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# **Nature versus architecture: navigating the threshold in Alain Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* and Jessica Hausner's *Hotel***

**By Hannah Mowat**

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on three films featuring traditional-style hotels that back on to natural surroundings: Alain Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) <sup>1</sup>, [ Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) <sup>2</sup>, and Jessica Hausner's *Hotel* (2004).

Although approaches to these films, particularly *Marienbad*, have tended to focus on questions of temporality, my interest here is spatial. I shall examine the relationship between built interior and natural exterior through the thresholds that link and separate them. I shall look at the ways in which the hotel compound depends on an appropriation of the exterior that raises the issue of rightful ownership and establishes a tension between nature and architecture. This I shall tie to Jacques Derrida's work on the threshold in the context of hospitality in order to posit their doorways as fluid portals across which hostile relationships between the natural and built environments are enacted. I shall extend his interpretation of the host-guest relationship by applying it beyond the purely social context to the spaces of architecture and nature. Through close analysis of selected scenes, I shall explore the potential - and limitations - of the hospitality approach to assess how architecture and nature might navigate the threshold in each case to lay claim to the status of host. On identifying its limitations, I shall raise the validity of applying an alternative concept of threshold space deriving from Michel Foucault, in which he posits the mirror as an interface that simultaneously embodies real and virtual spaces.

## **The hospitality paradigm**

As part of the hospitality industry, the hotel has at base a clear contractual relation: what Derrida (drawing on Kant) has termed conditional hospitality (2000: 4). For an agreed fee, guests receive a "restricted right of temporary sojourn" (Friese, 2009: 58). Yet the concept of hospitality is fraught with ambiguity. Etymologically, the term is linked to hostility and the hostage. Moreover, in the original French, Derrida's division between host and guest is blurred by the fact that the same

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word, *hôte*, is used for both. A conflict thus underpins the concept; one that Derrida acknowledges by describing it in terms of the threshold. The host accords the guest a “*right of asylum* by authorizing him to cross a threshold [...] the line of which can be traced” (2000: 6). Yet at the same time, “if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality. [...] Hospitality thus becomes the threshold or the door” (ibid.: 14). Consequently, “the question of limits is never far from the scene” (Dikeç, Clark and Barnett, 2009: 5).

Derrida’s hospitality is profoundly embedded in social relationships played out in specific locations, whereby guests and hosts are either individuals, communities or state structures. However, the juxtaposition in these films of the natural and built environments suggests that we may be dealing with a different kind of host-guest dynamic: that of nature versus architecture. At base, the hotel precinct – like the stately home and gardens before it – is underpinned by an aggressive appropriation of natural space (Williams, 1973: 106) that pits the human concept of land ownership and entitlement (Morgan, 2009: 113) against the fluid, ungraspable force of rurality (Murdoch and Pratt, 1997: 58).

There is a powerful sense in the stern, vertical lines that govern the outdoors in these films that the exterior – and its history – have been forcibly appropriated and shaped in order to provide commercialised leisure. In *Marienbad*, the amalgam of Baroque exteriors (drafted in from a variety of palaces around Munich) offers an image of nature that has been trimmed and channelled in the services of “pure convention”, in the words of M (Sacha Pitoëff), rather than those of historical accuracy (Fig. 1) <sup>3</sup>.



Figure 1

*The Shining*’s Overlook Hotel, filled with photographic reminders of its illustrious past, features a similarly sculpted hedge maze that echoes the labyrinthine interior of the hotel (Fig. 2). There is a strong intimation that the appropriation of the site – formerly an Indian burial ground – was

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itself an act of violence.



Figure 2

*Hotel's* neighbouring wood with its legend-laden cave, meanwhile, has written the rural exterior into its own history; its tourist literature capitalises on its myths (the woodland witch, the mysterious disappearance of a group of hikers in 1962). The institution even derives its name, *Waldhaus*, from the forest, which dominates its rear façade (Fig. 3).



Figure 3

I would therefore like to raise the possibility that these films engage with a broader application of the hospitality paradigm, whereby the threshold is not one of a conditional relationship between people, but of uneasy tolerance between forces: an interface between two opposing hosts (the

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primal force of nature and the rigid force of architecture), and two opposing guests (verdant settings forcibly subsumed into the hotel environs and the built structure whose continued presence depends on the cooperation of the natural environment). To explore this, I shall look more closely at the thresholds featured in these films in order to illustrate how each can be viewed as the axis across which a battle between nature and architecture is fought.

### **Threatening thresholds**

*Marienbad*'s central threshold is the window in A's (Delphine Seyrig) room that, we are told, offers access to the garden (Fig. 4).



Figure 4

However, we never actually witness her accessing the exterior through it; indeed, at one point, X (Giorgio Albertazzi) suggests it may be jammed. The dangers of passing through a door to be exposed to the “other side” are nonetheless illustrated when A exits the ground-floor lounge and steps onto the balcony, only to be almost blinded by natural light, blending into the wall in an overexposed blur of white (Fig. 5). Here, exposure leads to over-exposure and the loss of the clear contours of the body.



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Figure 5

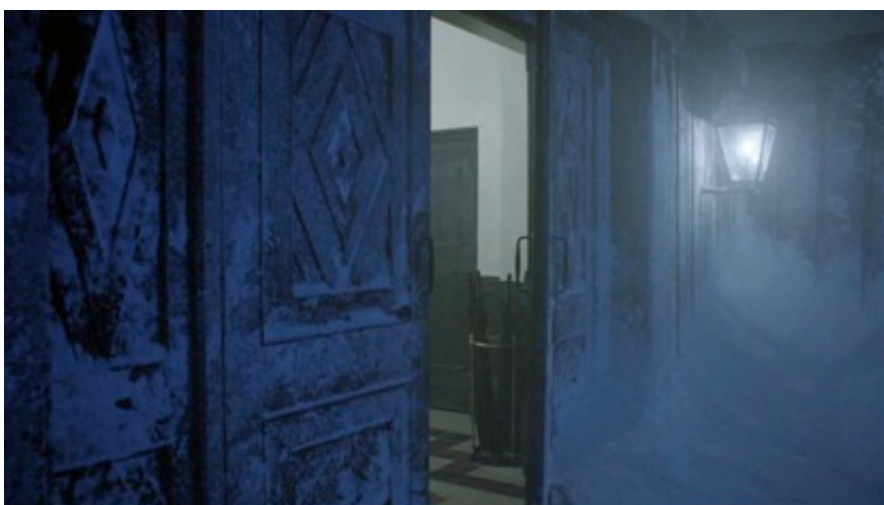
Significantly, the only other site of overexposure in the film is A's bedroom - the receptacle for the window threshold (Fig. 6).



Figure 6

The window is thus an ambivalent access point: it is functional in principle, but unreliable in practice, and proximity to it has the potential to blind and obliterate.

In *The Shining*, meanwhile, double doors offer an escape route to the exterior. They also allow Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers) to enter the hotel to help Danny (Danny Lloyd) and Wendy (Shelley Duvall). However, they are simultaneously a breach in the architectural fabric that leads almost directly to the treacherous maze, and one that lets the outside in. Furthermore, it is perennially unclear who - or what - is able to open them. As Hallorann approaches, they stand ajar, as if anticipating his arrival (Fig. 7).





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Figure 7

We witness the difficulty that this powerfully-built man experiences in opening the doors any further, impeded by snowdrifts. Yet when it comes to the final chase, as Jack (Jack Nicholson) pursues his son, they stand wide open to facilitate Jack's passage (Fig. 8).



Figure 8

As the only person who has preceded him is Danny - a slip of a boy - we are left with the impression that if there is no "someone" who can have forced them open, it must have been a "something".

Hausner's *Hotel* has a similarly eerie set of double doors leading from the basement to the neck of the woods (Fig. 9).



Figure 9

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When receptionist Irene (Franziska Weisz) is initiated into her duties, the manager emphasises that she must keep them locked at all times, as “the devil never sleeps”. She ignores him, leaving them open on three occasions when she slips out for a cigarette (Fig. 10)<sup>4</sup>. On the first occasion, nothing happens; the doors behind her remain reassuringly ajar. On the second, she turns to find that the doors have inexplicably swung shut but can still be opened. On the third, however, she finds them not only closed but locked against her.



Figure 10

These are ambivalent thresholds indeed. It is this idea of the fluid, unsettling delimitation that I should like to consider here as a means of exploring whether the relationship between nature and architecture may always be one of competition - and of hostility and hostage-taking - whereby both vie to occupy the position of host. I shall look here at the surfaces, both natural and constructed, in each of these films to examine how they act as a portal between inside and out, and how they are the source of a number of uncanny (dis)appearances.

### **Absorbent surfaces: uncanny (dis)appearances**

#### *The Shining*

Jeff Smith has described *The Shining* beautifully as a “disarrangement of surfaces” (1981: 64). I should like to focus here on the surfaces of the maze to the rear of the Overlook. From the outset, the towering hedge walls exude a leafy menace. Undaunted, Danny and Wendy head off to explore them (Fig. 11). The camera pans to the right: an ambiguous motion, as in doing so it reveals a maze map that indicates that its structure is relatively easy to navigate, but which simultaneously blocks

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the entrance. The camera cuts to Danny and Wendy. Suddenly, they are interrupted by one of the slow, mobile dissolves that permeate the film and establish a symbiosis between exterior and interior. We find ourselves following Jack across the hotel lobby.



Figure 11

Jack stops in front of a maze model that is an exact replica of the one outside (Fig. 12). A cut emphasises his god's-eye view. This only serves to underscore the incongruity of the next shot, which requires us to reorient ourselves on two planes, vertical and horizontal. We find ourselves looking straight down on the model from an entirely different angle. Moreover, the maze has expanded in size and complexity, with a series of potentially endless passages on the peripheries that extend beyond the limits of the frame and thus our visual field. As the camera zooms in, we see two tiny figures - Danny and Wendy - moving in what we had assumed to be the model. Not only are they trapped in the maze, it seems, they are doubly trapped, as the maze itself is contained within the hotel. Moreover, the shift from assuming that Jack's view is all-encompassing to an overhead vantage point that indicates a still-higher force at work that is invisible to him (and us) is extremely unsettling. From believing that the labyrinth is the domain of the outdoors, we are forced to consider that the omniscient viewpoint has shifted to the interior, and that the controlling force is the hotel itself.



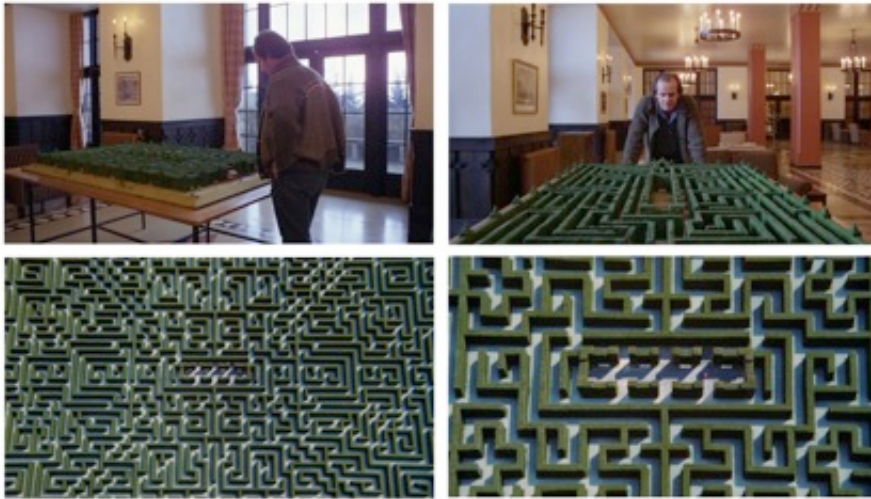


Figure 12

The degree to which the hotel has co-opted this structure is again visible in its tortuous corridor structure, which is uncannily reminiscent of the twists and turns of the outdoor maze, compounded by the garish carpeting favoured by Kubrick throughout. In the scene in which Danny is lured into Room 237, these parallels are taken to the extreme (Fig. 13). We see Danny in close-up playing with his toy cars. In a reversal of the maze-model sequence, the camera gradually zooms out to reveal the boy at the centre of a geometric, maze-like pattern. A ball rolls down one of the lines on the carpet, coming to a halt just in front of him. The camera cuts to display the empty, tapering corridor.



Figure 13

In a shot/reverse-shot sequence, we accompany Danny to find the source of the mysterious ball, ending outside Room 237. All we can glimpse

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through the door is a closet clad in full-length mirrors. The scene that we had hoped might provide insight has ended with a surface that can only reflect our gaze back on itself.

However, it is the final sequence that reveals the absolute dominance of the hotel structure over the natural exterior. Danny rushes into the maze with his father in hot pursuit. He survives; Jack, meanwhile, is done for. Visibly weakening, Jack collapses against a hedge wall (Fig. 14). As day breaks, we see his frozen body, still in the maze. The camera switches to the interior, slowly approaching a set of old photographs lining the corridor outside the Gold Room. Their pattern recalls the maze model. As we hone in on a single figure in one of the photographs, dated 4th July, 1921, we realise it is Jack. His death in the maze has resulted in his complete absorption into the hotel's history - through the hedge-lined exterior and onto the plastered walls of the interior. The final dissolve to an extreme close-up of Jack's face offers further confirmation of this ultimate assimilation.



Figure 14

In *The Shining*, therefore, it is the hotel as host that co-opts the surfaces of nature as a means of incorporating the “guest” - and it does so to embellish its own past, literally sucking its residents into the photographs that document its history. Architecture here has mastered nature.

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## Hotel

In *Hotel*, we swiftly realise that interior surfaces are less solid than they seem. It is a film replete with images of disappearances as we see Irene – shot predominantly from behind – repeatedly subsumed into darkness (Fig. 15). Indeed, the film’s final image shows her, locked out of the hotel, being swallowed up by the forest.



Figure 15

Absorbency, however, is not a noted feature of functional architectural structures, valued for their impermeability. Yet in *Hotel*, it becomes increasingly apparent that anything physically located within the hotel is susceptible to being swallowed up by the structural fabric and “regurgitated” in the surrounding woods. Where we expect to come up against solid brickwork, we find instead a softness and penetrability more in keeping with foliage. Unlike *The Shining*, however, the exterior appears to be the dominant force. I would like to look here at two examples of seemingly literal interior absorption and external regurgitation. The first of these involves Irene’s “lucky charm”, her necklace. Before taking a swim, she places it carefully on a shelf in the changing cubicle. When she returns, it has vanished (Fig. 16).



Figure 16

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It is only a few days later that the manageress announces that the necklace has been found - in the woods. The suggestion is that the interior acts as a conduit to the exterior. Foliage and brickwork have literally swapped surface characteristics, opening up a penetrability within the interior while positing the exterior not only as threatening, but potentially also as in control. Nature, it seems, may be capable of commanding and ensnaring the features of the interior.

This gives rise to what must be the most astonishing sequence in a film that otherwise plays out a tale of understated paranoia. Irene finds herself alone in one of the hotel corridors (Fig. 17). She looks to one side and the camera cuts to her from behind, receding into the darkness at the end of the corridor. But then we shift unexpectedly back to her, still in the corridor, apparently *watching herself* walk away. The "second Irene" follows in the footsteps of the first. The camera breaks the 180-degree rule repeatedly as we witness her progress into complete darkness, creating a proliferation of Irenes, each looking at another embodiment of herself outside our visual range. A change in the quality of the diegetic sound suggests that she has moved to the woods; moments later, trees emerge from the darkness. Irene again looks to her right, mirroring the gaze that initiated the sequence. A further 180-degree cut shows her from behind. Suddenly, a mysterious, faceless "third person" enters the scene as the camera rushes towards her. Irene turns and screams in terror.



Figure 17

It is feasible to argue, of course, that we are witnessing a dream sequence. Yet the subsequent scene shows us Irene settling down in a common-room armchair and falling asleep. If anything, then, the previous sequence predates any dream that Irene might have. Ultimately, our overriding impression is that the corridors of the hotel are inextricably linked to the exterior, that the exterior is capable of transporting its objects outdoors at will, and that it is only a matter of time before the forest will absorb Irene entirely, as it may well have done her predecessor, Eve, whose unexplained disappearance is still under investigation.

Hence, *Hotel* offers us a study in liminality that is the precise opposite of the one explored in *The Shining*. Whereas Kubrick's Overlook Hotel swallows up its residents, in Hausner's film, it is the exterior that invades and transforms the surfaces of the interior into a shadowy portal between indoors and outdoors. Here, the forest is the host, and the built environment very much in its thrall.



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## *Marienbad*

With its hypnotic narrative of repetition and disjunction, its endless corridors and insistent organ soundtrack, *Marienbad* is a profoundly unsettling filmic experience. I should like to focus here on A's bedroom as an interior marked by external intrusions that is also a recurring site in which X and A's competing versions of the previous year's events play out. From the outset, it exudes a mystery all of its own, glimpsed in flashback as a dazzlingly white space decorated with a delicate pattern of foliage, full of light yet sparsely furnished (Fig. 18).



Figure 18

Over time, the furniture multiplies strangely (Fig. 19).



Figure 19

As X embellishes and imposes his story – apparently one of sexual conquest – the stucco foliage becomes visibly denser and more suffocating as natural light is blocked out (Fig. 20).



Figure 20

There is a suggestion here that there has been a return to nature, albeit a highly stylised and peculiarly unnatural one. Even A is ultimately forced into a costume parody of the natural, her feathered negligée transforming her into “part animal, part languishing fetish” (Wilson, 2006: 79). We seem to be witnessing a double battle between the “civilised” interior and the parasitic exterior: the attempt to subjugate the woman by cloaking her in appropriated nature that also serves to allow nature to enter the inner scene and slowly but surely take it over. Superficially, therefore, we might argue that, as in *Hotel*, nature is imposing its mark by evolving within the architectural space and taking over its contents, setting itself up as what initially appears to be a willing guest, only to reveal itself as a parasite.

However, there is a major difference between *Marienbad* and the other films treated here. Whereas we assume that the spaces in *The Shining* and *Hotel* are real, in *Marienbad*, the struggle for control centres on a virtual domain: the mind. This greatly problematises any attempt to position the film in terms of an encounter between architecture and the natural world, for nothing here can be deemed natural. The changes in furnishings are prompted by embellishments to the spoken narrative, whose hypnotic quality, in turn, attempts to overwrite the subconscious. Hence, at root, *Marienbad* is a story of the battle to control a shared memory rather than physical space. It is consequently difficult to justify applying even an extended version of the Derridean host-guest relation. Although hospitality is premised on social contracts that are as such intangible (cultural mores, laws, religious precepts, a sense of responsibility, etc.), the very fact that they *are* social means that they centre on the precise location of the human subject within the social structure. *Marienbad*'s pervading virtuality, however, means that non-locational interiority dictates the filmic narrative throughout, whereby the concept of the exterior and integrity of the architectural structure are both equally unreliable and, ultimately, irrelevant.

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*Marienbad* is thus a film that never shifts beyond the liminality of the threshold. I would like to suggest here that there is an approach other than that of the hospitality paradigm that enables us to analyse it more effectively. I turn here to Foucault's essay, *Of Other Spaces*, whose central premise is the definition of an *alternative* to social and state contractuality: states outside the norm, spaces of exception. He refers briefly to utopias - "sites with no real place" (1986: 24) - before moving on to discuss at length the spaces he calls heterotopias of deviation, defined as "outside of all places" (ibid.), subject to a constant "system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (ibid.: 26). The rooms and gardens in *Marienbad* fit both categories: as "no real place", they are utopian, yet, as Foucault expressly notes, both gardens and historical hotels (as archival and commercialised institutions) are heterotopian. What interests me in particular is Foucault's explicit reference to a further and enduringly liminal "other" that similarly combines these two forms of space, namely the mirror that acts as a further threshold, but one that links virtual and real. As a site of virtual space, the mirror is classified as a utopia; however, its physical reality as a tangible object also qualifies it as a heterotopia (ibid.: 24). Hence, this mirror transforms the space occupied by the beholder, making it both "absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (ibid.). Positioning the threshold as a semi-real, semi-virtual "mirror" that acts as an axis between two heterotopias of deviation that are dependent on processes of "opening and closing" seems a promising approach to a film in which both nature and architecture are secondary to the endeavour to craft a shared memory.

I should like to look briefly at the mirrors that feature in *Marienbad*. The very first of these are introduced in the opening sequence that takes us through a collage of rooms and corridors, multiplied almost to infinity by the narrator's monologue (Fig. 21). They are adorned with stucco foliage and reflect still more leafy plaster motifs in the interior. These palimpsests of greenery introduce layer upon layer of natural elements that have been transplanted and translated to the civilised interior.



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Figure 21

Yet mirrors are ultimately deceptive. We see X listening intently to a conversation that we assume is being held by two hotel residents captured in the mirror by his head (Fig. 22).



Figure 22

Shortly afterwards, however, we discover that the dialogue is being carried out by another couple altogether. Mirrors, it seems, do not always reflect our expectations.

During the exchanges between X and A as they struggle for control of the narrative, A describes the mirror in her room in a sudden exuberance of detail (Fig. 23). It appears, containing a proliferation of self-images as we see A - and multiple reflections of her in yet another mirror - reproduced in its surface.



Figure 23

X immediately intervenes to deny that such a feature ever existed, describing a painting of a snowbound landscape in its place, which then literally supplants the mirror (Fig. 24). The mirror image is suddenly

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revealed to us as artifice as A's multiple selves are overwritten by a historical representation that has little to do with either A or her Baroque surroundings.



Figure 24

*Marienbad* thus offers us a threshold that remains eternally uncrossed and that appears to contain traces of its architectural and natural settings without ever confirming the reality or supremacy of either. Its non-contiguous, unsubstantiated virtual spaces fall outside the logic of continuity editing or topographical coherence. They are never anything more than reflections and virtual projections. The threshold in *Marienbad* is hence not a portal; it is only ever a mirror, a space of exception that precludes hospitality.

## Conclusion

I would like to end by reassessing the expanded interpretation of Derridean hospitality that I put forward as a means of exploring the tensions between natural and built environments mediated by a physical threshold. As my analysis suggests, this approach offers rich readings of films in which these environments are clearly (and contractually) delineated and posited as real. *The Shining* offers a compelling portrayal of a pre-eminent hotel space bending the forces of nature to its will via the threshold. In *Hotel*, meanwhile, the supremacy of the natural setting imposes itself by absorbing the interior through the architectural fabric of the *Waldhaus*. However, in *Marienbad*, the pervading virtuality of the space and the actions that take place within it indicate that we are witnessing a different battle - not one between nature and architecture centred on navigating the threshold to gain the status of "host", but one to shape a shared memory. A contract of hospitality is thus still in the process of being drawn up. Consequently, the threshold can never be anything more than a threshold, a mirror that captures intangible pasts and unsubstantiated spaces. My suggestion here is that it cannot be theorised in the framework of the social and contractual relations that



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underpin the hospitality approach. Instead, it must be explored through a concept such as Foucault's framework of the mirror that favours "other space" and allows for spaces of exception.

I started by positing my approach as spatial; as a potential avenue for further research, I would like to suggest how this paper might be extended by reintroducing the temporal – specifically with regard to history and collective memory. I have indicated how the spaces in each film can be viewed as a forcible appropriation of history: *The Shining* offers an indexical trace of the past in the form of its photographic archive; *Hotel* presents us with tourist literature that enables its residents to retrace the myths and mysteries of the neighbouring woods; *Marienbad* sets up a narrative battle whose aim is to situate and specify the events of the previous year. While the first two films absorb their inhabitants to supplement their archives, the latter offers a meditation on the actual – and artificial – process of creating a shared memory. As such, all three can be posited as meditations on collective memory. I would like to suggest that they explore our assumption that memory is a place – an indexical recollection that we can call upon to access and re-enact specific moments of time past. We assume also that our institutions – museums, archives, historical places, even our traditional hotels – are memory palaces that encapsulate these concrete moments so that we can visit them by paying the requisite "entry fee". But what if the memory has no true basis in the past, is merely a figment of our present desire – or indeed, someone else's? These seem to be the questions underpinning all three films. Where they overlap entirely is in their agreement that both the habitation and the creation of this memory site is a perilous process. Perhaps the site of collective memory is in fact the musealised "space" in which both the hospitality paradigm and Foucault's alternative spaces can take up residence. As the ultimate "host", it takes its inhabitants hostage; and as the mirror that simultaneously occupies real and virtual space, it has the power to inhabit – and take over – not only the body, but also the mind. And perhaps these films can thus be viewed not only in terms of the threshold battle between architecture and nature, but also as essays on the dangers of the attempted or enacted musealisation of memory <sup>5</sup>.

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## **Filmography**

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Notes:

1. Abbreviated to *Marienbad* throughout. ↵
2. The 142-minute US release. ↵

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3. All screenshots have been captured from the DVDs of the films cited in the filmography. ↵
  4. Multiple screenshots are read row by row, from left to right. ↵
  5. The implications of the manipulation of collective memory in Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* are explored in a chapter by Hannah Mowat with Emma Wilson, appearing in: Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams (eds), *Representing Auschwitz: The Boundaries of Holocaust Testimony* (Palgrave, forthcoming). ↵