

Hiroshima mon amour:
a monument to the pleasurable
pangs of memory and desire

«Time», wrote Sartre, «is, above all, that which separates» (Sartre, 1947: 76). Such an observation seems scarcely possible before the modern period – before an era of World Wars, that is, in which all hope of plunging back into the delectable bath of a “sacré souvenir” had been abandoned. Even from Proust, whose characters were, at the beginning, still reveling in a fin-de-siècle insouciance, there surfaces an urgent presentiment about the ravages of time, a time that tears into human experience rather than offering shelter. In fact, Proust had radically remapped a terrain that was for decades the private property of Romantic poets: the topos of the revivifying potential of the past. Whereas for the Romantics memory was merely a refuge from which to escape the awful contingencies of present time, Proust’s “mémoire involontaire” afforded the remembering subject the possibility of escaping time altogether – i. e., of suspending the rules of chronology and occupying, however momentarily, an impossible space in which past and present were fused. Such a notion, for the generation that lived through World War I, was precious in view of voluntary memory’s reluctance to remember at all. Proust narrativized the idea by endowing memory with these extra-terrestrial qualities.

Though it is Alain Resnais’s and Marguerite Duras’s *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) that I wish to inscribe in this pervasive twentieth-century fascination with a memory that overcomes time’s incisors, it is important to note that in films between-the-Wars there is already a decisive investigation of the effects of time. Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (1939), for example, articulates the loss of a certain social decorum that the War had done away

with. The protagonist of Marcel Carné's *Le jour se lève* (1939) wrestles with the memories of events leading up to the man-hunt about to close in on him as the film inscribes memory onto the signifying medium with a rhythmic, lyrical use of flashback. And once narrative "voice" becomes implicated in the specifically cinematic handling of memory, as in Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951), the medium opens itself up for plays on vocal disembodiment and temporal double-takes in its probing into the peculiarly twentieth-century intertwining of voice and memory.

Following World War II, filmmakers in Italy felt compelled to deal with the horrific events that had led to fascism and a humiliating defeat. Constructing a body of films that Marie-Claire Ropars has called «un cinéma de cicatrices» (Ropars, 1970: 140), Rossellini, Zavattini, and de Sica delved into such themes as the devastated land (*Paisan*, 1946), the plight of the poor and disenfranchised (*Umberto D*, 1951), and urban misery in general (*The Bicycle Thief*, 1949). In the context of the irradicable changes effected by fascism, these directors raised questions about existential isolation, remembering and forgetting, individual and collective guilt. It is against this neorealist background, I believe, that one can best appreciate the profound intensification as well as radical shift represented by Resnais and Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour*.

What makes the European reaction to World War II in general, and to the atomic bomb in particular, all the more interesting is the aesthetic determination to represent a series of events in cinematic form that are virtually unrepresentable. How was it possible for Resnais and Duras to squeeze from a story, whose main elements involve absence and nothingness, such power and, most important, such pleasure? As the present study is part of a more extensive project, an investigation into the dynamics of pleasure in the sound film in general and the effort to push to the limits the cinematic signifiers of both image and sound track¹, I shall also

¹ I am engaged in the construction of a theory of pleasure in which I distinguish, among other things, "putative pleasure" (fulfillment of the usual expectations elicited in us by the well-told tale) from "structural pleasure" (creation of unexpected gaps or new configurations in the

be interested eventually in inquiring into the historical specificity of the tendency to locate a paradoxical pleasure in the most unimaginable of human atrocities.

«Bien regarder, ça s'apprend»: *Hiroshima* as Lehrstück

Released in 1959, *Hiroshima mon amour* might have seemed most easily read as a prolongation of Resnais's meditation on time and memory. *Night and Fog* (1955) and *Toute mémoire du monde* (1956) were short films that thematize memory during times of war and times of peace. *Last Year at Marienbad*, a collaboration with Alain Robbe-Grillet, raises the topos of the dubiously remembered love affair to the level of abstract symphonic poem. None of these early efforts, however, attain the complexity of *Hiroshima's* analysis of desire in the era of nuclear destruction – an analysis expressed in most delirious terms.

The narrative is complicated not by a questing voice-over, as in *Journal d'un curé de campagne* or *Marienbad*, but by a mise en oeuvre of the very memory process of the protagonist, a French actress on assignment in Hiroshima to make a peace film. At one point the woman's inner voice suddenly jumps onto the sound track as she is washing her face; it makes light of that part of her consciousness that had tried to keep hidden the long-buried yet not forgotten affair with a German soldier during the War. Throughout the last third of the film we witness a very complicated counterpoint between the spoken words and actions of the French actress (who remains anonymous) and her thought words which we hear as voice-over. This unusual cinematic stream of consciousness, full of contradictions (e.g., is



signifying chain). Focusing on post-War films in France and Italy, I discover patterns of ellision and accretion suggesting that, as in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pleasure accrues as often from subtraction as from addition of stimuli.

the point that she has remembered the German lover or forgotten him?), effectively frustrates our expectation that a voice-over will narrate what has already happened from a detached perspective. It suggests that *Hiroshima* is not so much about the bomb or about the War as about the ambiguity of our affective attitudes toward anything we love or hate. And it is in this sense that, as I shall argue later, the film might best be viewed as a monument.

The splitting of the actress into voice and body, moreover, “responds” at a deeper level to the perceptual challenge launched by the Japanese lover: What can a Westerner know about the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Through a kind of morbid poetic justice, but also, more importantly, as a confirmation of the Japanese man’s doubts about her ability to see the pain of the other, the French woman is dramatically revealed as trapped within her own subjective memories.

The opening sequence of the film goes as far as any previous film had gone in evoking an affective situation without recourse to exposition, lip sync, or any type of narrative summary. In its virtual destruction of the codes by which we assume the spoken voice will relate to the visual image, the “prologue”, as it is usually called, embodies what Ropars has called “écriture” in the cinema (Ropars, 1970: 145-63), for the primary signifying elements of cinema collaborate through counterpoint and contradiction to effect a fluid medium whose chief characteristic is not its capacity to configure diegetic information. The situation at the opening cannot be summarized as: two people discussing Hiroshima as they make love; or, scenes of devastated Hiroshima recalled by a woman as she makes love; or even, the injustices and follies of war. The image track depicts the fulfillment of desire with tight close-ups on the shiny bodies in the grips of love-making. Death and destruction soon begin to punctuate this overflowing image of beautifully entwined limbs. (Flow is precisely the dominant signified here: Bodies flow together; they overflow the frame; the interstices between them disappear as sweat, dust, and other (atomic?) particles blur natural anatomical divisions. But also – and this is the initial scandal – loving whole bodies flow into maimed ones). In the meantime, the

two voices dispute whether anyone can ever come to see or know moments of great destruction. The woman claims that, by visiting the museums and viewing the reconstructions, even though she was not a witness, she can come to know the horror of Hiroshima. The man claims that no amount of reconstitution will ever be able to represent, even symbolically, the intensity of the original horror. What one claims to have thoroughly, albeit vicariously, experienced is verbally challenged by the other as an explicit distortion of the past and the knowledge it encompasses.

It is important to note Resnais's use of the *acousmètre*² to suggest the separability, and ultimately, the independence of seeing and saying. *Hiroshima mon amour* is a film that traces a line from seeing and saying to knowledge. It is a film about saying "I have seen" with the feeling that the assertion is false, or more precisely, without any assurance that what is claimed to have been seen is representable. This is the evident meaning behind the opening antinomies, as the French actress, speaking as *acousmètre*, says, «J'ai tout vu. Tout» (Duras, 1960: 22). The Japanese has just "told" her, also in *acousmètre*, «Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien». His words are full of meaning, but a meaning built on contradictions. For, in one sense, there is nothing to see in Hiroshima. That is, all one can see is nothingness. What might be "seen" – in the sense of witnessing the results of destruction – is, strictly speaking, unrepresentable. Hiroshima is the place of an absence, a horrible, man-made void. To represent, or re-present, this in an exact manner, in contrast to the subsequent and only approximate reenactments of the tragedy, would mean to recreate the bomb. Thus, the Japanese man's denial of the French woman's claim is double-edged: Not only can she see nothing of the devastation that took place in Hiroshima, but what she does see can only ever be an absence, a nothing. She did not see anything; she saw nothing.

² Michel Chion (1982: 25-33) defines the "*acousmètre*" as an anthropomorphized voice speaking without a body. Voice-over is by definition an instance of the *acousmètre*; its use in *Hiroshima*, however, is more subtly linked to the harrowing experience of humiliation and repression.

I agree with Marie-Claire Ropars that in order to make sense of this film at the most basic level one must determine how its *écriture* is pitched. In order to unpack its formidable pleasure potential, moreover, one must understand how the gradually developing emotional baggage of the story is being hurled along a fast track, like express mail, while the seemingly innocent, even banal, love story is making all the local stops. It is in order to maximize the momentum of this gathering emotion, I believe, that the last part of the film (the scenario is divided into five parts) begins with the actress's interior monologue: «On croit savoir. Et puis, non. Jamais» (Duras, 1960: 109). Her realization at this stage that she does not know is a resolution of the opening contradiction between the lovers: She thought she knew, but no, she doesn't.

A movement, then, of reversal here – the most obvious one among the many reversals and revelations that drive the film's story. I shall not dwell upon the complexities of *Hiroshima's* narrative structures, since what concerns me is how Resnais and Duras make of these fundamental oppositions, contradictions and aporias a powerful emotional statement. The film is fascinating for its iconoclastic transformation of film conventions into an expressive *écriture*. Like Barthes's *jouissance*, which refers to a range of reading pleasures that decenter rather than ground the reading subject, the identification of *écriture* is the first step in an analysis of *Hiroshima* that will aim ultimately at disclosing its textual thrills.

Ropars is only half right, though. To appreciate Resnais's breakthrough in film language one needs, it is true, to explain his use of *écriture*; it allows the critic to illuminate, for example, the unique lyric tone of much of the film:

When it is freed by the voice-over, speech becomes song and accompanies the image, without explaining it; cut off from its psychological roots and its dramatic function, it is transformed into an incantation that locates the narrative on a tragic level at the same time that it offers multiple openings beyond vision, onto meditation. With lyric recitation, characters are detached from themselves and, as in the theatre, look at themselves [...] (Ropars, 1970: 150).

But to appreciate his and Duras's galvanization of writing-plus-speech-plus-sound-plus-image, one must highlight in the analysis the underlying metaphor of seeing. Laid bare in the opening acousmetric dialogue, the figure of physical sight as metaphor for mental understanding is as old as Oedipus. If the horrors of Hiroshima cannot be "seen", the film seems to suggest, then how can they ever be conceptualized, much less represented? If we cannot view or re-view the actual annihilation, then what can be seen? And what, for that matter, is ever seen?

It is in meditating the answers to these questions that the filmmakers pass beyond war and peace, desire and destruction – diegetic elements located just along the borders of representation in the first place – to broach the unrepresentable. For underlying all these questions is the simpler but far more vexing question, What is seeing? It is certainly not the product of a simple glance. And no glance, however penetrating, guarantees knowledge. The question gains all the more immediacy in that it relates not only to the diegetic issue of how much, if anything, one can "see" of Hiroshima (and, by extension, how much one can feel for its victims), but also to the basic reception of cinematic images. As has been made clear by modern film scholarship, watching a film is no mere reception of images whose mental recording is standardized for all viewers. Not only do our eyes rove more or less depending on where we are positioned in relation to the screen, but specific techniques such as deep focus will enable and spur us to view several planes of action at the same time. Some things we see "later" than others, and what we do or do not catch upon first viewing depends decisively on the cultural baggage we bring along with that seeing. Indeed, as with reading literary texts, our reception depends crucially upon our gender, class, and competence³.

Sight is a culturally and temporally conditioned faculty.

³ The cultural, social, and gendered relativity of film spectatorship has received a good deal of attention in recent scholarship. See, for example, Metz (1982), Heath (1981), Doane (1987, 1991), Silverman (1988), Mulvey (1989) and Mayne (1993).

In order to enlist this fact in the analysis of the plastic arts, Pierre Francastel rejects all mimetic definitions of the image. «The image is not a facsimile of reality», he writes, «it is a relay» (Francastel, 1967: 37)⁴. There is no completely iconistic relation, in other words, between an image and the thing it represents. The image, rather, recalls or relays to the brain of the viewer certain stimuli that the viewer always has some prior familiarity with (cf. Eco, 1976: 192-95). Francastel's theory of knowledge-as-relay, like Plato's thesis about remembering as the foundation of knowledge (Plato, 1965: 81-86), thus supports the Japanese man's initial contention, that the actress cannot truly perceive what happened in Hiroshima as a discrete historical event; nor even can she, more generally, perceive the past of Hiroshima. She has no concrete relay for it.

What we see here and now cannot be dissociated from what we have already seen; and if what we see has no prior relay, then it most likely cannot be grasped. Memory conditions what we see in the present, to the point of denying the possibility of any bare, innocent perception. In this sense, the newsreels and reconstructions of the immediate aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, which we see in the prologue, presumably as the French woman had seen them in the museums, are pitifully inadequate images because they try to be facsimiles of the horror rather than relaying it. The French woman's own capacity to "see" and to know is in process during the film; hence, the implication of her words, when she says, in response to the Japanese man's query about why she wanted to see Hiroshima in the first place, «Ça m'intéressait. J'ai mon idée là-dessus. Par exemple, tu vois, de bien regarder, je crois que ça s'apprend» (Duras, 1960: 41). She still holds out hope of being able to sift, perceptually, through the imperfect images of disaster to apprehend something authentic, accurate.

"Bien regarder" is a skewed aural thematicization of the enforced cultural blindness whose poignant emblem appears early in the film, during the prologue, when the eye socket of a bomb victim is pulled wide open,

⁴ Francastel's remarks are made in the context of an attack on semiotics for its inadequacy as a system for analysing the visual arts.

with the aid of forceps, to reveal a gaping absence. The maimed woman of the newsreel is the pathetically full “knower” of destruction, in painful contrast to the French woman as well-intentioned but unseeing questor.

The crux of the difference between the French woman’s and the Japanese man’s relation to Hiroshima’s past lies in how experience, perception, and memory are interconnected. Memory not only conditions perception, it is (a part of) perception: «[S]eeing, in the active sense, fed as it is by our experiences and by ever-renewed memories, is an act of confrontation between present facts and remembered facts and hence between perception and memory» (Francastel, 1967: 12). The French woman perceives (present facts and remembered facts) but can never know. As Francastel insists, we never look at anything with a perceptual tabula rasa. And while *Hiroshima mon amour* gathers a good deal of its dramatic force from the uncanny parallel between personal history and world history, the former, it insists, can never become a substitute for the latter.

«Pourquoi nier l’évidente nécessité de la mémoire?»

The French actress’s access to the truth about Hiroshima is blocked, then, by all the inevitable cultural limitations of human perception. By the same token, our access (that is, that of the ordinary Western audience) to the true horror – and to the true motives of the actress’s quest as well – is also blocked. Resnais and Duras, however, are not content to leave matters in this state of negative, albeit enlightened, cross-cultural apperception. If our access to the historical horror, moreover, is blocked, an important avenue of pleasure is also congested. As I have suggested, by the end of the prologue it is clear that *Hiroshima mon amour* is a film that will not proffer its diegetic kernels with ease. We soon get a cue – immediately following the double-take on the sleeping Japanese man’s upturned hand, to be exact – that the French woman’s relation to all of the fleetingly and ambiguously broached

topics of the prologue (the War, physical sensation and pain, destruction and demoralization) may be far more extensive than at first suspected.

Elaborating its metaphoric work on seeing, the film will go on to suggest that, though she may be endowed with no more historical second-sight than other humans, the protagonist discovers a vision through memory by which she can mediate at once her desire to share in the other's calamity and her need to mourn the loss of her first lover, the German soldier. I want to suggest, in other words, that what the French woman inevitably lacks in historical vision is compensated for by her personal vision. By demystifying the very desire to "see" Hiroshima's desolation (the tourist-bus sequence of the prologue accomplishes this most succinctly), the film simultaneously opens the possibility of a new way of seeing. It offers, through the exemplum of the French woman's personal crisis that comes to a head through an intense session of remembering, an opening onto pleasure – an opening tantamount, at least, to the elimination of what Freud termed "unpleasure".

Given the contradiction of a narrative that officially proscribes pleasure (how can one do anything but mourn at the sight, or even just the thought, of ravaged Hiroshima?) but that begins with and returns compulsively to scenes of tender, delicate love-making, it is not surprising that the pleasures of *Hiroshima mon amour* are not of the "putative" variety. An example of what Laura Mulvey calls "alternative cinema", the film daringly presents images of entwined naked bodies with a candor and nonchalance that belie the awesome scenes to follow. There is clearly no appeal here to spectatorial scopophilia. The extreme tightness of these opening shots suggest a quasi-scientific take. As though filming an agon between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, Resnais and Duras brutally contextualize the physical pleasure, at least that which is diegetically taking place in 1959, within the individual and collective memories of the nuclear bomb detonated fourteen years earlier.

The peculiar kind of pleasure that *Hiroshima* works toward is all the more complicated in that it posits woman as bearer of the look. Mulvey had

argued that dominant cinema is composed of images whose chief motive for visual pleasure is the sight of a woman, posed as object of a male gaze and of male libidinous desire (Mulvey, 1989: 14-26). But this film refuses such pleasures; or rather, it proffers them only to undercut them by radical recontextualization. To upset the paradigms of pleasure even more, it downgrades the visual narrative by assigning a preeminent place to that of orality and aurality.

It is, first of all, a story about love more from the woman's slant than from the man's. The French woman, one gathers, had allowed herself to be picked up at a bar the night before (characteristically, it is the penultimate scene of the narrative that reenacts such an event as a heterodiegetic prolepsis). She is neither coy about her sexual desires nor embarrassed to take an active role:

Je t'ai remarqué toi, c'est tout. [...]
J'aime bien les garçons...
(Duras, 1960: 47, 54)

Yet the hermeneutic upshot of the Japanese man's lengthy, even tedious, attempt at persuading the woman to stay in Hiroshima is that, while she is strongly attracted to him, he is not a man with whom she could become seriously involved. Desiring, active, and principled, she confounds the cinematic stereotypes of the woman in love and thus throws the male gaze out of order.

The object of her desire is a Japanese architectural engineer, like her, happily married, who remains conspicuously opaque throughout the film. Though he is evidently a feeling man capable of expressing deep emotions, his personal life, in contrast to that of his lover, remains for the most part closed off to us. Like the German soldier, who comes alive for us only through the woman's memory, the Japanese man is presented

predominantly as alien, other. Since he is an Asian, his personal history seems to be foreclosed by the film's unabashedly Western point of view⁵. He is perhaps most important, as we shall see, as a double for the film viewer/listener.

If her open desiring of the Japanese lover confounds ordinary cinematic voyeurism, the narrative progression into the French woman's tantalizing past also frustrates our usual expectations. The viewer/listener is invited into the scene of lovemaking only to be emotionally assaulted in a few moments by images of the dying victims of nuclear destruction. The woman's first love with a German, which results in punishment and personal humiliation, can be articulated only in spasms of diegetic detritus. We get it in bits and pieces, out of chronological or causal order. I use the term "spasms" advisedly: Just as an involuntary muscle spasm differs from the willed gesture by dint of a loss of physical control, so the piecemeal coming to light of the protagonist's past differs from the rest of the narration by its apparently involuntary articulation. (The "spasm" metaphor is all the more apt in that the visual trigger to the woman's memories is the involuntary muscle spasm that the Japanese man makes while asleep. The flashback structure, in other words, is repetitious and disjointed; only

⁵ The use of Oriental settings and characters as context and stimulus for a Westerner's self-discovery has deep roots in French culture. Hiroshima as stage for the resuscitation of Nevers, and the Japanese man as *pharmakon* for the French actress's psychodrama, call to mind the ways in which the East, for generations of French writers beginning with the Romantics and Gérard de Nerval, became imbued with associations of magical release. If Western thought locked the individuals into rationality, and if Western industrialized cities hemmed them in physically, the East could unlock and unleash the powers of the imagination. Voyages and promenades through exotic oriental landscapes and gardens (Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, 1851, is prototypical) become a topos of this posture, the poet-subject bringing out into the open – though still to himself – problems that he could not bear to face at home. In spite of Duras's intention of casting a "Western-looking" actor for the part of the Japanese man in order to avoid the pitfalls of an "exoticism" that would attribute his attractiveness to his ethnic difference and thus fall prey to an "involuntary racism" (see the appendix to the screenplay, «Portrait of the Japanese»), the literary commonplace of the East as a stage for the Westerner's psychodrama must nevertheless be seen as a racially loaded intertext for the relationship between the Japanese man and the French woman. He acts as catalyst for her past, playing somewhat the role of the psychoanalyst during the cure, just as Nerval's Orient conditions the discovery of his protagonist's true life.

during the café scene do the past images relate to the present words or situation in an exemplary or illustrative manner).

As though in stylistic or thematic resposion to the opening images of fragmented bodies and buildings, these memories, then, radiate⁶ spasmodically, without chronological coherence, from the initial graphic match between the Japanese man's upturned hand and that of the German soldier lying dead on the quay where he has been shot. The story of the French woman's clandestine affair with a soldier of the enemy army is told actually several times over. First, there is the metonymic shot of the moment of traumatic loss, which will be returned to only during the paroxysmal climax of the film. Upon "rereading" the film, we realize that at its most spasmodic moment it has recounted the most traumatic moment, which the protagonist has repressed for so long – i. e., her public grief over the dead lover's body – well before the causes of that repression. Or, put in other terms, what is first recalled, involuntarily, by the French woman is the moment of greatest pain: What she least expected crops up when she thought she was entirely on guard. In the quick five-shot montage – the woman looking into the hotel room from the balcony, from medium shot to close-up in three moves, intercut with first the Japanese lover then the dead German lover – what appears to dawn on her like a seismic shock is the awesome similarity between the two situations.

The past affair is then summarized in the most general, though still fragmented, terms. Random shots of Nevers, including one of a German soldier crossing a square, accompany this dialogue:

LUI: Il était français, l'homme que tu as aimé pendant la guerre?

ELLE: Non... il n'était pas français. Oui, c'était à Nevers. On s'est d'abord rencontré dans des granges. Puis dans des ruines. Et puis dans des chambres. Comme partout. Et puis, il est mort (Duras, 1960: 78-9).

⁶ This radiating structure eschews both syntagma and paradigm. Like a rhizome in its "asignifying rupture", the woman's throbbing memory cuts against the diegetic and narrative structures of the film, «against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure» and though it may seem «broken, shattered at a given spot [...] it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines» (Deleuze; Guattari, 1987: 9).

Then there is a longer, iterative flashback that includes shots of the young French woman hurrying to meet her lover, on foot, on a bicycle, climbing fences, furtively entering various hideouts with him, the intensity of the love amplified by their solitariness amidst the natural settings. Erotic fulfillment is gradually, then repeatedly, signified on the image track as shots become shorter, the rhythm increasing to an impassioned pace; and the music that accompanies the sequence is a bright, allegro melody that contrasts with the brooding chords and atonal series behind nearly all the sequences until now. Finally, though still spasmodically, we get an account of the trauma: Scenes from the woman's public humiliation and eventual imprisonment are juxtaposed with shots of the French woman and Japanese man drinking in a café overlooking the river. He prompts her with questions; she appears to be transported into the past, as in a trance: She addresses the Japanese in the second person, as though he were the German lover. Although by now we have a fair sense of the totality of the woman's experience, the images from Nevers are still presented out of order. For example, there is a long sequence in the cellar, a history of her "madness", before we see the scene of the jeering townspeople ritualistically shearing her hair for having consorted with the enemy, the young woman's mouth smeared with her lover's blood. Yet obviously the scene of public humiliation chronologically precedes her family's sequestering of the woman in the cellar. Thus, traumatic pressure points surface onto the image track pell-mell; whatever edification this new kind of filmic discourse provides, it has little to do with resolving the enigmas outlined by means of a hermeneutic code.

Pleasure and the obtuse meaning

Pleasure sneaks into *Hiroshima mon amour* in a most unsettling way. As a narrative text, we have seen, the film renegs the usual approaches to

spectator pleasure. We sense that its pleasures lie elsewhere; I shall suggest they subtend a “third meaning”, and “obtuse meaning”, that issues from the intensities of the buried story’s pressure, dissonance, and excess⁷. As it surfaces, this story, and most particularly the French woman’s performance of its complex emotional mesh, articulates a new discourse of desire, a different kind of pleasure and, without exactly reaching a climax, develops an intensity to enthrall us textually.

The film begins at a relatively high emotional pitch. It does not “build” in the way a conventional tragic love story or even a traditional piece of strong harmonic music would. The lyric montage of the prologue allows, as we have seen, for a rapid, intense statement of central motifs and metaphors: principally the metaphor of seeing, but also desire and destruction, wholeness vs. mutilation, the personal vs. the political, the contrast between the immediate tenderness of the other and the unapproachable, abject victims of the bomb.

Intensities accrete as these central antinomies, remaining unresolved, fail to illuminate the protagonist’s dilemma. During the café sequence the French woman returns (imaginatively) to the German lover’s dead body, to the object of a mourning that has never been completely tied off. When she does so, her description of what she felt as she lay prone upon the dying man’s body attains the kind of affective paroxysm that we associate with orgasm, death, and mystical revelations⁸. The return to the quay where the lover lies dying is also a narrative return: She has already said that he died, and we have already seen all the spaces in which the fatal event transpires, (the quay itself, the stairs leading down to the quay at the top of which a

⁷ From the first two levels of meaning, the informational and the symbolic, the “obvious” proceeds. The «third meaning – evident, erratic, obstinate [...] exceeds the copy of the referential motif [...]. [T]his third level [...] is that of *signifiante*, a word which has the advantage of referring to the field of the signifier (and not of signification) [...]. As for the [...] third, the one ‘too many’, the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive, I propose to call it *the obtuse meaning*» (Barthes, 1977: 52-4).

⁸ Jacques Lacan considers what these activities have in common, from an analytic point of view (Lacan, 1975: 11-2; 104-5).

jubilant young woman, suitcase in hand, arrives in eager anticipation, the camouflaged overhanging garden from which the shot was presumably fired), even if we were unable to grasp their full importance at the time. The moment of ecstatic horror, in other words, is presented under the sign of repetition, the drive that seems to propel both the reality and pleasure principles (Freud, 1961: 19-31; 50-2).

These intensities are effected by means of an important code in the woman's new discourse of desire: agony in ecstasy, ecstasy in agony. As I have said, "climax" would not be the most accurate way to describe this moment, but our language lacks a term more fitting in its clear sexual overtones. It is similar to the «continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end» which Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 22) discover in Gregory Bateson's descriptions of Balinese culture. It has been prepared for, in a sense, by a strangely beautiful monologue of erotic supplication that the French woman recites during the prologue:

[...] Je te rencontre.
Je me souviens de toi.
Qui es-tu?
Tu me tues.
Tu me fais du bien.
Comment me serais-je doutée que cette ville était faite à la taille de
l'amour?
Comment me serais-je doutée que tu étais fait à la taille de mon
corps même?
Tu me plais. Quel événement. Tu me plais.
Quelle lenteur tout à coup.
Quelle douceur.
Tu ne peux pas savoir.
Tu me tues.
Tu me fais du bien.
Tu me tues.
Tu me fais du bien.

J'ai le temps.
Je t'en prie.
Dévore-moi.
Déforme-moi jusqu'à la laideur.
(Duras, 1960: 35)

Signifying simultaneously in the present moment of love-making with the Japanese man and in a vague, not-yet specified past, prefiguring in its ambiguous address the confusion in the café scene between "tu" the Japanese and "tu" the German, and confounding, finally, the drive for pleasure («Tu me fais du bien») with the drive for (self-)destruction («Dévore-moi. Déforme-moi»), Eros with Thanatos, this monologue sows the discursive seed of an erotic delirium which, when the woman is in the throes of it, seems to spill over all the borders, formal and semantic, of the film. Erotic drives, in particular, overflow their habitual channels, mixing with a death drive whose motive force lies in its intersubjective indifference – i.e., it surges forward regardless of which subject is dead or dying. As Freud has taught us, what is most remarkable about the pleasure principle is its contradictory composition, «the presence of a sadistic component in the sexual instinct» (Freud, 1961: 47). If the intensity of the protagonist's personal revelations are to be read as a metaphor for the intensity of the apocalypse that the world cannot get over, then her cognizance and revelation of sadistic and masochistic impulses become a scathing indictment of everything that is erotically satisfying in the pain and destruction wrought by the War – and by war in general. As a terrain of ideological struggle, the French woman becomes a monument to the obligation to remember⁹. In spite of the Japanese man's embittered promise – «[J]e me souviendrai de toi comme de l'oubli de l'amour même. Je penserai à cette histoire comme à l'horreur de l'oubli» (Duras, 1960: 105) –

⁹ In this sense, the French woman is a metonym for the world-historical cataclysm unleashed in the atomic bomb. Just as Hiroshima becomes a city commemorating an event that is hopefully never to be repeated, so her body, gradually reconstituted after the imprisonment, becomes a monument to the memory of "impossible love".

she utters to herself precisely the opposite: «Pourquoi nier l'évidente nécessité de la mémoire?» (*Id.*: 33).

And, as if to put her maxim into practice, she “remembers” this monologue, almost verbatim, as she walks the streets of Hiroshima in the last part of the film – she repeats it, word-for-word, that is, up to a certain point. Seeming to call up with greater precision than ever the actual setting of her astonishing and poignant Liebestöd, she says now:

Je t'attendais dans une impatience sans borne, calme.

Dévore-moi. Déforme-moi à ton image afin qu'aucun autre, après toi, ne comprenne plus du tout le pourquoi de tant de désir.

Nous allons rester seuls, mon amour.

La nuit ne va pas finir.

Le jour ne se lèvera plus sur personne.

(Duras, 1960: 115)

Her identification with the object of her mourning becomes so “absolute and unavoidable” that the French woman, for a time, is unable to distance herself by any means from the dead lover: She is «transformed into a crypt inhabited by a living corpse» (Kristeva, 1987: 139). Yet at the height of this reenacting of her vain will-to-embody the dead man, a direct outgrowth of her “repetition” of the passion with the Japanese, she begins to realize that oblivion will relieve her – is already relieving her – of the burden of total recall: «Du temps viendra. Où nous ne saurons plus du tout nommer ce qui nous unira. Le nom s'effacera peu à peu de notre mémoire» (*Ibidem*).

Before this erasure, or slow fade, can be effected by time, however, she must “work through” the intense love lost and the excessive pain occasioned by the death of the German soldier. Of the three key processes by which the human psyche transforms unpleasurable past experiences into bearable mental entities, according to Freud, “working through” (*durcharbeiten*) is the one we have noted the least in the case of the French actress. The other two, remembering (*erinnern*) and repeating (*wiederholen*), are the very modalities by which the originary trauma is put into

perspective and its trace articulated (Freud, 1961: 147-56)¹⁰. The psychoanalytic cure is not so much an interpretative tool for understanding *Hiroshima mon amour* as it is an inescapable analogue and sub-text for the café sequence and the film's finale. It underlines the one major difference between the French woman's personal story and the world-historical story of the Hiroshima bombing (which the Japanese man escaped only by chance): The former can be organized, reconstituted and rationalized in terms, precisely, of remembering, repeating, and working through. No such process is possible for Hiroshima. By the same token, it is through the triadic rehashing process that the love affairs can be "represented", albeit spasmodically, whereas the fact of genocide can never be "shown." That the woman's story can be made sense of in these terms is, finally, a further testament of the aptness of discovering the cure as sub-text: It is, after all, the major discursive practice in use in the West for understanding trauma.

The two stories, the personal and the world-historical, are further interrelated by a network of chronological ironies. Living during the War on opposite sides of the world, the French woman's and Japanese man's lives are nevertheless intertwined, long before they meet, by the bombing on August 7, 1945. She is released from the bondage of her home two nights before: «When I reach Paris two days later the name of Hiroshima is in all the newspapers». Hiroshima, as pure signifier, has for the young woman the connotation of liberation¹¹. When given the opportunity, fourteen years later, to act in a peace film being made on Hiroshima, she takes it – only to experience in Hiroshima the return of the repressed – the return, that is, of

¹⁰ In plain analytic terms: Through the repeating of a love affair, the extent of whose unconscious motivations would be difficult to determine, the French woman comes to remember the first lover whose brutal death scarred her profoundly. The painful humiliation and alienation that she suffers subsequently have led to a powerful repression of all but the faintest traces of this original affair; through the acting-out of her anguish in the café she manages to work through the trauma and thus lay it to rest.

¹¹ Madeleine Borgomano suggests that because it contains an anagram of the word for love in Latin, *amor*, "Hiroshima" stands for "amour à l'envers" (Borgomano, 1985: 42). I would add that it is first and foremost by reason of the diegetic coincidence of the French woman's release from the cellar and the release of the atomic bomb that "Hiroshima" and "amour" become – grimly – associated in her mind.

that on the basis of which the word "Hiroshima" had come to signify a freedom: for her, personal liberation and for all of Europe the end of the War. The French actress thus embodies, in yet another sense, not only the ghost of her dead lover but also the trauma of the bomb: By its deployment she is symbolically, as the world is actually, however ruefully, liberated.

If the prologue suggests, as we saw above, that represented objects are relays and not facsimiles of reality, the film's narrative structure echoes the idea in a system of relays (metaphors, metonymies, embodiments) established among its various parts and plateaus. Resnais and Duras construct a vast network of associations and contradictions. The French woman's story is a romance that informs us of the horror of the bombing of Hiroshima; yet it is historically linked to Hiroshima, if only by association, because of the timing of her "liberation" from the cellar: Horror is displaced by liberation. Similarly, her mission in Hiroshima is to participate in a peace film; but through her contact with the architect, she rediscovers deep within herself a connection with Hiroshima that involves the opposite of peace. Public commemoration is displaced by the private traumatic return of the repressed.

The major tropes of the film, then, appear with intensity during the café scene. It is a scene, globally, of revelation, the most important of the film. It shows a reversal in the French woman's character: Whereas she had been assertive, self-reliant, and positive in her affair with the Japanese man and its punctual termination, she is now adrift, dependent on him for getting prompted through the channels of repressed memories. It reverses at the same time, however, the epistemological roles that the French woman and the Japanese man have played until now. She is in possession of an experience whose awful power could only be felt first-hand. The scene presents, finally, as we have noted already, the most radically fractured sequentiality yet of that experience – e.g., the public hair-cutting ritual, though early in the chronology of events, surfaces near the very end.

An important structural feature of the scene is the Japanese man's role as listener. At once gadfly to and audience for the woman remembering, he

continues a reading process of the woman's life that had begun during the second love-making sequence, at his home, and which parallels the viewer/listener's deciphering of the film¹². Although he will discover slowly, and by a different itinerary, the same secrets that the film audience will gradually learn, he does so solely by hearing and understanding the woman's spoken words. He is deprived of the stark images of Nevers disclosed to us. Playing on the "nothing" that he himself thematizes in the first words uttered on the sound track, he must experience the Nevers of her memory as she must experience the Hiroshima of his – that is, as a non-place. The time pun that subtends Nevers (for Anglophones, at any rate) makes of the woman's hometown a "no-time", an out-of-time space to match its status as non-place. Since it is never presented in a fully constituted present, but always mediated through memory, Nevers cannot ever be the place of the here-and-now. It is consequently coded not simply as the locus of the French woman's repressed past but also as the compendium of all those socially dangerous or borderline states: proscribed desire, ritual humiliation, and madness.

The Japanese man, then, is a double for the viewer/listener in the café scene. What we "see" and hear he hears only. His aural pleasure is thus the cipher for and the initiation to our own¹³.

Before turning at last to the café scene in detail, I would add one word about the film's enigmatic ending. Though each of the lovers is deprived of

¹² That his role begins to be one of reader and interpreter is stressed by the alternate answers he provides, during that scene at his home, to the woman's question, «Pourquoi parler de lui plutôt que d'autres?» (Duras, 1960: 80):

C'est là, il me semble l'avoir compris, que tu es si jeune... si jeune, que tu n'es encore à personne précisément. Cela me plaît.

Ou bien:

C'est là, il me semble l'avoir compris, que j'ai failli ... te perdre... et que j'ai risqué ne jamais te connaître.

Ou bien:

C'est là, il me semble l'avoir compris, que tu as dû commencer à être comme aujourd'hui tu es encore (*ib.*: 81).

¹³ This is the best way to understand his otherwise rather fatuous reaction when he learns that he is «the only one who knows» about the woman's affair with the German man (Duras, 1960: 103).

an authentic perception of the other's calamity, they use love-making to commune, as if the act were capable of engendering the missing perception. Language, through much of the film, is woefully limited – incapable, in any event, of describing the public and private horrors of Hiroshima and Nevers. Yet these are precisely the signifiers that the lovers murmur to each other upon returning to the hotel room. This murmuring suggests the first babblings – rediscovered after the emotional and physical cataclysm the film has charted – of human communication. Its obvious meaning lies in the representation of hope for the achievement of mutual communication, either a historically inflected hope or, as in William Gibson's portrayal of Helen Keller's first phonological articulations in *The Miracle Worker* (1957), simply a hope for human amelioration. The obtuse meaning of the scene, however, far from optimistic, is concentrated in the tight grip in which the man holds the woman's wrists as they utter this vatic promise of mutual metonymy. In the age of nuclear warfare, the lover's name can only be the place where he survived, "Hi-ro-shi-ma." And hers, by the same logic, must be the place of her survival, "Ne-vers, in France." Continuity in this world of nuclear armament, in other words, requires two things: assumption of guilt for the massive destruction and waste of human life, and complete identification with the object of mourning. In this sense, *Hiroshima mon amour* is a monument not simply to memory but to active, responsible, historical remembering.

Textual paroxysm: memory's Liebestöd

The French woman's discourse approaches the intense plateau of negative ecstasy during the café scene as she tells of going to meet her lover on the quay for their elopement. She sees him lying on the ground, writhing. What happens to her then, emotionally, is not shown – cannot be shown. It is communicated instead by her words. But what she feels is not signified in the normal way, informationally or symbolically. The ecstatic horror with

which she reacts to his agony comes across as the third meaning of her awesome monologue:

On devait se retrouver à midi sur le quai de la Loire. Je devais repartir avec lui.

Quand je suis arrivée à midi sur le quai de la Loire il n'était pas tout à fait mort.

Quelqu'un avait tiré d'un jardin.

Je suis restée près de son corps toute la journée et puis toute la nuit suivante. Le lendemain matin on est venu le ramasser et on l'a mis dans un camion. [...] Il est devenu froid peu à peu sous moi. Ah! qu'est-ce qu'il a été long à mourir. Quand? Je ne sais plus au juste. J'étais couchée sur lui... oui... le moment de sa mort m'a échappé vraiment puisque... puisque même à ce moment-là, et même après, oui, même après, je peux dire que je n'arrivais pas à trouver la moindre différence entre ce corps et le mien... Je ne pouvais trouver que des ressemblances... hurlantes, tu comprends? (Duras, 1960: 99-100).

At the beginning of the passage the voice of Emmanuelle Riva, who plays the French woman, is still under control; but from this point onward it makes a gradual crescendo until it reaches a shriek with the final sentence. This moment, which I have referred to as a *Liebestöd* – or “love-death” – because of its strong resemblance to Isolde’s grief over the dead Tristan in Wagner’s opera, might be more properly designated a moment of “life-death.” The paroxysm of pain and desire intensifies as the woman realizes that her body, as it lies on top of his, remains alive while the German dies. Its intensity is then amplified – multiplied exponentially as it were, since in mathematics negative numbers are also called “imaginary” – by the opposite: by the woman’s conviction that there is no difference between her body and his – in other words, by the disavowal of what her senses clearly convey to her, and therefore the disavowal of one of the primordial facts of human existence, the difference between life and death (Freud, 1963: 47-8).

“Madness” begins here (and it is swiftly prevented from taking her over by the Japanese man’s slap that immediately follows the aural peak of

her monologue) in the French woman's determined disavowal of death vs. life. Her mourning takes place only much later. Her altered state is aggravated by her inability to cope with – or perhaps even bring to consciousness – the other fact, that she is still alive. Her identification with the dead lover, in other words, becomes so complete that his death is a mere fiction and her life a waking death.

I would underline the terms in which this paroxysm is expressed. At the crest of her wailing crescendo, the woman is saying «des ressemblances hurlantes». What is appalling for us as viewers/listeners in the woman's appalled reaction is that what is "hurlant" must be "hurlé" – that is, screamed. «Ressemblances hurlantes» comes to mean, literally, "screaming similarities" or perhaps "similarities that scream out". Her almost literal miming, then, of the experience through the word "hurlantes" opens the door to the obtuse meaning of the scene. In the reliving of the extreme agony of her lover's death is the sublime ecstasy that appears to surge from her proximity to life-death processes. The 36-hour ecstasis that she lives, and for which she will be severely punished, interminably haunted, is communicated in the delirium of her rising, thinning voice. What we can read of her intensity, with certain pleasure, wells up itself from this performance of the woman's hanging on to the portals of death. She "hurls" it to us, as a satiated eater throws a dog a bone, or as a suicide shouts back an indistinct word before she jumps, through the thrilling door opened by the sheer excess of the protagonist's grief.

In the French woman's case, it is not simply that the strength of her desire, like that of Isolde, transcends life and death. Hers is a fighting desire that will not be quenched, by either death or love, for a long time. The excess of her grief is thus matched by the subsequent pressure under which the bottled-up desire must be kept. This pressure is expressed throughout the film by the spasmodically spewing articulation of the past that we have studied.

Thus, the obtuse meaning of the scene comprises chiefly an excess whose force is amplified by the pressure built up out of the trauma's

convulsive resurgence. But there's more. The scene is a bottomless pit of textual thrill, I would suggest, because of the unresolved dissonance created by the forces of horror and pleasure. The extremity of her desire prevents the woman from recognizing the German's death as the extinguishing of his life: the horror of non-being. Yet her guilt-feelings, that she still truly lives and breathes, are so great she fantasizes herself as one with the dead lover («I couldn't feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine»): the pleasure of complete union, of abrogating the line of demarcation between self and other at the very moment of dissolving the barrier between life and death.

As in the café scene, and in later moments as well, it is this continual conjunction of horror and pleasure (an obverse reflection of the earlier blending of destruction and desire) that keeps us on the plateau of an intense textual thrill. While it offers little in terms of a program for world peace, *Hiroshima mon amour* articulates a historical vision whose hallmark is the indelible imprinting of the individual onto the collective. Like the body of the French woman itself, it is a monument to remembering. Although the wounds of Hiroshima, like the scars of the woman's lost love, can be represented only as an aftermath, the film's post-Holocaust focus at once pains and, like the Japanese lover's epistemologically motivated slap-in-the-face, sobers. Like an itching scab, the horror of Hiroshima continually demands to be dug into and ripped away. *Hiroshima mon amour* is this violent scratching at the scab and the intense paradoxical pleasure that accompanies the very temporary relief. Just as pressure against a toothache yields a painfully sweet pleasure when pushed by the tongue, so the film yokes together, thrillingly, the initially antinomial vagaries of desire, the attractions and repulsions we feel toward certain objects, the intensities of love and guilt brought to bear upon the forlorn lover. Neither story nor essay, it is a sum of these intensities: the agony-ecstasy of the woman as well as the grim statistics («Two hundred thousand dead. Eighty thousand wounded. [...] Ten thousand degrees on the earth», the natural excesses of desire as well as the tortured fruit of humiliation.

Each new intensity – like a scrim through which to vainly peer at the bomb whose figurative ticking gives pulse to the film – succeeds the former in a series of semantic lap-dissolves that amounts to nothing – literally to no thing. Each intensity, in other words, is a displacement for another; and each displacement is operated in the hopes that what can never be represented on the screen will nevertheless be signified so as never to be repeated. In a unique way, then, *Hiroshima mon amour* comes to intimate what it could never represent, and so to name, like a gravestone, a collective existence extinguished, which no documents can completely account for and yet which must never be forgotten.

Keith Cohen é Professor de Literatura Comparada na Univesidade de Wisconsin – Madison. Tem escrito extensivamente sobre literatura e cinema, incluindo as obras *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (1979), *Writing in a Film Age* (1991) e artigos em revistas como *Poétique*, *Tri-Quarterly*, *Sub-Stance*, *Contemporary Literature* e *L'Esprit Créateur*.

Referências bibliográficas

BARTHES, Roland (1977) – *Image. Music. Text*, New York, Hill & Wang.

BORGOMANO, Madeleine (1985) – *L'écriture filmique de Marguerite Duras*, Paris, Albatros.

CHION, Michel (1982) – *La voix au cinéma*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma.

DELEUZE; GUATTARI (1987) – *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

DOANE, Mary Ann (1987) – *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

DOANE, Mary Ann, (1991) – *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, New York, Routledge.

DURAS, Marguerite (1960) – *Hiroshima mon amour*, Paris, Gallimard.

ECO, Umberto (1976) – *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

FRANCASTEL, Pierre (1967) – *La figure et le lieu*, Paris, Gallimard.

FREUD, S. (1961) – *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, New York, Norton.

FREUD, S. (1963) – *Studies in Parapsychology*, New York, Collier.

HEATH, Stephen (1981) – *Questions of Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

KRISTEVA, Julia (1987) – «The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras», *PMLA* 102, 2 (March 1987).

LACAN, Jacques (1975) – «Encore», *Le Séminaire, Livre XX*, Paris, Seuil.

MAYNE, Judith (1993) – *Cinema and Spectatorship*, New York, Routledge.

METZ, Christian (1982) – *The Imaginary Signifier*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

MULVEY, Laura (1989) – *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

PLATO (1965) – *Meno*, ed. A. Sesonske & N. Fleming, Belmont, Wadsworth.

ROPARS, Marie-Claire (1970) – *De la littérature au cinéma*, Paris, Gallimard.

SARTRE, J.-P. (1947) – «À propos de *Le bruit et la fureur*: la temporalité chez Faulkner», *Situation*, I, Paris, Gallimard.

SILVERMAN, Kaja (1988) – *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.