activity of reassembling, of constructing from, existing elements."¹⁰ The interest of Robbe-Grillet's work lies in the formal organisation of the given material, and Heath takes as his example Robbe-Grillet's fifth novel where

the Hong-Kong that everybody knows . . . conventional locus of popular oriental mystico-erotic adventure, of drugs, prostitutes, spies, and so on, is taken as the material for the assembly that is the writing of *La Maison de rendez-vous*. This writing puts into suspense the conventional narrative sense of the material, revealing its constituent elements, as it were, as pure forms the significance of which is found at the level of the text, precisely, that is, at the level of the wavering of their sense.¹¹

Heath's insights date, however, from 1972, and the terms in which the films treated in this present study were presented and initially received were very different. It is to this successive theorisation of Robbe-Grillet's work that we must now turn.

In setting out to examine the critical and theoretical assumptions underlying Robbe-Grillet's initial approach to the cinema, it is important to bear in mind the precise status of the author's own declarations. The publication of Robbe-Grillet's first novel, *Les Gommages*, in 1953 preceded any theoretical writing, and he has always disclaimed the title of theorist. *Pour un nouveau roman* begins with the words: "Je ne suis pas un théoricien du roman,"¹² and at the Cerisy-la-Salle debate on his work in 1975, he replied to comments by Jean Ricardou in terms which conceal an underlying seriousness beneath their obvious humour: "La théorie continue, pour moi, à avoir ce rôle principal de faire peur aux gens."¹³ Stephen Heath has ably demonstrated the impossibility of abstracting a consistent theory of the novel from the pages of *Pour un nouveau roman*, which abounds in half-truths and contradictions as well as passages of real insight. As a theorist, Robbe-Grillet displays, as Heath points out, "a certain inability to assume the reality of his own texts in exactly those terms in which they are most radical."¹⁴ But at the same time, from the first appearance of the essay "Nature, humanisme, tragédie" in 1958 until the publication of Ricardou's *Problèmes du nouveau roman* in 1967, it was Robbe-Grillet himself who largely dictated the terms in which his work was discussed (even to the extent of acting as publisher for Bruce Morrissette's influential analysis, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*).

Recently Robbe-Grillet has been concerned to denigrate the importance of his own critical and theoretical writings, making a "solemn declaration" at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1975:

Mon œuvre, c'est l'ensemble des textes que j'ai publiés et qui portent le nom de romans, nouvelles, récits, films etc. Mais il ne faut faire entrer dans ce corpus ni les articles de journaux plus ou moins ramassés en volume sous le nom d'Essais, ni à plus forte raison les déclarations orales que je peux faire ici, même si j'admets qu'on les publie ensuite.¹⁵

This attitude implies less a dissatisfaction with theory as such than an awareness that he himself has always been a populariser rather than a theorist, in the sense that his critical and theoretical writings (reviews, articles, essays, *prières d'insérer* written for the early novels, *résumés* of his films, etc.) have invariably had as their prime object that of making his creative work more accessible to an audience by simplifying the work's complexities. The tactic has been a quite conscious one:

Dans cette présentation des œuvres, j'admets très bien, personnellement, qu'il faille jouer une sorte de double jeu, et proposer des interprétations que l'on est prêt, soi-même, à démentir. . . . Ce qui est important, pour moi, c'est de ne rien mettre dans l'œuvre qui puisse, d'avance, permettre cette récupération.¹⁶

Such attempts to provide a means of access to his work have therefore always been accompanied by an awareness of their inadequacy and by the fervent hope that "les textes résistent à ce que j'ai pu en dire pour les promouvoir."¹⁷ A good example of Robbe-Grillet's duplicity is his presentation of *La Jalousie*:

Au moment où je portais aux nues la description optique, les seuls passages de *La Jalousie* qui m'intéressaient vraiment, c'étaient les passages acoustiques dont je n'ai jamais parlé à l'époque. Tous ces bruits qu'on entendait. Et cela m'intéressait justement parce que ça n'avait pas encore été gagné par le sens.¹⁸

But while his own presentations of ideas may be both partial and of limited lasting value, the critical and theoretical response itself is as crucial to Robbe-Grillet as to many other modern artists (as is borne out by his invariable attendance at discussions of his work). In this sense little has changed since the approach outlined in the first essay of *Pour un nouveau roman* on "The Use of Theory":

Une fois l'œuvre achevée, la réflexion critique de l'écrivain lui servira encore à prendre ses distances par rapport à elle, alimentant aussitôt de nouvelles recherches, un nouveau départ.¹⁹

It is with these reservations in mind that the following pages propose an

approach to Robbe-Grillet's films through the critical and theoretical writing which his work has provoked.

Robbe-Grillet's first concern in "Nature, humanisme, tragédie" is to separate man and objects. The whole essay can in fact be seen to derive from the single proposition: "L'homme regarde le monde, et le monde ne lui rend pas son regard."²⁰ That is to say, there is a fundamental separation between man and his world which humanism in all its forms denies:

Véritable pont d'âme jeté entre l'homme et les choses, le regard de l'humanisme est avant tout le gage d'une solidarité.²¹

But since this solidarity is a sham, the writer must combat it by clarifying the real position of man. This implies cleansing the language of those metaphors which build bridges but provide no appreciably new information about the objects examined. Otherwise,

le monde des choses aura été si bien contaminé par mon esprit qu'il sera désormais susceptible de n'importe quelle émotion, de n'importe quel trait de caractère. J'oublierai que c'est moi, moi seul, qui éprouve la tristesse ou la solitude; ces éléments affectifs seront bientôt considérés comme la *réalité profonde* de l'univers matériel, la seule réalité—censément—digne de retenir sur lui mon attention.²²

Robbe-Grillet opposes the idea of tragedy:

Car la tragédie ne comporte ni vraie acceptation, ni refus véritable. Elle est la sublimation d'une différence.²³

And together with tragedy, he rejects "deux nouvelles formes de la complicité fatale,"²⁴ the relationship between man and nature which he sees advanced by Albert Camus in *L'Étranger* and Jean-Paul Sartre in *La Nausée*. A powerful critique of this stance from the standpoint of existential phenomenology has been offered by Stephen Heath, who emphasises the absence of such mediating concepts as consciousness and culture. In Heath's view, it is this which is responsible for

the way in which the theory found in the emphasis of "Nature, humanisme, tragédie" will shift to its opposite, and the "objective" become the "subjective" theory, for it is this absence of any term of relation (consciousness or language) which makes that shift possible.²⁵

Except in so far as they have promoted fundamental misreadings of individual films, the ideas advanced in "Nature, humanisme, tragédie" have little direct significance for Robbe-Grillet's practice as a filmmaker. But they do underlie the slightly earlier essay "Une Voie pour le roman futur" which contains

Robbe-Grillet's only lengthy discussion of the cinema before his own practical involvement in filmmaking. His comments are worth quoting at some length, since they offer a useful counterbalance to the ideas of "subjective realism" advanced with such force in the early 1960s. In this passage Robbe-Grillet compares the inability of literature to cope with the "being there" of objects with the experience offered by any number of filmed novels:

Le cinéma, héritier lui aussi de la tradition psychologique et naturaliste, n'a le plus fréquemment pour but que de transposer un récit en images: il vise seulement à imposer au spectateur, par le truchement de quelques scènes bien choisies, la signification que les phrases commentaient à loisir pour le lecteur. . . . Dans le roman initial, les objets et les gestes qui servaient de support à l'intrigue disparaissaient complètement pour laisser la place à leur seule signification: la chaise inoccupée n'était plus qu'une absence ou une attente, la main qui se pose sur l'épaule n'était plus que marque de sympathie, les barreaux de la fenêtre n'étaient que l'impossibilité de sortir.... Et voici que maintenant on *voit* la chaise, le mouvement de la main, la forme des barreaux. Leur signification demeure flagrante, mais, au lieu d'accaparer notre attention, elle est comme donnée en plus; en trop, même, car ce qui nous atteint, ce qui persiste dans notre mémoire, ce qui apparaît comme essentiel et irréductible à de vagues notions mentales, ce sont les gestes eux-mêmes, les objets, les déplacements et les contours, auxquels l'image a restitué d'un seul coup (sans le vouloir) leur *réalité*.²⁶

Robbe-Grillet rightly locates the source of this impact on us in the conventions of photography—"l'aspect un peu inhabituel de ce monde reproduit"²⁷—but, as we shall see, this is something he ignores in presenting such early films as *L'Immortelle* as successions of mental images.

What remains most important from Robbe-Grillet's early theoretical writings is less the vision of the world made explicit there than the relationship established between his practice as a writer (and subsequently filmmaker) and the tradition of French literary narrative. His seriousness of purpose derives from a double recognition. Firstly,

inconsciemment jugée par référence aux formes consacrées, une forme nouvelle paraîtra toujours plus ou moins une absence de forme.²⁸

Secondly,

lorsque une forme d'écriture a perdu sa vitalité première, sa force, sa violence, lorsqu'elle est devenue une vulgaire recette, un académisme que les suiveurs ne respectent plus que par routine ou paresse, sans même se poser de question sur sa nécessité, c'est bien un retour au réel que constitue la mise en accusation des formules mortes et la recherche de formes nouvelles, capables de prendre la relève. La découverte de la réalité ne continuera d'aller de l'avant que si l'on abandonne les formes usées.²⁹

One of Robbe-Grillet's first major essays, "Sur quelques notions périmées" (1957), comprises an attack on a number of Balzacian (and, in film terms, Hollywoodian) conceptions whose continued use falsifies our view of reality. He begins with the notion of the "character." For Robbe-Grillet, this is now "une momie..., mais qui trône toujours avec la même majesté—quoique postiche—au milieu des valeurs que révère la critique traditionnelle."³⁰ Such a notion is totally outdated in the present age, which is not that of the individual but "plutôt celle du numéro matricule."³¹ He is equally opposed to the idea of the "story," so crucial to a traditional novelist like E. M. Forster:

Bien raconter, c'est donc faire ressembler ce que l'on écrit aux schémas préfabriqués dont les gens ont l'habitude, c'est-à-dire à l'idée toute faite qu'ils ont de la réalité.³²

Elsewhere, the romantic notion of the novelist as genius, "une sorte de monstre inconscient, irresponsable et fatal, voire légèrement imbécile, de qui partent des 'messages' que seul le lecteur doit déchiffrer,"³³ is confronted with the true situation of the modern writer moving towards the future, "vers une époque de la fiction où les problèmes de l'écriture seront envisagés lucidement par le romancier, et où les soucis critiques, loin de stériliser la création, pourront au contraire lui servir de moteur."³⁴ Likewise the existentialist idea of commitment is opposed on the grounds that "la fonction de l'art n'est jamais d'illustrer une vérité—ou même une interrogation—connue à l'avance."³⁵ Since the novelist can only create "for nothing" and his work contains nothing, "au sens strict du terme,"³⁶ any separation of form and content is absurd:

Ne pourrait-on avancer au contraire que le véritable écrivain n'a rien à dire. Il a seulement une manière de dire. Il doit créer un monde, mais c'est à partir de rien, de la poussière... (ibid.)

The objections to the literary formulations of the past lead to a confrontation with the set of assumptions which he sees built into the formal devices of the Balzacian novel (and which are equally relevant to the Hollywood movie):

Tous les éléments techniques du récit—emploi systématique du passé simple et de la troisième personne, adoption sans condition du déroulement chronologique, intrigues linéaires, courbe régulière des passions, tension de chaque épisode vers une fin, etc.—tout visait à imposer l'image d'un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable. Comme l'intelligibilité du monde n'était pas mise en question, raconter ne posait pas de problème. L'écriture romanesque pouvait être innocente.³⁷

Between the appearance of *Dans le labyrinthe* in 1959 and the publication of *La Maison de rendez-vous* in 1965, Robbe-Grillet's thinking underwent a considerable change. This period of the early 1960s was very much a time of

taking stock. In 1962-63 he published collected editions of the essays and short narrative pieces which he had written in the previous decade and also involved himself deeply in a new art form—the cinema—through his work as scriptwriter of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* and as writer-director of *L'Immortelle*. The shift is substantial enough for Roland Barthes, one of the first critics to concern themselves with the early novels, to posit the existence of two Robbe-Grilletes in his preface to Morrisette's study, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, which appeared in 1963:

Maintenant que cette œuvre s'est développée et que le cinéma lui a donné un nouveau souffle et un second public, ce sont des questions qu'on peut lui poser d'une façon nouvelle. Selon la réponse, on s'apercevra vite que l'on dispose, avec l'aide de Robbe-Grillet lui-même, de deux Robbe-Grillet: d'un côté le Robbe-Grillet des choses immédiates, destructeur de sens, esquissé surtout par la première critique; et d'un autre, le Robbe-Grillet des choses médiates, créateur de sens, dont Bruce Morrisette va se faire ici même l'analyste.³⁸

The key texts in which Robbe-Grillet's new position is spelt out most clearly are the introductions to the two published *ciné-romans*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* and *L'Immortelle*, and recently he has attempted to explain away this early 1960s stance as a purely tactical measure, designed to allow his films to reach an audience:

Présenter un objet qui mettrait définitivement en péril l'idéologie, à tel point qu'il ne serait jamais vu par personne parce que, justement, on l'aurait censuré au départ, est peut-être pire que d'occulter un peu le travail de l'œuvre par des clins d'œil à la récupération, disposés soit dans l'œuvre, soit, de préférence, dans les prières d'insérer, dans les présentations à la presse, etc., afin que l'œuvre ne soit pas enterrée et qu'un public plus averti qui la verra autrement puisse se développer. Pour la voir autrement, il fallait peut-être commencer déjà par la voir comme cela.³⁹

This explanation has all the marks of a judgement in hindsight and posits a critical and theoretical awareness of his work in Robbe-Grillet for which there is no evidence in either his published writings or his public pronouncements of the period. Traces of the concept of subjective realism can be found in many of the essays of *Pour un nouveau roman* which were by no means designed as publicity pieces, and it seems to have formed a necessary bridge between his initial conception and the later formulations of his position worked out in response to Jean Ricardou's theorisation of the *nouveau roman*. Stephen Heath has underlined the essential unity of the two Robbe-Grilletes:

The new *realism* that was the aim of "Nature, humanisme, tragédie" is equally the watchword of the novelist of subjectivity. There is no call for surprise at this application of *realism* now to the one, now to the other, for the theoretical justification

of the realism of the subjective emphasis is based on exactly the same set of premisses as that of the justification of the objective emphasis of "Nature, humanisme, tragédie," and the new theoretical basis, contrary to popular belief, is, in fact, equally alien to the thinking of existential phenomenology.⁴⁰

Robbe-Grillet's new approach to his own work is immediately apparent in the essay "Temps et description dans le récit d'aujourd'hui," written in 1963 for the collected volume *Pour un nouveau roman*, when he comments once more on the attraction of the cinema for the *nouveaux romanciers*:

Ce n'est pas l'objectivité de la caméra qui les passionne, mais ses possibilités dans le domaine du subjectif, de l'imaginaire. Ils ne conçoivent pas le cinéma comme un moyen d'expression, mais de recherche, et ce qui retient le plus leur attention c'est, tout naturellement, ce qui échappait le plus aux pouvoirs de la littérature.⁴¹

Of the three areas of research which he picks out for comment, two are those which will continue to be characteristic of all his work in the cinema: the attraction of sound—"le son des voix, les bruits, les ambiances, les musiques"—and of audio-visual counterpoint—"la possibilité d'agir sur deux sens à la fois, l'œil et l'oreille." The third factor is the cinema's ability to treat the imaginary in a new way:

Enfin, dans l'image comme dans le son, la possibilité de présenter avec toute l'apparence de l'objectivité la moins contestable ce qui n'est, aussi bien, que rêve ou souvenir, en un mot ce qui n'est qu'imagination. (ibid.)

The particular aspect of the cinema which allows this is its present tense quality, as the introduction to *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* makes clear:

Sans doute le cinéma est-il un moyen d'expression prédestiné pour ce genre de récit. La caractéristique essentielle de l'image est sa présence . . . de toute évidence, ce que l'on voit sur l'écran *est en train de se passer*, c'est le geste même qu'on nous donne, et non pas un rapport sur lui.⁴²

Robbe-Grillet points out that in a flashback sequence—after some marking to indicate a return to the past—the image can resume as before:

La parfaite netteté de la projection peut se rétablir, pour le reste de la scène, sans que personne soit gêné par une image que rien ne distingue alors de l'action présente, une image qui est en fait *au présent*. (ibid.)

Similarly, in a courtroom scene for example, true and false hypotheses are presented without any differentiation at all in the image:

Tous sont présentés avec la même qualité d'image, le même réalisme, la même présence, la même objectivité. Et de même encore si l'on nous montre une scène future, qu'un des personnages imagine, etc.⁴³

But Robbe-Grillet's continued concern at this time with realism (the last essay of *Pour un nouveau roman* is entitled "Du réalisme à la réalité") leads him to move from this precise definition of certain aspects of the cinematic image to a very questionable definition of the workings of the human mind:

Que sont, en somme, toutes ces images? Ce sont des imaginations: une imagination, si elle est assez vive, est toujours au présent. Les souvenirs que l'on "revoit," les régions lointaines, les rencontres à venir, ou même les épisodes passés que chacun arrange dans sa tête en modifiant le cours tout à loisir, il y a là comme un film intérieur qui se déroule continuellement en nous-mêmes, dès que nous cessons de prêter attention à ce qui se passe autour de nous. . . . Ainsi le film total de notre esprit admet à la fois tour à tour et au même titre les fragments réels proposés à l'instant par la vue et l'ouïe, et des fragments passés, ou lointains, ou futurs, ou totalement fantasmagoriques. (ibid.)

This formulation ignores the crucial distinction developed initially by Jean-Paul Sartre and subsequently by Maurice Merleau-Ponty between perception and imagination.⁴⁴ This is not a perceptual quibble: Robbe-Grillet's conceptualisation, if accepted, gives rise to a systematic misreading of the films. In the introduction to *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Robbe-Grillet also makes a very valid contrast between his practice and that of more traditionally minded filmmakers, but he underestimates the radical novelty of his own work by reference to a reality outside the work which it reproduces, namely "mental time":

On connaît ces intrigues linéaires du cinéma dit "de papa," où l'on ne nous fait grâce d'aucun maillon dans la succession des événements trop attendus. . . . Notre esprit, en réalité, va plus vite—ou plus lentement, d'autres fois. Sa démarche est plus variée, plus riche et moins rassurante: il saute des passages, il enregistre avec précision des éléments "sans importance," il se répète, il revient en arrière. Et ce temps mental est bien celui qui nous intéresse, avec ses étrangetés, ses trous, ses obsessions, ses régions obscures, puisqu'il est celui de nos passions, celui de notre vie.⁴⁵

In the terms he adopts for the presentation of his work, Robbe-Grillet falsifies his own preoccupations so as to bring his thinking in line with that of Alain Resnais. The true relationship of writer and director to be found beneath the self-fabricated myth of a perfect collaboration will be considered later. What needs to be noted here is the extent of Robbe-Grillet's willingness to distort the film (and even more his own script) by reference to this concept of mental realism. He goes so far as to take *Hiroshima mon amour* (scripted by Marguerite

Duras and directed by Resnais two years previously) as an example of what they were seeking in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*: "C'est cette espèce de réalisme mental que nous cherchons."⁴⁶ Instead of stressing the destruction of the categories of real and imaginary which is in fact accomplished in the text, he seeks to maintain that an undifferentiated mixture of real and imaginary somehow constitutes an advance towards a truer realism:

Toute la question est de savoir si l'incertitude qui s'attache aux images du film est exagérée par rapport à celle qui nous entoure dans la vie quotidienne, ou bien si elle est du même ordre. Pour moi j'ai l'impression que les choses se passent vraiment de cette façon-là. Il s'agit, entre ces personnages, d'une aventure passionnelle et ce sont justement, pour nous, les aventures qui contiennent la plus grande proportion de contradictions, de doutes, de phantasmes. *Marienbad* est une histoire assez opaque comme nous en vivons dans nos crises passionnelles, dans nos amours, dans toute notre vie affective. Par conséquent, reprocher au film de ne pas être clair, c'est reprocher aux passions humaines d'être toujours un peu opaques.⁴⁷

The same stress on subjectivity is to be found in the introduction to the *ciné-roman* of *L'Immortelle*,⁴⁸ but as we shall see, such an explanation is quite unable to account for the actual structural organisation of the film, though this has generally been treated by critics in accordance with the interpretation proposed by its maker. Even more surprising are some of Robbe-Grillet's comments at the time of the release of *L'Homme qui ment* in 1968:

On s'oriente de plus en plus vers un cinéma subjectif: l'époque du néo-réalisme est bien finie et les promoteurs de la Nouvelle Vague, fidèles naguère à un certain vérisme, en viennent eux-mêmes à une vue plus personnelle de la réalité ou de ce qui nous semble l'être.⁴⁹

If the subjective interpretation of Robbe-Grillet's work finds its most systematic expression in the work of Bruce Morrissette (who insists on studying the *ciné-romans* without reference to the films, as if they were novels in their own right), the effect is to be seen too in the work of Jean Alter, whose study of *La Vision du monde d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* appeared in 1966. Alter's work contains many excellent passages of analysis, though he too neglects the films in favour of the *ciné-romans*, and it marks a new step forward in the discussion of Robbe-Grillet's work.

Alter bases his study of the relationship between man and the universe in Robbe-Grillet's work on the tension between freedom and fatality. In *Les Gommages*, for example,

Robbe-Grillet maintient un certain équilibre artistique entre l'attention accordée aux effets de la liberté, c'est-à-dire au contenu fantasque des vingt-quatre heures en trop, et l'intérêt présenté par les formes sous lesquelles apparaît la fatalité,