Realism Is Existential

By CHRIS KELLER

"The modern author creates." Thus did Alain Robbe-Grillet sum up the role of the contemporary novelist. Sponsored jointly by the Rice French Department and L'Alliance Francaise of Houston, Monsieur Robbe-Grillet addressed his audience Tuesday night on the subject "Realism in the New Novel."

As the author of several books and the script and dialogues of the film "Last Year at Marienbad," M. Robbe-Grillet qualifies as one of the leaders in current literary trends. He denies, however, the role of theoretician for the Nouveau Roman school.

Novelists' Work

Rather, he says, it is part of the work of all novelists to reflect on their art and try to correct misunderstandings about their work.

There are two ways of approaching authorship according to the writer. The contemporary realist considers action, psychological or physical, as the important element, while the formalist subordinates plot to form. It is through his style that the action becomes manifest.

For example, Balzac was interested in using a form or style which would shock his readers. His works exemplify the point of view of the omniscient narrator whom, in the given situation, one might equate with God as an omniscient force.

M. Robbe-Grillet said that in the New Novel one no longer finds the omniscient narrator. Nor does one find objective realism. Objective may be defined as neutral, impartial, without passion. But this has given way to subjective realism wherein an ordinary man, subject to the limitations of humanity, is the narrator.

For the subjective realist, things and events exist only insofar as the individual is in immediate contact with them. Robbe-Grillet used as an example the description of a harbor. The objective realist describes the harbor; it has existence apart from the narrator.

The subjective realist creates the harbor; it does not exist prior to the narrator's encounter with it, nor will it exist beyond his immediate exposure to it.

Instant In Time

This approach lead the author to another observation concerning the realist in the subjective school. The present is not a transitional period between the past and the future. The concepts past and future have no validity. Only the present is real and valid at that instant in time.

It is with this consideration that one must view "Last Year at Marienbad." Its realism is valid only for the two hours of it presentation. Similarly, the characters are valid only in their present situation and as they create a past for themselves, but not as they recall a past.

Finally, then, the realism of the new novel is that of existentialism. It is in this way that the modern author creates.