In his famous articles on aphasia (Selected Writings II, The Hague 1971), Roman Jakobson notes that all systems of signification are based on the interaction of paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes—that is, on the horizontal contiguities of metonomy, and the vertical associations, in absentia, of metaphor. Jakobson further notes that realistic narrative literary language emphasises the contiguities of metonomy while poetic language operates through the association of similarities and differences of metaphor.

In an effort to extend his remarks beyond the realm of language, Jakobson also notes that the films of Chaplin exemplify the metaphoric while the films of Griffith exemplify the metonymic pole of film communication. Unfortunately, Jakobson does not explain in any detail why or how this is so. I would like to explicate Jakobson's very suggestive remarks in a comparison of two films by Alain Resnais. My purpose is not so much to categorise a work as metaphoric or metonymic but to see how these two poles are distributed and how they interact in different films. The two films, Hiroshima Mon Amour and L'Année Dernière à Marienbad, are of particular interest because of apparent similarities in their subjects and because both are directed by Resnais. Both films seem to be about a love affair between men and women who are pre-occupied, even obsessed, with certain events of the past. These are qualities that have become typical of Resnais' films. It would therefore be possible to speak of these two works in terms of the director's style as an auteur and how this style reflects his typical subjects. But instead, if we look at these two films in terms of the distribution of their discourse along the axes of metaphor and metonomy we may learn something new, not about Resnais' style but about the process of film écriture altogether.

The metaphoric or paradigmatic pole of communication operates, as Jakobson shows, by means of selection and substitution of
elements that are not actually given within the syntagm. Two minimal units must be given within the syntagm in order to establish metalinguistically a category that can contain both units.

_Hiroshima Mon Amour_, as the title indicates, is a film that is built on the conjunction of two very disparate and conflicting units: Hiroshima, the city of atomic destruction is equated with the ecstasy of love. Resnais and Duras bring together these conflicting units in order to allude metaphorically to a more general category or essence that contains partial elements of both.

The general purpose of the film's many contradictory equations between love and horror seems to be to create a broad, connotative level of meaning that speaks of the general nature of human contact — of both its pain and its ecstasy. As the film progresses, each time there is contact between the two lovers this contact recalls a former contact with the woman's dead lover and all the pain that that death had caused. As the contact between the lovers increases their relationship becomes more painful, not only with the memory of lost love but also with the projected loss of their present love.

The film moves rapidly between past and present, opposing a moment from the past to a moment from the present. The point of this opposition is to make us see that these violently disparate moments do have something in common, that the horror of the atomic bomb has something to do with the ecstasy of lovers, that a cold and dead German lover has something to do with a live and warm Japanese lover, that destruction has something to do with creation, and that memory has something to do with forgetting.

A brief look at one of the film's typical 'flashback' montages should explain how these metaphors are worked out in visual terms. From the balcony of her hotel room the French woman gazes at the sleeping figure of her Japanese lover. His hand twitches slightly, followed by a cut back to the woman on the balcony. There is a certain tension in her face. Suddenly there is another cut to a different male hand in a slightly different position and in an obviously different place. The camera rapidly moves from the hand up to the bloodied face of a man who seems to be dying. This cold, dying face is being kissed by a young woman.

The entire sequence is very fast and rather shocking. At this point in the film we do not yet know about the French woman's German lover killed by partisans in the last days of the war. The only obvious thing that relates the two elements of this montage, or syntagm, is the visual similarity between the two male hands. Denotatively we are presented with two reclining male figures, one restful and the other agonised. Connotatively we seek a reason, a systematic justification for linking these two elements. We find this link in the hands which can be related to a broad metaphoric system of touch that runs throughout the film. The shot of the Japanese hand signifies the tender, pleasurable aspect of touch.
The German hand signifies the pain of loss. In this case it is really the absence of touch that is signified. The juxtaposition of these two hands, one present and one past, forces us to form, metalinguistically, a transcendent category, of which these are the marked elements. This transcendent category speaks of the paradoxical nature of all human contact. It says that touch and absence of touch inhere in each other, that one constantly leads to the other, that present moments of closeness can never be held on to, and that the pain of absence cannot be either. Thus, the purpose of this metaphor is ultimately to undermine the given 'reality' or 'thereness' of the two elements of the syntagm. The predominance of these kinds of constructions in Hiroshima leads us to see that this is a film whose metonymies, or syntagma, are in a sense exploited by their systematic organisation. The contiguities of the syntagm are there only for the purpose of making a highly abstract statement about the essential nature of love.

Thus, in spite of the narrative character of this film, and in spite of what Christian Metz has described as the predominant syntagmatic character of all film communication, Hiroshima Mon Amour is a film that is based, at least connotatively, upon a very radical form of metaphoric systematisation.

Radically metonymic constructions, on the other hand, refuse to operate on the basis of systematic elements that can be abstracted from the given units of the syntagm. In a sense one could say that L'Année Dernière à Marienbad is about a man who is trying to establish an association between a present time and place and a past time and place, much as the woman in Hiroshima does. The film appears to be built upon a relation between past and present that will establish an eternal essence of a fated love that has existed '... pour toujours – dans un passé de marbre ...'. The striking thing about this film, however, is that the metaphor doesn't work. Each of X's attempts to convince A of their former relationship last year at Marienbad, Frederiksbad, or wherever, fails. The reality of these past times gives way to the reality of the present. Past and present are not really distinguishable.

What the film offers instead is a number of variations on a single theme: a man is trying to get a woman to go away with him. To do this he argues that they have loved in the past. But each of his arguments in which he tries to reconstruct this past, is really a version of their present relationship. The distance that is usually required between the two units of a metaphor is not provided in this film.

At the beginning of the film, for example, we hear X's voice as the camera tracks through the corridors and salons of a sombre, stately and somehow frozen hotel. His voice both describes the hotel and the basic elements of his past/present relation with A. But gradually this monologue is taken over by another voice. The camera has entered a salon in which a play is being presented and
it is now an actor who speaks X’s lines to an actress who ends the play with the line: ‘Je suis à vous’. Thus, in these first few minutes of the film, we are given all of the basic elements. What follows are variations. We cannot say that X and A, and the two actors who mirror them, are two halves of a metaphor. They are too much alike. We cannot construct, on the basis of similarities and differences, a connotative signified through which we can better understand the transcendent nature of relationships between men and women in general. We cannot even safely assume that this relationship is ‘about’ love. There is a good deal of evidence that it may be about death. But in either case the evidence is not conclusive.

Similarly, in another scene in which X and A gaze at a statue of a man and woman, the statue stubbornly holds on to its own individual existence. Although it is clear that the statue ‘stands’ in some way for X and A it is never established how or in what way. In speaking of the statue X and A provide several conflicting interpretations of its meaning – just as the film audience attempts to establish a systematic explanation of X and A themselves. In a sense, the statue is a metaphor for the refusal to be a metaphor, but such a statement reveals more about the metalinguistic habits of criticism than it does about the work itself. The important point is that we do not have the information to go beyond the literal, metonymic elements given in the film, we cannot determine where the woman in the statue is pointing. All the metaphors remain potential.

Does this mean, then, that Marienbad operates purely on the syntagmatic axis without the aid of a connotative system? Robbe-Grillet himself seems to think that this is the case; that film is the one medium that can push metonymy to its extreme limits. In the essay ‘A Future for the Novel’ (in For a New Novel, New York 1965, pp 20-21), Robbe-Grillet calls for novels that will imitate this essential metonymy of the film medium:

‘... in the cinema one sees the chair, the movement of the hand, the shape of the bars. What they signify remains obvious, but instead of monopolising our attention, it becomes something added, even something in excess, because what affects us, what persists in our memory, what appears as essential and irreducible to vague intellectual concepts are the gestures themselves, the objects, the movements, and the outlines, to which the image has suddenly (and unintentionally) restored their reality. ... Let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical.’

This however, is the ‘early’ Robbe-Grillet speaking – the Robbe-
Grillet whom Roland Barthes observed to have placed a naive aesthetic belief in a *Dasein* of things antecedent and exterior to the signs that constitute them. Robbe-Grillet’s theory, as Gérard Genette has noted (*Figures I*, Paris 1966) is not the same as his practice. Genette observes that there is in fact a connotative and systematic level in all of Robbe-Grillet’s works although it is not the closed, coherent system described by Bruce Morissette. What Genette observes instead is a system of variations. Each variation constitutes a slightly incompatible change in relation to its surroundings. We never know, for example, whether M shoots A or simply bids her a melancholy farewell. We never know whether X rapes A or seduces her in that bedroom whose decor is constantly changing, for all these possibilities are given.

Yet, in spite of all this uncertainty, various systematic explanations do arise in quite negative and provisional ways that are not meant to be coherent or complete. Genette’s point is that Robbe-Grillet has placed the paradigmatic terms that are usually only constructed by a critical metalanguage within the contiguous series of the syntagm. Instead of placing the paradigms vertically, Genette claims that Robbe-Grillet places them horizontally in the discourse itself, *in praesentia*. In this way we can see *Marienbad* as offering a *kind* of metaphoric configuration, but one that does not undercut the denotative presence of the syntagm. By offering conflicting and only partial metaphors, Robbe-Grillet avoids the abstract essentialism that we have observed in *Hiroshima*. *Marienbad* is not ‘about’ the nature of love, it is about these two people in this present time and place. If we choose to see X as a figure of death that has come to take A away with him this abstract explanation can only be partial, it is challenged by other elements of the film.

Genette’s argument shows that the systematic axis of the film has not disappeared altogether. While in *Hiroshima* the syntagm exists in order to be observed by the system, so in *Marienbad* the systems exist in order to thrust us back upon the syntagma. The radical metonymy of a film like *Marienbad* is one way of breaking down the essentialism so endemic to metaphoric constructions. When the systematic axis is present but not coherent, when it does not lead us back to some essential nature or order of things presumably given in the world, we are reminded that what we are dealing with is not the reality of the world, the *Dasein* of things, but the humanly constructed reality of the work itself. There is a paradox here: the metaphoric constructions of *Hiroshima* which use the denotative syntagm in order to express abstract, systematic notions that are artificially created, have the ultimate aim of referring back to the world, of rhetorically saying that *this* is how it is in reality; while the metonymic constructions of *Marienbad*, which use partial and contradictory systems that are contained within the given reality of the syntagma, have the ultimate aim of referring us back to the work rather than the world. Thus, the
apparent radical realism of metonymy (or at least Robbe-Grillet's brand of it) leads us back into the artifice of the work, while the artifice of metaphor leads us back to the 'reality' of the world.

But whichever way the work points, we come back to the notion that even the most metonymic use of film must operate on the double axis of syntagm and system, metaphor and metonymy. The realism of metonymy, even in film, is not the realism of the world. Film is neither the purely metonymic language that Bazin would have liked it to be, nor is it even the predominantly metonymic language that Christian Metz would like it to be. It is a language that creates its meanings through structural principles that are similar in all forms of communication. Just as the aphasic must compensate for a disorder in contiguity or similarity by relying more heavily on the opposite pole, so Resnais has relied first on metaphor then on metonymy as his predominate means of expression in these two films. But as we have seen, neither of these poles can operate in total isolation from its opposite.

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