THE KRAKEN WAKES

Wild Grass (Alain Resnais)
Around a Small Mountain (Jacques Rivette)

At one point in Wild Grass, the protagonist Georges is typing at his desk late at night. As Mark Snow’s wistful music plays, the camera commences a slow tour of the room, encompassing a picture, a lamp, bookshelves, and an African mask on the shadowy wall. When it reaches the heavily draped window, though, we realize that time has been compressed; suddenly it is morning outside. His wife enters and greets Georges fondly. It is such a graceful shot. It could belong to a cohesive and humane film in which art (personified by the eager typist) masters space, condenses time, and rejoices in the unity of a loving couple. But Wild Grass is not that film. Consider, just for a start, the unseen narrator’s commentary on the scene (adapted from Christian Gailly’s novel, L’Incident), which describes a disordered and suggestible mind: “He kept writing about what he believed his life to be. He ended up believing it. No, he believed it. He wrote it, so he believed it.” Notice too the simple fact that the camera spends as much time on objects as characters. Starting with its title, Wild Grass subverts anthropocentrism. The film opens with a series of oddly impersonal images: vegetation, the back of a woman’s spiky hairdo, designer shoes, a stolen handbag swinging from an invisible thief’s hand. The mobile viewpoint for some of these initial shots is only slightly above the ground. No person is watching down there. The camera seems to occupy the position of a scurrying creature—its creepy gaze is bestial.

It is a reminder that Resnais is scornful of humanity elsewhere. In My American Uncle, characters are equated with rats in electrified boxes being conditioned by a pompous scientist. The theme of coercion is reinforced by a series of movie-clip match cuts, the archival action seeming to hypnotically dominate Resnais’s characters much as pop songs possess the actors in his Dennis Potter tribute, Same Old Song: people are represented as puppets or ventriloquist’s dummies, mindless playthings reflexively obeying commands. He revisits the caged-animal idea more obliquely in Private Fears in Public Places. A scene in which a realtor shows someone around a property is filmed from above so that the dividing walls resemble lab containers; partitions and screens appear in other rooms as well.

People are like electroshocked vermin in a medical research project. Though this implication is disturbingly dehumanizing, it still assumes a detached observing intelligence and Resnais mocks this epistemology. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit rightly state in Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais (Harvard University Press) that My American Uncle “ruthlessly reduces theoretical discourse itself to one of its own cinematic fictions.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in the scenes of grotesque comedy in which, far from being separated in an empiricist hierarchy, human and animal actually combine. Characters sprout rodent heads. These invading chimeras from myth or science fiction are not scientifically knowable, unless by scientists who have themselves grown mutant eyes. There is another incursion in Same Old Song. During the culminating cocktail party, translucent jellyfish float across the screen as if this designer residence were submerged in a black lagoon. An even more uncanny sight follows: shocked to learn that the apartment will soon be overlooked by a new building, the hostess howls in indignation and as she does so the disgusting limbs of an octopus are superimposed on her face so that she is for an instant a slimy and demented Medusa. This is the frightful hybrid face of Resnais’s inhuman imaginings.

There are no such beasts in Wild Grass; instead it is the cinematography itself—failing, soaring, scuttling, cavorting, assaulting—that is monstrous. Take two of the most unexpected shots. Toward the end, Georges looks to his left, where we know the object of his parsimonious desire is sitting. The camera whirls round until it reaches her face, which is spotlit in close-up. What occurs next is incredible: she recoils, jolted. The camera has slapped her! Any account of this crazy shot will have to be strange, so I hesitate only for a moment before suggesting that it is as though a giant octopoid tentacle had gained control of the camera before lashing out at poor Marguerite. Shortly after, something just as eerie and hostile occurs. For the second time Georges is seen with his eyes shut, moving backward in the direction of a cinema entrance. Perhaps he is in a cinephile trance, being transported blissfully into the uterine auditorium. He is not tumbling, however, and he is not using his own limbs either. What is happening to him, then? Faced with the extreme peculiarity of the effect, it makes as much sense as anything else to claim that an oozing prodigy, having paralyzed Georges with its poisonous suckers, is showing him into its lair. Unless its mon-
strosity is acknowledged—a monstrosity evoked for the last time by the mysterious little girl at the end of the apocalyptic and absurdist coda to Wild Grass—Alain Resnais’s marvelous film will be unfathomable.

Both Wild Grass and Jacques Rivette’s Around a Small Mountain follow mercurial middle-aged love affairs. But whereas Resnais depicts a perverse charade, Rivette presents a secular parable in which people carefully invent a healing ceremony. Jane Birkin plays a performer who returns from exile to her family’s tiny country circus. Fifteen years earlier she was banished because of her involvement in a fatal accident. She is haunted by the memory. “It’s unbearable,” she says. “It’s too hard.” By chance she meets a wandering Italian whom she charms. He starts to delve into her past and finally hatches a plan to lift the burden from her by administering (as he puts it) a shock. “You hurt me,” she says of his questioning, but despite the language this is a warm and tender film. Its signature technique is the lateral establishing shot: the camera travels slowly a couple of meters along a track or executes a semi-circular pan. Asserting no great mastery of time and space, never completing a circle, Around a Small Mountain’s camera does not pounce or rise to dizzying heights. Its motion is more restricted, benign, and affectionate—the movement of a host welcoming friends with a gesture or of a compère who flourishes an arm while bowing to the audience. Some may find Around a Small Mountain stilted; I found it a lovely, poignant fable about reconciliation, powerful enough to subdue demons and monsters.

Rob White