Love and Catastrophe: filming the sublime in Hiroshima mon amour

By Reni Celeste


Hiroshima mon amour

Hiroshima mon amour is a film that proclaims that history will not be possessed, and then proceeds to reflect the shadow of historical truth through the confession of this limitation in narrative cinema. Commissioned to do a documentary film on Hiroshima, Alain Resnais instead made a feature-length drama that questions the very possibility of documenting history. If classical aesthetics in the German idealist tradition situates the question of art within a philosophy of identity, here the same paradoxes are marked within a philosophy of difference. Can the frame present what lies beyond the realm of the sensible: love, catastrophe, and historical truth. Can a film image be considered a presentation? How film presents absence is the broader question of Hiroshima mon amour.

In his biography of Alain Resnais, James Monaco describes the film this way: 'Hiroshima mon amour is two films, often working against each other' (Monaco 1979: 49). It is this point of strife that gives the film its metaphysical and erotic tension. The film takes as its centre the question of love and catastrophe, contact and disruption, the play of opposites touching and recoiling, but it does so in a manner in which opposing forces are not conflated upon one another in equivalence, or reconciled and unified. For example, it consists of a dialogue between two nameless lovers, one French and one Japanese; it is set between two cities in two nations; it involves two sets of lovers existing in two different moments of time; it questions the distinction and commingling of fact and fiction; and it brings into friction the image and the word, the horrible and the beautiful. In this film love and catastrophe are shown to coexist, but in a relation of perpetual strife that refuses totality.

The plot of the film is fairly simple. A French actress has an adulterous affair with a Japanese man while filming a peace documentary on Hiroshima on location. The affair
regenerates a memory of a lost German lover from her youth in an occupied France. The film thematizes the problem of telling or presentation across all levels of articulation, image, music and text, through the figure of betrayal. The first manner in which these themes become cinematic is in the structure of the film's temporality. The temporality of this film is both brief and vast. On the one hand the film transpires within the claustrophobic confines of an adulterous love affair that lasts less than two days; and on the other it takes up the vast territory of history and memory as it struggles to revive lost episodes of trauma and loss from the war thirteen years before. That the latter is filtered through the confines of the former sets the stage of recollection as a prison. The adulterous affair exists as a space without space. Its illegitimacy relegates it to the realm of secrecy and transgression. From this position, a desire that refuses fulfilment, it stands in for love. And from this void, ironically, emerges the portal through which the past (truth) may be reanimated as fiction (lies) within the limited confines of a screen.

Despite remaining nameless, the French actress and the Japanese architect will be both distinctly developed characters and universals. He tells her she reminds him of every woman, and she asks if he is entirely Japanese. She confides that adultery is nothing new for her, that she has a weakness for men. She is comfortable with lies, but has no reason to lie to him. She can at times be both completely honest and dishonest. She feeds on reinvention, re-creation, fiction, and yet is tormented by a desire for truth. Above all, she seeks freedom, and finds it only through secrets. No one has all the pieces to her, and so she is not possessed. This is her greatest loneliness and her greatest freedom. This stranger will be the only one to whom she has ever spoken the story of her dead German lover. The architect, on the other hand, is a realist, a man who builds and occupies structures. Just as the film focuses during the prelude on the architectonic in its portrayal of urban construction and reconstruction, he too will open up the dichotomy between structure and history, position and its absence.

Through its manipulation of time and space, this film seeks to create a space of disclosure. This requires that the ineffable be given a position. This position that denies position must in some sense always come as a betrayal. The film acknowledges itself as this betrayal and in so doing
redeems itself. I would like to reveal this betrayal by focusing on two scenes of radical loss: the fifteen-minute prelude, which tries to reanimate the catastrophe of Hiroshima, and the flashback of the German soldier, in which the French actress tries to reanimate her lost love.

The prelude
From the first shot, the image is marked by an unsettling ambiguity. A piano plays, the screen is dark, and slowly light emerges, revealing glistening flesh, body parts moving in time with melancholic piano notes. The image provokes the viewer to draw closer, to struggle against confusion, to make out in the darkness what is too dim and unclear to understand. Is the flesh loving, or is it dying? Are these the limbs of lovers entwined, and the sweat of sex, or is it the final movements of a dying, damaged body? The film's title asserts the only evidence one has to comprehend the image – the words Hiroshima and mon amour – each seemingly signifying in different directions. These bodies are not given faces until fifteen minutes into the film, but even when they will be clearly identified as lovers, they will go unnamed throughout the film, and despite the film's probing into their histories, she will simply be the French actress, and he the Japanese architect.

Overlaying this opening image is the commencement of the dialogue between the lovers that bears a resemblance to an incantation or musical exchange. The voices loom over the images; the male asserting total negation, the female total affirmation. The sense of the entire dialogue is already encapsulated in their opening lines:

HE: You saw nothing in Hiroshima.
SHE: I saw everything. Everything... [original emphasis]

(Duras 1961: 15)

Her claim to total presence is negated not only by his repeated denial of everything she affirms, but also by the shots that accompany her claims: public spaces, architecture, the hospital, the museum, artefacts, photographs, and newsreels. What we see are images of a city reconstructed and obsessed with its lost history:
children gazing at miniature reproductions of the city, artefacts behind glass in museum boxes (twisted iron, bicycle wheels, hair from the heads of anonymous women), and dramatized newsreels of the trauma following the explosion. While she seeks and speaks of actuality, the visuals show only mediation and loss. Gradually a relation other than strict opposition is brought to bear upon everything and nothing. The sensible trace is everything, all there is, and yet it indicates a lack, a nothing. Thus the lovers speak the same thing from opposing positions. As singular assertions, the claims bear no truth, becoming merely opposing metaphysical poles. It is the toccata and fugue of their dialogue that gives them their weight as aesthetic truth claims.

The woman repeatedly relies upon official history to bolster her case. Beyond the museum reconstructions, there is the memory of the media documentation in process, of being witness to the making of history through newsreels. She insists, if not upon the credibility of the newsreel, at least upon the phenomenology of having seen the newsreels. Her voice becomes more urgent, and the images move frantically as well. The image track shows actual newsreels taken after 6 August 1945, crosscut with shots of the lovers in shadow:

SHE: I saw the newsreels. On the second day, History tells, I'm not making it up, on the second day certain species of animals rose again from the depths of the earth and from the ashes. Dogs were photographed for all eternity. I saw them. I saw the newsreels. I saw them. On the first day. On the second day. On the third day.

The progression of days passing, each documented and archived for its developments and departure from the previous images, attests to a history, a linear mode of narrative captured for all eternity. But he interrupts:


Next we have the beginnings of the theme that brings the oppositions of the horrible and the beautiful into an
uneasy alliance. As she speaks of beautiful flowers we see images of children, of gaping wounds being probed with instruments, burns, fingers missing, an eye being extracted:

SHE: ... on the fifteenth day too.

Hiroshima was blanketed with flowers. There were cornflowers and gladiolas everywhere, and morning glories and daisy lilies that rose again from the ashes with an extraordinary vigour, quite unheard of for flowers till then. I didn't make anything up.

HE: You made it all up.

SHE: Nothing.

Just as in love this illusion exists, this illusion of being able never to forget, so I was under the illusion that I would never forget Hiroshima.

Just as in love. [original emphasis]

(Duras 1961: 18-19)

The play in the texts between all and nothing leads into the first reference to love, which is presented through analogy. Love begins to be linked to catastrophe, and memory to illusion. It is here that the case she has made thus far to the preservation and possession of events begins to open onto its opposite and expose the wound opened by love and catastrophe.

The film now expands from the private sufferings of individuals to the city as social phenomenon. Individuals will be destroyed, lives will be radically transformed, but it goes on. The city is shown now as an angry force and these larger public structures exhibit all the same torments as the private sphere. Newsreels show demonstrations, conflict, public speeches, and mass burials of food, but these visuals exist without narration, orchestrated only by the film music, as if to contest the classic documentary belief in the narrator's omniscience and ability to control the meaning of the images. Unity and dispersal are shown to transpire on a variety of scales, connecting the private and the public, personal history and global history, the life of the person and the metropolis. These oppositions are not represented in an effort to assert a hierarchy, wherein one is diminished and the other heralded as the greater value, but to show their inseparability, and mutual entanglement.
This entire prelude can be seen as an overlaying of desire and death upon the outline of the urban landscape, but the final moments conclude and highlight this project. The dialogue dissolves into a monologue of desire by the French actress accompanied by a monotonous, hypnotic tracking shot where the camera flows steadily down the city streets, across bridges, along train tracks. Her utterances and the visual movement resemble the moments of deep passion moving toward sexual climax, but we see no lovers, just streets, onlookers, details, bicyclists, things being passed as if seen from the handlebars of a bicycle. These images are haunted, appearing as if they had already been lost, or as if they were being remembered from deep within a dream. As we see these lost images passing rhythmically by, we hear her disembodied monologue addressing the lover:

SHE: ...I meet you.
I remember you.
Who are you?
You're so good for me.
How could I have known that this city was made to the size of love?
How could I have known that you were made to the size of my body?
How slow all of a sudden.
And how sweet.
More than you can know.
You destroy me.
You're so good for me.
Plenty of time.
Please.
Take me.
Deform me, make me ugly.
Why not you?
Why not you in this city and in this night so like the others you can't tell the difference?
Please...

(Duras 1961: 25)

It is here that the impulses of desire are most explicitly linked to fatality and destruction. The Other is a phantasm that both redeems and destroys. It is the otherness of the lover that is coveted, but the goal of desire would be to
appropriate that otherness, make it sameness, and absolve the radical threat to individuation. Ecstasy is shown to be the process of resisting, succumbing, and being deformed and transfigured in the embrace of the Other. To achieve love is in some way to interrupt the ambition of desire and embrace the ecstatic.

The betrayal of love
There has been much discussion regarding the transference that takes place in this film between the recounted love affair with the German soldier during the war and the love affair in the present with the Japanese architect. But rather than consider the complex psychological dynamics revealed in this act of recovery, I would like to look at how these two adulterous lovers come to signify the larger betrayal that functions in the filmic presentation of history.

Firstly, the situation that commences the attempt at historical retrieval is adultery. The encounter between the French actress and the Japanese architect is secretive and discontinuous. It is a closed intimacy that does not extend outside their dialogue and this brief moment in time. It is as if they speak to themselves, into a closed box, or to the already dead. This setting highlights something essential about the community of two more universally. The language of lovers bears a certain exclusivity. The adulterous love is born within an even stricter secrecy; it was not intended to travel or be passed on. Each will carry its memory as a kind of loneliness and longing, just as she has carried her dead German lover as her deepest loneliness up to this point of confession, where she turns him into story and in doing so betrays him. To tell their secret, even within another secret, is to reduce it to language and representation.

The affair with the German soldier during the German occupation of France was also by circumstance a deep social transgression held quiet between the lovers. Their encounters were hidden. We see them riding bicycles through a desolate countryside:

SHE: .At first we met in barns. Then among the ruins. And then in rooms. Like anywhere else.

(Duras 1961: 48)
Love is described as a secret place; one that opens up within solitude. It is the attempt to share a place that really permits of no communion, and the promise implicit in this effort is that this secret community is not be turned into public rhetoric or universalized. Whether one loves alone or one's love is returned amounts to the same torment, the same loneliness, and the same impossibility. After her confession/betrayal we see the French actress battling with her solitude, entering her hotel, uncomfortable, at first unable to face herself and exiting the room, retracing her steps, then re-entering and finally coming to terms with the room. She goes to the sink to wash her face, as if seeking absolution, and looks into the mirror. What follows is a combination of speech and interior monologue:

SHE: You think you know. And then, no. You don't. In Nevers she has a German love when she was young ... We'll go to Baravia, my love, and there we'll marry. She never went to Baravia. (Looking at herself in mirror) I dare those who have never gone to Baravia to speak to her of love. You were not yet quite dead. I told our story. I betrayed you tonight with this stranger. I told our story. It was, you see, a story that could be told. For fourteen years I hadn't found ... the taste of an impossible love again. Since Nevers. Look how I'm forgetting you ... Look how I've forgotten you. Look at me.

(Duras 1961: 73)

This is a disturbing and complicated shot. She takes herself as an object in the third person while looking at her reflection in a mirror, and she addresses her deceased lover directly from an interior voice. There is in this monologue an 'I', a 'her', a 'you', and a 'we'. She asks the dead to take her as an object, to look at her, and to see on her exterior the signs of betrayal: as if oblivion, forgetfulness could be seen, as if the dead were capable of
redeeming. Here she is neither herself nor another. Even solitude is divided, and she herself cannot be one. She has found another impossible love, not because her love for the Japanese architect will go unfulfilled due to circumstances, but because the ambition of desire (to share one's solitude, to possess the other, to overcome individuation) is an impossible one. Love itself has thwarted desire. The object of love is destined to slip away and be lost to her. The only way she can remember him, or retain him, is by displacing him with others.

When she recounts the public recrimination following the death of her soldier, she is unmoved by shame, by her family's dishonour, by her shaved head. She can think of only one thing: his absence, his eternal absence, that her life continues, and his death continues, and that this border will never be breached. This otherness, this slipping away of the Other, is love itself. She waits and counts time in her cellar while he lays timeless in the grave. The encroaching oblivion of their encounter is hers alone to resist.

In the cellar she screams out to her dead lover, but she know she is already losing him because she now possesses only a name:

SHE: Your German name. Only your name. I only have one memory left, your name.

(Duras 1961: 57)

The proper name here is divested of all its weight. It is just a name. A word. A signifier. Like the anonymity of the she and the he, and the movement of the film away from being simply a public discourse on Hiroshima (like the peace film and the demonstration within the film), there is here an attempt to get beyond language and traces. She follows this ambition for a real, viable memory through pain and blood, scratching her hands and fingernails against the rock walls of the cellar until they bleed, then licking off the blood. Pain holds you riveted to a spot and may even mark the body with a visible scar. It contests forgetfulness.

The Japanese architect understands that his task is to stand in for the German lover, to revive him, and thus to
ensure his own survival. He pries from the French actress her lost memories, and she gives her secrets. He will be the only one who knows her story, and this shared secret will be their bond. The retrieval of this fading story of love resembles the film itself in its ability to represent at both times a betrayal and redemption. In forgetting, one remembers. For example, he says to her in one of their final meetings:

HE: In a few years, when I'll have forgotten you, and when other such adventures, from sheer habit, will happen to me, I'll remember you as the symbol of love's forgetfulness. I'll think of this adventure as the horror of oblivion. I already know it.

(Duras 1961: 68)

So, to have made the lost German lover into a story is to have betrayed him, to have made him into discourse and turned intimacy into mere narrative; but in so far as one presents the narrative as failure, just as in the sublime, there is a gain through the realization of loss. She will become nameless and forgotten a few years from now, but she will be remembered as 'the symbol of love's forgetfulness'. Likewise, Resnais's work of art, Hiroshima mon amour, serves as the symbol of love's forgetfulness, and in doing so indirectly achieves love.

Conclusion
Kant argues that reason remains victorious through its ability to recognize its limits in the sublime. Postmodern accounts have found in the sublime the fissure of reason that deems its exercise a failure and renders it tragic. If we understand Love as Levinas does, it is this very inability to possess the other that makes love the ultimate achievement of Being. He says in Time and the Other:

'Can this relationship with the other through Eros be considered as a failure? Once again the answer is yes, if one adopts the terminology of current descriptions, if one wants to characterize the erotic with 'grasping', 'possessing', or 'knowing'. But there is nothing of all this, or the failure of all this, in Eros. (Levinas 1987: 90)
Both Nietzsche and Levinas strove to rewrite philosophy, one through tragedy and one through love. Levinas's thoughts on love reveal an opposition to a philosophy that defines itself through desire's quest for totality, authority, and power. Instead he describes philosophy as the pursuit of Love, a transcendence that is 'otherwise than being', and can be described best in terms of the future, the mystery to come. Though Levinas excluded tragedy from this future, I have argued for its inclusion. To bring together tragedy and love is to grant the work of art a sublime capability - the achievement of love.