PLACE, MEMORY AND HISTORY:

CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

IN

ALAIN RESNAISÔAND MARGUERITE DURASÔ

HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR

BY

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DIPLOMA IN ART AND DESIGN

NCAD
One can only speak about the impossibility of speaking about HIROSHIMA. The knowledge of HIROSHIMA being, at the outset, presented as an exemplary delusion of the mind.

(Duras, 1961)
Human identity may be thought of as an accumulation of time and memory, as a matrix constituted by time as experience on one axis and by memory as experience on the other. Identity in a postmodern world relies heavily on the use of memory, particularly prosthetic memory. Film representing itself, a form of such prosthetic memory, contributes significantly to our shifting perspective of reality and human identity. Alain Resnais' and Marguerite Duras' film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* can be read as an important early example of a film that, predating the postmodern memory boom, challenges the reliability of historical discourses and instead privileges subjective remembrance, depicting the ways in which both individual subjectivity and cultural identity are continually and performatively constructed and reconstructed through memory.

If, as poststructuralist theory supposes, reality is a mere reflection of language, then language, in its conventional linguistic sense, has many implications for our understanding of cinema and how identities, both individual and cultural are constructed within it. French filmmakers were the first to postulate the notion of filmmaking as a sort of writing. Alexandre Astruc's notion of film as "La Caméra-Stylo" (The Camera Pen) (Astruc, 1948), was to serve as a declaration for what would become a "New Wave" in French film. This notion became crucial in the formation of auteur theory consisting, as André Bazin put it, "of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference" (Bazin, 1985). In *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais, these notions of the personal and ethical implications of memory, identity, mourning and testimony are investigated in relation to the filmic representation of trauma and loss.

The project began when Resnais was asked to make a documentary on Hiroshima twelve years following its atomic bombing. After several months of filming he abandoned the documentary genre, the devastation of Hiroshima not only defying understanding but also exceeding the limits of filmic representation. In imply a "truthful" and unmediated representation of the past the documentary style seemed in excess of what could be relayed through film. Resnais instead chose to create a fictional narrative incorporating partial memories of the bombing while focusing upon a more personal experience of trauma. The film included his documentary footage but would counter the notion that his images could account for the reality of atomic devastation.

The filmic narrative shifts from a documentary depiction of the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing to a focus upon a woman's personal memories of a series of traumatic experiences that took place in wartime France. The present-day narrative centres upon a chance encounter between a French woman and a Japanese man who remain unnamed. They meet in a bar in Hiroshima and commence a brief love affair. This affair incites recollections of traumatic memories from the woman's past that move to form the central narrative of the film.
The opening sequences subvert audience expectation by amalgamating documentary, experimental, and more naturalistic techniques. The first shots comprise of close ups of the lover’s naked bodies entwined, progressing to shots depicting their bodies covered with ashes, dew, and then sweat. The sequence that follows consists of Resnais’ disturbing documentary footage of the hospital, the museum and filmed reconstructions of the bombing, evoking a sense of horror, which flashes onto the screen at speeds disallowing contemplation. Contradictory plot lines and cinematic styles fuse together to explore the alternate (and at times similar) means by which historical trauma is remembered and represented. The two narrative streams are metaphorically linked creating parallels between public and private, past and present, history and memory and personal and cultural identity.

Encouraged by the man, the woman recalls the story of her love affair with a German soldier in Nevers during the German occupation of France. On the day they were to flee the country, her lover was shot. As punishment for her enemy collaboration her head was shaved in the town square and she was imprisoned in the cellar of her home; both for the shame she had caused and for her own protection. She was unable to contain her grief, the intensity of which resulted in the loss of her senses. Only when she was able to contain her emotions was she released and returned to her room. On fleeing to Paris the next day, she recalls, the name of Hiroshima is in all the newspapers (Duras, 1961).

The film thus represents female subjectivity by focusing expressly upon the female view, which was exceptional at the time of the film’s production in 1959. In the formation of the woman's identity and experience, place is of specific importance to Duras. Caroline Mohsen highlights that place is incorporated in women's identity as a reaction to the forced silence and solitude women endure in patriarchal societies, relegated to the interior of homes, or to Nature, while men participate in the political sphere monopolizing speech (Mohsen, 1998). Mohsen finds this a situation that the female protagonist in Hiroshima Mon Amour experiences in all its traumatic implications, as her identity is built as loss or erasure.

Duras here finds parallels with Luce Irigaray's genealogy of women's relations to space-time within the history of philosophy, space having traditionally been acknowledged as the mode of perception of what is exterior to the subject, while the subject’s understanding of time is the mode of apprehension of her interiority. Irigaray argues that time has been associated with the male (the only subject with an interiority) while the female, representing pure exteriority and external to men, is associated with space. Men exist and evolve in the conceptual and the political with the female committed only to the private and the personal (Irigaray, 1993). Hiroshima Mon Amour can thus be viewed as an important document of the feminine interface with place, with the film/scenario demonstrating performatively how place and feminine lived-in experience affect and construct each other.
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...tions are essential in the psychological development and sense of identity of the female protagonist. With each performing a continuing conversation, undermining and complicating the meaning of the other. By the conclusion the protagonists have become what Foucault calls heterotopic places (Foucault, 1984). Foucault opposes heterotopia to utopia, describing heterotopias as placeless places, mixed joint experiences that exert a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy... [Heterotopia] makes the space I occupy at the moment ... at once absolutely real, [é] yet absolutely unreal since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault, 1984).

This heterotopia proves important in the analysis of the alternative subjectivity Duras creates, as the heterotopic contains a revision of both the masculine and feminine. Place within the film, when viewed as space suffused with subjective corporeal experience, creates a fusion of past and present, depicted cinematically towards the conclusion of the film with a series of shots weaving together the locations of Hiroshima and Nevers, the female protagonist mentally fusing the two locations into one. While in voice-over she says, his city was made to the size of love (Duras, 1961), it is ambiguous as to which city (and which love) she is referring. This interconnection of the past and present is even more tenable in the final moments, in which the protagonists, their identities never fixed to start with (neither of the characters has a name, only Elle and Lui), lose their coherent individual identities altogether. She says to him Hi-ro-shi-ma. That your name, to which he replies that is my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers in France (Duras, 1961).

The sites of their respective traumas have thus become their individual identities. The woman identity is merged with Nevers and the memory of trauma and loss that it contains. Hiroshima now functions as a signifier for several distinct signifieds: a geographical location, a traumatic historical event and a person, her Japanese lover, who has become synonymous with both place and trauma. This is how it must be: the trauma cannot be forgotten, because that place is, as the Japanese man puts it, the place where performatively one became the person one is and will continue to be (Duras, 1961), this fusion ultimately representing the timelessness and universality of trauma and the subsequent crises in identity that befalls many survivors of war.

As we view the documentary footage of Hiroshima, we hear a voice-over, with the woman seemingly justifying the presence of these images through her descriptions of what she has witnessed during her visit, saying, saw everything. Everything, her partner contests, you saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing (Duras, 1961). The phrase you saw nothing in Hiroshima is integral, becoming central to a deconstruction of how identity is constituted within the film.

As outsider, tourist, the woman, like the majority of the viewers of the film, witnesses the site of the city long after the atomic bombing has taken place, an aftermath, not an event. The word
points to all that exceeds the representational frame, as a negation, performatively points to all that exceed s the representational frame, projective images of horror that flash on the screen. This opening scene can be understood as a template for the film as a whole. The lovers' disagreement over the possibility of knowing and understanding Hiroshima extends to the film's broader concern as to whether a traumatic past can be represented or communicated to another. She has not in fact, seen Hiroshima. The event has only been relayed through photographs and film. Such reconstructions (so realistic that the tourists cry) are dangerous, the film implies, as they produce an impression of having truly witnessed something, when all that has been seen is the representation, Baudrillard's Simulation, a substitution for the real.

Alison Landsberg discusses the implications of what she terms this 'prosthetic memory' - memories which do not come from a person's lived experience, contending that cinema possesses the ability to generate experiences and memories of its own - memories which become experiences that film consumers both possess and feel possessed by (Lansberg, 2000). The assumption of prosthetic memory as a theoretical construct is that reality always has been mediated, as a consensus upheld through narrative and information cultures - or indeed through the very structure of language itself. In a postmodern world, the real has retreated from its previously uncontested inhabitation of grand structures and narratives, into the realm of the individual. Reality has become a highly relativistic enterprise. As such, the systematic and proliferated use of such prosthetic memory she argues leads to a conception of what we may call 'prosthetic culture' - little more than the standardizing process of individual psychologies (Landsberg, 2000).

Baudrillard has sought to inverse the traditional social scientific approach to culture by renegotiating relations between culture and the individual semiotically. Consumption, he finds, is the basis of our (prosthetic) social order, a complex sign system that endows consumers with meaning as individuals. Far from the individual expressing his or her needs in the economic system, it is the economic system that induces the individual function and the parallel functionality of objects and needs (Baudrillard, 1981). The individual is nothing but the subject thought in economic terms, rethought, simplified, and abstracted by the economy. The entire history of consciousness and ethics (all the categories of occidental psycho-metaphysics) is only the history of the political economy of the subject (Baudrillard, 1981).

Prosthetic memory, Ekeberg argues, 'prods our understanding of reality and authenticity and implies that our functioning in a technological, consumption-driven society depends on affiliations far beyond our conventional idea of identity (Ekeberg, 2005). Prosthetic memory is caught up what he terms a kind of feedback loop viewed as a prosthesis insofar as it resurrects personal identity and thereby
sustains the economic web of consumption, which in turn ensures some form of moderately stable, consensual reality—a standardizing of human minds.

The focus on the subjective aspects of the woman’s memory and experience within the film becomes problematic when they are thus emphasised in terms of and at the expense of the historical, the cultural and the political. This privileging of subjective remembrance reflects a broader cultural interest in using memory as a counter discourse to established history. The widely documented cultural preoccupation with memory became particularly prominent in the early 1980s with cultural critics arguing that memory had become one of the defining themes within postmodern culture (Radstone, 2000; Malkin, 1999; Huyssen, 1995).

Huyssen, while recognising the importance of discourses on memory also challenges the binary opposition that has been established in contemporary academic debates between history and memory, arguing for the continued value of history. Huyssen highlights the issue inherent in any compulsion with remembrance of the past— that it results in a subsequent forgetting of the future. In the instance of highly traumatic memory, he counters that the need to envision the future is particularly pertinent (Huyssen, 2003).

According to Willy Szafran, the transformation of an endless mourning, a mourning that knows no end because of a sense of guilt which is never overcome, into a normal clinical mourning can be achieved through a phenomenon known as historisation in which the survivor of trauma attempts to transcend it by placing it within a historical context (Szafran, 1998). The female protagonist feels she comprehends the horror of Hiroshima because she considers Hiroshima linked to her own personal history, focusing her attention on Hiroshima because it is both related to and removed from her experience. This gives her enough distance to discuss Hiroshima objectively, something she cannot do with her past experience in France. In the beginning, instead of talking about herself, she discusses the victims of Hiroshima, using secondary sources of information, like the documentary images of the victims of Hiroshima or the war museum there, punctuating her various examples with phrases like I did see them or I did not make anything up or I know everything, claims which are all in turn denied by the male protagonist: You did not see anything, You made everything up, You know nothing (Duras, 1961).

There is a double irony to be found in the temporal indications surrounding the female’s trauma, in that it spans the time of the liberation of France, whilst her own liberation, her leaving Nevers and arriving in Paris, coincides with the news of the bombing of Hiroshima. Hiroshima is synonymous for her with extreme grief, a grief that drove her to near-madness whilst her other countrymen and women were celebrating the liberation of France in the streets. This grief caused a detachment of herself from
her French identity, especially from the renewed sense of cultural identity experienced by her compatriots during la Libération. Retelling the story of the evening her hair was cropped she says: “La Marseillaise is being sung all over the town. Darkness falls. [...]. I am alone. Some people are laughing. In the night I make my way home” (Duras, 1961). She demonstrates here the total fission between herself and her people and the distance between herself and the geographical and political contexts of her situation, cut off from her country-people, place and time.

The notion of a national identity is clearly questioned here. The French woman has become rootless, identifying with all victims of war, without distinction of nationality. The movie she is acting in — her reason for her being in Hiroshima — is about peace. She informs the Japanese man that it is not a French film, but an international one. While she is constantly referred to as la Française in the script, she is not seen as representing her country. She plays the role of a nurse in the movie, a role she already had in Nevers. This time, however, she is a Red Cross nurse, a role which develops the character’s sense of statelessness.

While walking the streets her voice is accompanied by a series of images linking Nevers and Hiroshima. The soundtrack (Japanese music, voices and street noises), juxtaposed with references to French culture (such as street names and slate-roofed houses), underlines her experience of despair in Hiroshima, (which really started previously in Nevers), while also highlighting the impossibility of forgetting, or of recovering from, the trauma of war. However, the conclusion of these acts of witnessing may be seen as the conclusion of the woman’s mourning, (if not altogether as her recovery). As Szafran discusses, the realisation and transcendence of this grief, may come from finding a historical context within which to place it, eventually allowing both protagonists to recognise their personal and cultural identities.

However, in the film the woman’s obsession with her past results in madness, a loss of identity and the detachment of the self from the social world. In this state of madness, she experiences a fluidity in her sense of self as she exists outside of reality and outside of time. While this realisation of a fluid identity may be read as a positive (Irigaray, 1985), it is also a trap preventing her from interacting with the external public world of society and politics. The woman’s melding of identities and fusion of the past and present produces a subjectivity divorced from social or historical factors, as she now exists outside of history.

Julia Kristeva describes this type of madness as existing in a space of antisocial, apolitical, and paradoxically free individuation (Kristeva, 1989). While history exists as the backdrop to the film’s narrative, she notes that it is unobtrusive and later disappears giving way to a melancholic narrative of individual grief (Kristeva, 1989). The difficulty with a move from a focus on historical trauma at
individual trauma in the later part, is that history and politics, the status of individual memory rather than that of a collective or cultural memory of historical human suffering, while also demoting the importance of public space as the space of history and politics. As Kristeva notes, the Nazi invasion, the atomic explosion are assimilated to the extent of being measured only by the human suffering they cause. Public life becomes seriously severed from reality whereas private life, on the other hand, is emphasized to the point of filling the whole of the real and invalidating any other concern. The new world, necessarily political, is unreal. We are living the reality of a new suffering world (Kristeva, 1989).

This view also finds parallels in Huyssen’s critique of contemporary trauma theory, Huyssen arguing that, to collapse memory into trauma . . . would unduly confine our understanding of memory, marking it too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering and loss. It would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition (Huyssen, 2003).

This repetitive compulsion is indeed displayed in the film when in another qualitative and temporal shift in her recollection of her past, the woman resumes her story at a bar later that evening. The scene resembles a psychoanalytic scenario as the man pushes the woman to continue her verbal remembrance of her past in order to expose the moment of trauma that she has repressed. She does not merely remember this traumatic past however, she relives it by re-enactment of it with her Japanese lover, he becoming an willing and active participant instigating the recollection and performing the part of her German lover; he says when you are in the cellar, am I dead? (Duras, 1961) initiating another troubling substitution, with time frames distorting as the past trauma is repeated in the present.

By refusing to incorporate her traumatic past into her subjectivity in her present life, the woman creates a fission between her two selves or as Michael Roth notes, a splitting of the self (Roth, 1995) into a self that experienced the grief in the past and the self that lives independently of that grief in the present. Although she can currently experience desire through her numerous love affairs, her past self knows only one love, a love unto death. Following her German lover’s death, she notes, that moment, and even afterward, yes even afterward, I can say that I couldn’t feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine (Duras, 1961). Her past self has died with her lover and though his body is removed her sense of fusion with the death of the other continues. Her repression of the past with her departure from Nevers suggests the construction of a new self. On the day of the Hiroshima bombing she arrives in Paris, effectively reborn.
Both the woman and the man eventually acquiesce to their destructive impulses to re-enact the past, from it. For the man, the pleasure stems from a self-interested desire to possess her memory. By performing the role of her German lover he writes himself into her history and identity, gaining access to her private memories that he wants to call his own. As these scenes progress, a series of psychoanalytic concepts are played out as symptoms. Lynn Higgins catalogues these symptoms as repetition compulsion (her need to re-enact rather than just remember the past), regression (to a childlike state where she is unable to use her hands and the man has to raise her glass for her), substitution and transference (she substitutes the Japanese man’s identity for that of her German lover and transfers her feelings for one man onto the other), and neuroses (as the distinction between past and present begins to dissolve) (Higgins, 1996).

The woman’s masochistic pleasure can be linked to her narcissistic obsession with grief. She is suffering from what Kristeva calls narcissistic depression or melancholia whereby sadness is displayed as the most archaic expression on an unsymbolizable, unnameable, narcissistic wound (Kristeva, 1989). Kristeva notes that for such sufferers sadness is really the sole object; more precisely it is a substitute object they become attached to, an object they tame and cherish for lack of another (Kristeva, 1989). This rings particularly true for the female protagonist in the film as she guards her melancholia like a precious object that (until now) was hers alone, unable to communicate, for her grief cannot be shared or represented in the social realm. Her attachment to this object and her desire to obsessively repeat the trauma may well prevent her recovery, subjectivity and agency.

The loss she has incurred was part of her self and thus she grieves, not an external object, but what Kristeva calls the Thing, which, like the Lacanian Real, cannot be symbolised, represented or replaced. Kristeva notes, knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing (Kristeva, 1989). The woman in the film constructs scenes and habits to deal with this void that can never be filled, experiencing an unnameable wound that results in a self-destructive regression which Kristeva, (following Freud), terms the death drive defined as a tendency to return to the inorganic state and homeostasis (Kristeva, 1989). The woman says to the man deform me, make me ugly (Duras, 1961) relaying her need to be absorbed and emotionally disfigured while also showing a characteristic ambivalence towards the lost thing you destroy me the woman says, closely followed by, you are so good for me (Duras, 1961).

Freud argues that those suffering from traumatic memories often compulsively re-enact the repressed event rather than remembering it as something belonging to the past stating that there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle (Freud, 1955). For Freud the danger of such repetition is that the subject experiences a crumbling in the distinction
B. between her past traumatic memories and her present identity, with both becoming integrated to what Freud terms ‘unpleasure’ as well as to a breakdown of the self and consequent loss of subjectivity. In Freud’s terms, the woman’s re-enactment of the past is not motivated by a desire to overcome it, but by a need to relive the traumatic memory to its final conclusion through a symbolic killing of the self.

Although published critiques of Hiroshima Mon Amour have increasingly focused on the depiction of traumatic memory with reference to current studies on trauma theory (Caruth, 1996 and Roth, 1995), Sarah French focuses instead upon the role of memory in the (re)negotiation of female subjectivity. Following on from Freud and Kristeva, she too argues that while the film represents a complex female subjectivity and interiority, the process of remembrance depicted threatens to overcome the woman’s sense of self in the present, depriving her of agency and rendering her trapped within this compulsive repetition of the past (French, 2008).

Others have countered that this memory re-enactment is precisely what allows the female protagonist to renegotiate her trauma and thus her identity, leading to an eventual healing of the self. The film depicts a series of shifts in the woman’s relationship to memory as the narrative progresses, beginning with initial flashes of involuntary memory, to the representation of narrative memory, leading finally to a dramatic re-staging of the traumatic events. Her initial recollection of her lover’s death occurs as an involuntary memory that suddenly flashes through her consciousness. In the opening scenes of the film, the twitching of the Japanese man’s hand as he lies beside her activates a memory of her German lover, his hand twitching similarly following his shooting. This flashback of the dead German Soldier cannot yet be fully comprehended by the audience and our confusion follows the woman’s sense of disorientation at the sudden arrival of this repressed event. The memory clearly evokes an emotional response in her but the duration of it is slight, the displaced memory fragment lasting only a few film frames. Thus she is able to prevent the memory from maintaining a permanent hold over her consciousness in the present.

At her next recollection of Nevers, occurring sometime later in the Japanese man’s home, the woman manages to control her memories as she consciously retells the idealised story of her love affair. Like the opening documentary shots of Hiroshima that emphasised the sites of the city, the initial flashbacks of Nevers focus upon the flat, geographical landscape of the town. The woman’s first recollections of her German lover are similarly devoid of emotional resonance, conveying little of her feelings for him, but are told exclusively in relation to place. At first we met in barns. Then among the ruins. And then in rooms (Duras, 1961).
These recollections of Nevers are represented in the form of a narrative, as opposed to the involuntary memories experience at the start of the film. Narrative memories are formed from a series of past moments that are converted into a story progressing along a linear chronology, the subject mastering these memories and reconstructing them through speech or writing. Michael Roth notes that, narrative memory integrates specific events into existing mental schemes. In so doing the specific events are de-charged, rendered less potent as they assume a place in relation to other parts of the past (Roth, 1995). Roth contends that the unforgettable is that which cannot be narrativized as this process is exactly what surrenders memories to the equivalence of other memories forcing them into existing mental schemes.

In contrast to the involuntary image of her lover's hand, the narrative memory of her love affair is temporally re-incorporated as she reconstructs it verbally. Unlike traumatic memory, in which the past is relived in the present, narrative recollections locate memory in the past, rendering it less potent and thus unable to impede upon her subjectivity in the present. The remembering subject can thus commence the process of recovery and re-enter the social realm. While the narrative structure of the film, set within a twenty-four hour period, prohibits the resolution of this healing process, it may be argued that rather than remaining trapped in an eternal cycle of compulsive remembrance, the woman may have just begun a process of negotiating her trauma.

Hiroshima Mon Amour thus provides a complex depiction of individual memory and the role this memory, whether involuntary, narrative or prosthetic plays in the construction of individual subjectivity and cultural identity. The film rejects historical discourses in favour of a more fluid and less hegemonic depiction of memory that emphasises subjective and inter-subjective experience, the film suggesting that the sublime historical event is not only in excess of the representable but also in defiance of memory. Its emphasis on individual memory validates the legitimacy of the personal narrative, probing interesting questions regarding its role in the negotiation of trauma while also however, problematically subsuming political events and displacing history from the discursive realm.

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Bibliography


