

The Cure by *Love*

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Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais's film, *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), is seemingly a film about a woman's failure to see.¹ This woman is a French actress, in the last day and a half of an extended stay in Hiroshima. She has been brought there by an international film production, which has engaged her as an actress. In her own mind, though, this woman is in Hiroshima more as a spectator than as an actress—as a spectator of Hiroshima itself. "Hiroshima," moreover, signifies for her not the place in which she presently finds herself, but rather the city which is no more, the city destroyed by the atomic bomb.



In the hope of seeing Hiroshima, the French actress visits the hospital where victims of the atomic bomb were treated, and some still remain. She goes four times to the memorial museum. She looks at newsreels documenting the destruction wrought by the bomb on food, water, and buildings. She stands before piles of hair that fell from the heads of women when they awoke the day after the bomb was dropped; sees skin that was flayed off bodies by the fiery heat; and looks at photographic evidence of limbs that have been twisted into unrecognizable shapes through atomic poisoning.

The day before her return to Paris, the actress lies in bed with a man she has just met, an architect and native resident of Hiroshima. It is here that Duras begins her script, and Resnais his film.² The French woman tells the Japanese man, whose parents were present at the moment the bomb was dropped, that she has seen Hiroshima. "I saw **everything**," she says, "Everything." "You saw nothing in Hiroshima," he responds, "Nothing." The woman reiterates her claim: "I saw it. I'm sure I did." But the word "everything" fails to connect with Hiroshima. It signifies in turn the hospital, the newsreels, and the documentary evidence and reconstructive films in the museum. At one point, it even signifies the other visitors in the museum. And over and over again, the Japanese man denies that she has seen anything.

Hiroshima, mon amour is also seemingly a film about the impossibility of remembering. During the German occupation of France, the French actress will later tell the Japanese man, she was a young girl in Nevers, in love with a German soldier. On the day of the liberation, she was to return with him to Bavaria, to become his wife. But on this very day, the day when her impossible love was to become finally possible, the German soldier was killed by one of the residents of Nevers. The young girl found him as he was dying, and lay with him until his lifeless body was removed the next morning. For a year she mourned him so profoundly that she was in effect blind; she saw nothing but him. So absolute was her scopical fidelity that when the townspeople of Nevers cut off her hair to punish her for collaborating with an enemy, she was hardly aware of being in the public square.

The young girl not only mourned her lover, but determined to continue mourning him. She fortified herself against the possibility of forgetting the German soldier by allowing no contact between her memories of him and her subsequent life.

She related the story of her first love to no one, lest it fade like a ghost in the light of day. She left Nevers forever, so that it, too, would remain both itself encrypted, and a crypt for the German soldier. She attempted to become the stone in which his shadow was forever etched.³

But the French woman was unable to keep the memory of her dead lover forever alive. Over time, her memories of him grew fainter and fainter, until they were hardly recognizable. She began to see the world around her once again. Now, in Hiroshima, comes the ultimate betrayal: she tells the story of her impossible love to the Japanese man. She gives to a second man what belongs to the first: herself. "I told our story," she says to her dead lover in a voice-over monologue late in the film; "I was unfaithful to you tonight with this stranger. I told our story. It was, you see, a story that could be told."

For the French woman, this is no ordinary infidelity; with the recounting of her memories about the German soldier, she has relegated him to oblivion. "Look how I'm forgetting you...Look how I've forgotten you. Look at me," she says a moment later. She has also defined herself as ineradicably unfaithful. If she has given what belongs to the German soldier to the Japanese architect, it is only a matter of time until she will repeat her betrayal with a third man. So certain of this is the French woman, that she experiences her seemingly unavoidable future as a present reality. It is not that she will have betrayed the Japanese man; she has already done so. "I'll forget you! I'm forgetting you already! Look how I'm forgetting you! Look at me!" she says to him in the closing moments of the film, in a nearly exact repetition of what she earlier utters in front of the mirror.

In the scene in which the French woman recounts the story of her first love to the Japanese architect, he makes much the same claim. "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," he tells her; "I'll think of this adventure as the horror of oblivion." In characterizing "oblivion" as a horror, he also seems to refer back to the other story Duras and Resnais tell. He seems, that is, to make forgetfulness the master trope for understanding not only the French woman's relationship both to himself and the German soldier, but also her blindness with respect to the atomic cataclysm. And if she cannot see Hiroshima because she has forgotten it, then it is presumably only through remembering it that she will be able to see it once again.

In the scenes in which the actress recalls her German lover, she not only repeatedly equates seeing with remembering, but also equates remembering with seeing. She thereby makes clear that those terms are synonymous for her. She also helps us to understand the very special meaning which seeing has for her. To look

in the way the French woman seeks to look at Hiroshima does not mean to open one's eyes to perceptual stimuli. Rather, it means to close them. It means to hold the past before one as a present reality, to the exclusion of all else: to see it and nothing else. It means to apprehend what was as if it still were.⁴



Such scopic fidelity poses even greater difficulties in the case of Hiroshima than it does in the case of the German soldier. Whereas the German soldier was once a perceptual reality for her, Hiroshima never was. As Duras and Resnais emphasize, she has no memories of the atomic destruction to forget. On the day on which the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, she was a young girl in Paris for the first time. The weather was beautiful, and the destruction visited on a distant city signified for her and her compatriots not the death and maiming of hundreds of thousands of people and countless animals, but “the end of the war.” In order to see Hiroshima, in the sense that she defines seeing, the French woman must experience not her own past in the form of the perceptual present, but someone else's. She must remember what has never happened to her.

As the images accompanying her narration in the opening scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour* indicate, the actress attempts to do so by looking not with her own eyes at the past, but rather with those of an anonymous assortment of eye-witnesses. Resnais underscores this strange desubjectification of her look in a number of ways. As she speaks, he shows us images depicting what she claims to have seen: the hospital, the memorial museum, newsreels and fictional reconstructions of the bomb damage. However, these images include no point-of-view shots, and no alternating shots of the French woman looking. Nothing connects them back to her. This sequence consequently does not function as a conventional flashback, although it accompanies a narrative about what the speaker herself has supposedly seen.

At one moment in the opening scene, the actress abandons her claim to have seen Hiroshima, and says instead that she has forgotten Hiroshima, just as the architect has forgotten it. But this is only an apparent contradiction of her earlier assertion. In telling the architect that she has forgotten Hiroshima, she is really purporting to have succeeded in installing within her psyche a memory of it, and so to have seen it in the distant, if not the recent past. As she says a moment later: “Like you, I have a memory. I know what it is to forget.” Not surprisingly, the architect now assails not only her claim to have seen, but the prior one upon which it is based. “No, you don't have a memory,” he tells her.

We are not surprised by the Japanese man's vehemence. Both the French woman's claim to remember what she has not lived through and her repeated assertion that to remember Hiroshima is to see it seem nothing less than sacrilegious. Surely the traumatic past belongs to those who have experienced it. Have they not paid with their suffering for their exclusive right to remember it, represent it, or talk about it? And is the verb “to see” not a very inappropriate one to use in this context? Presumably even those who lived through Hiroshima cannot

be said to have “seen” it. To “see” something implies having a certain distance from it. Like the victims of the Shoah, those who lived through the atomic cataclysm must have been much too deep inside it to have looked at it.

But *Hiroshima, mon amour* does not finally tell us that the French woman cannot see Hiroshima either because she has no right to do so, or because it is ultimately unseeable. Indeed, it does not even tell us that the French woman fails in her scopic project. On the contrary, it shows her working toward the possibility of seeing Hiroshima, and finally succeeding in doing so.

Hiroshima, mon amour also insists upon the importance, for Hiroshima, of this looking. Indeed, Duras and Resnais suggest that without it, Hiroshima cannot fully be Hiroshima. Finally, *Hiroshima, mon amour* does not effect a one-to-one equation of seeing and forgetting. On the contrary, it shows a certain kind of forgetting to be the precondition for Hiroshima to appear.



In her “Synopsis” of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Duras maintains that the story of Hiroshima and the story of love are linked not through analogy, but rather through **incorporation**.⁵ In writing the script, she tells us, she sought not to dramatize horror through horror, but rather to make what the bomb had destroyed rise again from its ashes. The agency of this regeneration is the love of the French woman for the Japanese man:

The Japanese is married, has children. So is the French woman....Theirs is a one-night affair. But where? At Hiroshima. Their embrace—so banal, so commonplace —takes place in the one city of the world where it is hardest to imagine it: Hiroshima. Nothing is “given” at Hiroshima. Every gesture, every word, takes on an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning. And this is one of the principal goals of the film: to...make this horror rise again from its ashes by incorporating it in a love that will necessarily be special and “wonderful,” one that will be more credible than if it had occurred anywhere else in the world....⁶

To incorporate something is to put it in the body of another thing.⁷ It is thereby to carry it away from itself—to make it something else. Duras does not attempt to minimize this point. A passage from John Hershey’s account of the damage done to Hiroshima by the atomic bomb is the apparent inspiration for the one I have just quoted from the “Synopsis.” Significantly, Duras includes in her script and Resnais in his film an almost verbatim quotation of this passage.⁸ In so doing, they provide one of most shocking images imaginable of incorporation. “Hiroshima was blanketed with flowers,” the French woman says in the opening scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour*; “There were cornflowers and gladiolas everywhere, and morning glories and day lilies that rose again from the ashes with an extraordinary vigor, quite unheard of for flowers till then.”

Upon a first viewing of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, it is difficult not to be appalled by this horticultural profusion. The atomic flowers seem a travesty of what was, a hideous betrayal of those out of whose ashes they sprang. However, Duras and Resnais work hard to make possible a different reading. They help us to understand that, in addition to being the source of immeasurable suffering and loss, the bomb was an agent of a massive decorporealization. It removed hundreds of thousands of creatures overnight from their bodies, and so from the world. Only through being embodied in a new form can these creatures become visible to us once more, and so secure a place again within the world.



There is another reason as well why *Hiroshima, mon amour* encourages us to be receptive to the manifold forms in which what has been lost can return. It makes the bomb representative not only of the destruction of a Japanese city by the Allies in 1945, but of the derealizing effect our look has upon the world whenever we absent ourselves psychically from the present. As its main narrative clearly shows, we absent ourselves psychically from the present when we refuse to allow it to reincarnate what we have previously cared about.

To see the past within the present, on the other hand, is not only to resurrect the dead, but also to confer Being or a kind of more-than-reality upon the living. In both of the passages I quoted a moment ago, Duras stresses the transfigurative effect upon what might be called the “host body” of its incorporation of the past. In embodying Hiroshima, the love of the French woman and the Japanese man becomes more than itself; it “takes on an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning.” What would otherwise be “banal” and “commonplace” becomes “special” and “wonderful.” The fertilization of the cornflowers and gladiolas with the ashes of Hiroshima has a similar consequence: those flowers grew with an “extraordinary vigor, quite unheard of...till then.”

The incorporation that the Hershey passage dramatizes is one that the look could only passively witness. However, the incorporation described by Duras in the “Synopsis” clearly requires the look for its implementation. The love between the French woman and the Japanese man can reembody Hiroshima and thereby transcend its intrinsic banality only to the degree that we allow it to. Duras and Resnais foreground the necessary participation of the spectator in this miraculous transformation in the opening images of *Hiroshima, mon amour*.

In this sequence, the limbs of two interlocked bodies move slowly, as if in the throes of death. They are covered by ashes, as if they have been caught in a fiery conflagration. Through a dissolve, the ashes give way to a glistening dew, which the still lethargic movements of the two bodies encourage us to attribute to chemical contamination rather than rain. And then, through another dissolve, the scene of death gives way to a scene of love. The two bodies now appear to be locked in an embrace. What seemed in the previous two shots to be a lethargy on the verge of inertia is transformed into a post-co-i-tal torpor.

On a first screening of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, this sequence is unintelligible. We literally do not know what we are seeing. Only at the end of the film are we in a position to look at it again, differently, and to allow it to enact the regeneration described by Duras in the “Synopsis.” This is not because the meaning which the opening sequence contains is then fully available. Rather, it is only then that we understand the central role that we as spectators must play if the past is to live again in a redemptive way within the present.

Surprisingly, it is our own dead that *Hiroshima, mon amour* encourages us to find again in the bodies of the lovers, not those killed in Hiroshima in 1945. It is everything that we ourselves have loved and lost that Giovanni Fusco’s music and Sacha Vierny and Takahashi Michio’s lighting invite us to enfold into their embrace. The French woman is our model in this respect. *Hiroshima, mon amour* shows her arriving at the possibility of seeing Hiroshima not by assuming other people’s memories, but rather by incorporating her own past into contemporary Hiroshima. At the moment that she is able to apprehend the German soldier in the form of the Japanese man, the scales finally fall from her eyes.

By making this subjective appropriation exemplary of true vision, *Hiroshima, mon amour* teaches us a lesson that runs directly counter to all of our usual assumptions about what it means to treat another person, another culture, or another nation with respect. It indicates that the basis for an ethical relation to the Other is not distance, but its exact obverse. Like the author of *On the Way to Language*, *Hiroshima, mon amour* shows us that it is only by making something our own that we can set it free, bring it to “its authentic appearance.” This film also gives the lie to the assumption that through our revisions and reconstruction of the past we cannot help but betray it. It suggests that it is only through reconstituting what we have loved in a new form that we can be true to it.



As critics of *Hiroshima, mon amour* have often noted, the scene in which the French woman recounts the story of her first love to the Japanese man is evocative in a number of respects of the psychoanalytic transference.⁹ In both cases, one person occupies the structural role of speaker, and the other that of listener. In both cases, the speaker also transfers onto the listener feelings that she earlier felt in relation to someone else, and—in the process—reenacts in the present what belongs to the past. And in both cases this reenactment serves to bring into the open what would otherwise remain hidden from view.

In the therapeutic context, it is of course the analysand who talks, and the analyst who listens; the analysand who transfers onto the analyst feelings that have their origin elsewhere; and the analysand who thereby brings into the present what happened long ago.¹⁰ In *Hiroshima, mon amour*, it is the French woman who speaks, and the Japanese man who listens. Beginning in the bedroom of the man’s Hiroshima apartment, and continuing later in a city bar, the woman recounts the

story of her love for the German soldier. This story constitutes what Freud would call “the repressed.” As the actress says, “Nevers is the city in the world, and even the thing in the world, I dream about most often at night” yet “think about the least.” Her narration thereby serves to make what has been repressed available to consciousness. And what permits the actress to exhume what has been buried in this way is her displacement onto the Japanese architect of her love for the German soldier.



The Japanese man not only listens in a very psychoanalytic way to the French woman’s reminiscences; he actively solicits the transference that makes those reminiscences possible. At the end of the scene immediately preceding their conversation in the bar, he says: “All we can do now is kill the time before your departure.” The phrase “kill time” ostensibly means “while away the hours,” but the bar scene shows the actress and the architect literally killing time: annihilating the present tense by revivifying the past. It is, moreover, the Japanese man who first initiates the process of recollecting what has been as if it still is. He does so by assuming the place of the German soldier. “When you are in the cellar, am I dead?” he asks. Later, when she says “I call you softly,” he responds: “But I’m dead.”

But several crucial features of the psychoanalytic transference which are operative in the scenes where the French woman tells the story of her first love have been generally overlooked. First, what is exposed through the transference is not simply a memory or series of memories, but the paradigm according to which the analysand desires. As Freud tells us in *The Dynamics of Transference*, our object-choices are not random. Rather,

...each individual...has acquired a specific method of his own in the conduct of his erotic life...that is, in the preconditions of falling in love which he lays down, in the instincts he satisfies and the aims he sets himself in the course of it.

The names for this libidinal paradigm are many. Freud characterizes it as a “stereotype-plate” which is “constantly reprinted afresh” in “the course of the person’s life”;¹¹ Laplanche and Pontalis think of it as a governing fantasy, which surfaces over and over again in dreams, parapraxes, and neurotic symptoms;¹² and Lacan refers to it as a language.¹³ This stereotype-plate, governing fantasy or language of desire determines the range of possible displacements a person can make. *Hiroshima, mon amour* also lays bare what might be called the “hidden parameters” of desire, although it is closer to Lacan than to Freud in the way it conceptualizes these parameters. The film suggests that what makes love possible is not so much a relatively inert stereotype plate as a constellation of unconscious memories. These memories entertain signifying relationships to each other; as a result of having been combined with and substituted for each other, every one of them refers back and points forward to many others. Indeed, they constitute a language—the language of our desire.¹⁴

The French woman's language of desire might be called "Nevers." Because the Japanese man understands this before she does, it is always about Nevers that he induces her to speak. When she asks why, he answers that "it was there, I seem to understand, that you must have begun to be what you are today." Later, after she has begun mobilizing her language of desire, she too calls it by its name. "I was born in Nevers," she tells the architect, "I grew up in Nevers. I learned how to read in Nevers. And it was there I became twenty."

Nevers is the Japanese man's conversational topic of choice not only because it defines the actress, but also because it is only her relationship to the German soldier that has made possible her relationship to him. As he puts it, "it was there...that I almost...lost you...and that I risked never knowing you." Without those war-time trysts with an occupying soldier, *Hiroshima, mon amour* makes clear, there would be no post-war romance with the stranger in Hiroshima.

What is also left out of most psychoanalytic accounts of the scene in which the French woman tells the Japanese man the story of her love for the German soldier is that the function of the transference is not only to make the analysand aware of the language that she is unwittingly speaking, but also to undo a libidinal fixation. The analysand described by Freud might be said to be in thrall to a memory to which she cannot help but return: to be arrested at the site of a particular signifier. This analysand is unable to displace, and so to form new signifying relations. As Freud explains in another crucial passage from *The Dynamics of Transference*, a portion of every patient's "libidinal impulses has been held up in the course of development; it has been kept away from the conscious personality and from reality, and has either been prevented from further expansion except in phantasy or has remained wholly in the unconscious so that it is unknown to the personality's consciousness." The analytic treatment seeks, through the transference, "to track down the libido, to make it accessible to consciousness and, in the end, serviceable for reality."¹⁵ It attempts to open the path to displacement—to make it possible for the analysand to form relationships between what was and what is.

Hiroshima, mon amour provides us with a striking case of libidinal fixation. In her fear of being unfaithful to the memory of the German soldier, the French woman has isolated it from all else; she has prevented that memory from forming links both with memories from other times and places, and with the perceptual present. We see her both accessing this buried memory and putting it into communication with the present in the scenes in the bedroom and restaurant.

Finally, as Freud makes clear in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as well as in his essays on transference, it is primarily in the form of visual perceptions that unconscious memories return.¹⁶ These memories may assume the guise of what was, or what is, but in either case it is first and foremost to the look that they appeal. And Freud writes that although he always made every effort to help his patients to translate their memories into words, and—in so doing—to relegate them to the past, he finally came to understand that even in the therapeutic context they

could not help but reenact them to some degree as present perceptions.¹⁷

Hiroshima, mon amour also consistently associates remembering with looking. Although the French woman narrates her story in words, Resnais makes clear that it is transpiring for her visually. He stages the actress's first memory of Nevers emphatically as a drama of vision. We see her standing just inside her hotel room, looking, and then a reverse shot of what she sees: the body of the sleeping architect, and most particularly his twitching hand. The camera cuts back to another shot of the French woman looking at the Japanese man in her Hiroshima hotel room, and then provides a second shot of what she sees: the hand of the dying German soldier. In the scenes in which the Japanese man helps the French woman to remember Nevers, Resnais also cuts several times on the look from the present scene to a past scene. As a result, the flashback structure that is missing in the earlier scene is emphatically in place. By portraying the process of remembering in such emphatically scopic terms, *Hiroshima, mon amour* also suggests that our language of desire is more visual than verbal—that it is through the look rather than the word that unconscious signification occurs.



But although the similarities between the psychoanalytic transference and *Hiroshima, mon amour* are even more profound than is generally assumed, there are some crucial differences. The role that the architect plays in the two scenes in which the French woman remembers the German soldier is in many respects the opposite of that ideally played by the analyst. Rather than attempting to function as a blank surface onto which she can displace her feelings for the German soldier, he encourages her to remake the latter in his own image. And rather than figuring only as a temporary stand-in for what could not otherwise be seen, he insists upon his status as her new lover.¹⁸

The architect also invites the actress to put him in the position she originally reserves for Hiroshima. In the opening scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, after repeatedly denying that she has in fact seen anything, he anticipates the moment when looking will become a possibility for her, not only in the future, but also—retroactively—in the past. However, what he predicts her seeing, in the strong sense of the word, is not Hiroshima, but himself. “You will have seen me,” he tells the French woman.

These strange differences that transect the many similarities that link *Hiroshima, mon amour* to the therapeutic transference help us to understand that what the film dramatizes is finally more the cure by love than the cure by psychoanalysis.¹⁹ The psychoanalytic cure brings about the end of a pathological love relation, ostensibly to free the subject for future, non-pathological relations. Those relations, however, lie outside its province. The psychoanalytic cure is even in a certain sense a-relational. Although it precipitates a new libidinal relation in the



form of the transference, it is not complete until this relation has been dissolved. The analysand must not only fall in love with the analyst, but out of love with him.

What Freud calls “the cure by love,” on the other hand, represents the triumph of relationality; it is a cure through and for displacement. The cure by love frees us from fixation through the formation of a new libidinal relation. Indeed, its whole point is to bring about the reconstitution of the past in the guise of the present. To the degree that what was asserts its priority over what is, the cure by love has failed.

Although Freud himself tells us that we must love or fall ill,²⁰ we are not accustomed to conceptualizing love as a cure. We are generally less aware of its medicinal properties than of its powers of intoxication. This is because we are accustomed to thinking in narcissistic ways about love. *Hiroshima, mon amour* encourages us to approach this topic from the other direction: from the direction of what is loved. It asks us to conceptualize love not in the form either of the aggrandizement or rapture of the one who loves, but rather in the form of care for the world. It suggests that creatures and things are in need of this care because without it they cannot help but suffer from the most serious of all maladies: invisibility.

Hiroshima, mon amour is in a complex implicit dialogue in this respect with Freud’s case history of President Schreber. Although *Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia* is generally read as Freud’s primary contribution to the theorization of paranoia, it also represents one of psychoanalysis’s most important accounts of the malady I have just described. Freud characterizes Schreber’s illness as the failure of his capacity to love—as the withdrawal “from the people in his environment and from the external world generally of the libidinal cathexis which he has hitherto directed on to them.” As a result, “everything has become indifferent and irrelevant to him.”²¹

As if to make evident that there is more at issue in the case of Schreber than a lonely psyche, Freud underscores that figure’s own sense that a “great catastrophe” is imminent: the end of the world as such. Freud also provides by way of a commentary upon this state of affairs the following quotation from Goethe’s *Faust*, which attributes to Schreber’s subjective state a surprising effectivity with respect to the larger environment: “Woe! Woe!/Thou hast it destroyed/The beautiful world/With powerful fist!/In ruins ’tis hurled/By the blow of a demigod shattered!...Mightier/For the children of men/More splendid/Build it again/In thine own bosom build it anew!”

Hiroshima, mon amour also tells the story of a subject’s affective incapacity. When the Japanese architect asks the French woman what the atomic bomb meant to her, she at first responds “the end of the war.” She then adds: “Amazement...at the idea that they had dared...amazement at the idea that they had succeeded. And then too, for us, the beginning of an unknown fear. And then, indifference. And also the fear of indifference...” Fear of indifference would seem to describe precisely the psychic condition of the actress at the beginning of *Hiroshima, mon amour*.

Hiroshima does not matter to her, but she feels that it should. She goes to the memorial museum and looks at documentary records and fictional reconstructions of the destruction wrought on that city by the atomic bomb precisely in the hope that they will make it possible for her to surmount her indifference.



In her conversation with the architect at the beginning of the film, she attempts to persuade both him and herself that she has looked in an affectively engaged way at this material. She even offers her tears as proof that she cares about Hiroshima. “The reconstructions have been made as authentically as possible. The films have been made as authentically as possible,” the French woman says. “The illusion, it’s quite simple, the illusion is so perfect that the tourists cry. One can always scoff, but what else can a tourist do but cry? I’ve always wept over the fate of Hiroshima.” But what the Japanese man says in return suggests that the woman cried less because she cared than because she could not care: because, no more than the testimonial evidence of piles of hair and pieces of detached skin, or the twisted metal of a burned bicycle, are the filmic reconstructions sufficient to arouse in her a sense of personal concern. She cannot care because that which alone would permit her to do so—the memory of the German soldier—is sequestered in an inaccessible region of her psyche: because it does not inform what she sees. “No,” is the architect’s response to her account of her tears; “What would you have cried about?”

Like Freud, Duras and Resnais also stress the devastating effects upon the world of this indifference. Indeed, they draw an implicit analogy between the destruction wrought on Hiroshima by the atomic bomb, and the destruction wrought on that city by the actress’s inability to care about it. But if Freud’s Schreber case history can help us to understand what is most at issue in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Duras and Resnais’s film clarifies in turn a number of points that remain obscure in the psychoanalytic text.

First, *Hiroshima, mon amour* shows that care comes into play primarily at the level of vision. When we care about something, we see it. We allow it to appear. This is a world-making event in the ontological rather than the existential sense of the word. Appearance represents the inauguration not of “being,” in the simple sense of the word, but rather of Being. What appears shines for us; it is radiant. It has that perceptual vividness and intensity that we normally encounter only in our dreams.

Second, *Hiroshima, mon amour* helps us to understand why it is that Freud identifies the necessary locus of the world as the human breast: why a creature or thing can appear only when we appropriate it psychically. Resnais and Duras show us that other beings can become visible for us, in the strong sense of the word, only by becoming the transformative reincarnation of what we have previously loved. They can appear, and so Be, only if we allow them to figure forth in a new form from that constellation of memories that determines what we care about. This means inserting them into that network of signifiers that most profoundly defines what each of us is.



In the scenes inside his apartment and the Hiroshima bar, the Japanese man succeeds in inducing the French actress to remember Nevers. For the first time in fourteen years, she speaks about what matters to her. Nevers also becomes visible to her once again: she sees the German soldier in the Japanese man sitting before her. "You are dead...I call you softly...[I] scream [y]our German name," she says as she looks at him; "...I only have one memory left, your name." And as if to make evident that it is first and foremost at the site of the look that this condensation is effected, Resnais cuts from shots of the actress looking to close-ups of the architect. He also shows us the French woman looking at the Japanese man as she equates him verbally with the German soldier, thereby indicating that she is seeing the one in the form of the other. However, although the actress has established a semiotic connection between the past and the present, she is not yet looking in the mode of care. No more than in the opening scene of the film does anything in this scene appear.

Appearance is a complex event, and one that exceeds our usual explanatory categories. It is neither strictly subjective, nor strictly objective; rather, it occurs only where there is a "meeting" of look and world.²¹ This is because although we alone can look in the way that releases the world into its Being, we do not ever ourselves initiate this action. On the contrary, when we light up the world in this way we are always responding to its own appeal to be so illuminated. Creatures and things might be said to intend toward appearance: to solicit the performance of the action in which we engage when we speak our language of desire. The Being that we confer upon creatures and things is thus paradoxically their essence; we do not so much "create" it as "disclose" it.

It is not only that we cannot by ourselves release other beings into their Being. We are also powerless by ourselves actually to see. Looking can take place only where there are perceptual forms. This is because it is only within the infinitely variegated bodies of other worldly beings that our desire can take shape. Without those bodies we would literally see nothing, no matter how strong the force of our desire. Appearance is therefore not just a disclosure; it is a co-disclosure—an event requiring two participants.

In the scenes in which she recollects Nevers, the French woman begins speaking her language of desire, but in a way that excludes the perceptual object. Although she has created a signifying relation between past and present, it is at the expense of the present. She is not seeing the German soldier in the guise of the Japanese man, but rather the Japanese man in the guise of the German soldier; she is not recorporealizing the past, that is, but rather decorporealizing the present. In the immediately following scene, the semiotic relationship between the German soldier and the Japanese man begins to shift. The French woman returns briefly to her hotel room. She rinses her face in the bathroom sink, and looks at

herself in the mirror. As she does so, she addresses her dead lover in the form of what Duras calls an “interior dialogue.” In this interior dialogue she confides that the past is for her no longer a present reality, but rather a “story” about things that took place fourteen years ago. More recent events are also beginning to assert their priority over it.

In the subsequent sequence in which the French woman walks at night through the streets of Hiroshima, she speaks again in an interior dialogue. Her point of address is now no longer unequivocally her dead lover. “I meet you,” says the actress. Here, “you” seems to signify the Japanese man. “I remember you,” she adds a moment later, now clearly speaking to the German soldier. “This city was made to the size of love. You were made to the size of my body,” are the next words she utters. Here, it is impossible to say whether with the word “city” she means Nevers or Hiroshima, just as it is to know whether with the pronoun “you” she is speaking to the German or the Japanese man. As if to underscore this undecidability, the actress herself asks: “Who are you?” A moment later, the point of address stabilizes, but it is now the Japanese architect rather than the dead soldier to whom the French woman speaks.

During this sequence, Resnais cross-cuts between shots of the streets of Nevers and shots of the streets of Hiroshima. The shots of Nevers show a city untouched by modernity. Hiroshima, on the other hand, is here—as elsewhere—emphatically a metropolis from 1959. By day it consists of International-style architecture, and by night of neon lights. We understand now what we have not fully grasped before: Nevers signifies memory, the past. Hiroshima, on the other hand, represents the perceptual present. To see Hiroshima thus necessarily means to see it as it now is, rather than as it once was.

In the bus station scene that follows, the actress finally embraces the imperative to forget the past. She conjures up Nevers once more, but only to say goodbye to it. “Lovely poplar trees of Nièvre, I offer you to oblivion....Silly little girl, who dies of love at Nevers. Little girl with shaven head, I bequeath you to oblivion.” Oblivion, she goes on to say, begins with the eyes. *Hiroshima, mon amour* proves the truth of this axiom. As the actress speaks, the camera holds on a series of by now emotionally charged images of the Loire, the houses and fields of Nevers, the German soldier. Resnais makes the cinematic image say not—as is usually the case—“this is,” but rather, “this was.”

In the final scene of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, the Japanese architect comes to the actress’s hotel room, where she awaits him. “I’ll forget you!” she cries in despair, as he enters; “Look how I’m forgetting you.” One last time, she assimilates the Japanese man to the German soldier, and responds with horror to the possibility that she might in the future see something other than what she has already seen in the past. But a moment later, something extraordinary occurs. The world approaches the look in the form of the Japanese man, and the look approaches the world in the form of the French woman. As a result of this miraculous convergence,



Hiroshima at last appears. Once again Hiroshima signifies both the city that now is, rather than the city that previously was, and the perceptual present in some larger sense. But what exists no longer manifests itself in its everyday guise; rather, through its incorporation of an alien past, it has become “wonderful” and “special.”

The look brings memory to its meeting with the world, and the world itself the new body in which memory is now to be housed. But each participant in the co-disclosure of Hiroshima names not what he or she brings, but rather what the other provides. “Hi-ro-shi-ma,” says the French woman; “Hi-ro-shi-ma. That’s your name.” “That’s my name,” responds the architect; “Yes. Your name is Nevers. Nevers—in France.” Since it is with these last words that *Hiroshima, mon amour* ends, it might seem that Duras and Resnais nevertheless privilege the role played by the look over that played by the world. Without the German soldier, they once again emphasize, there can be no Japanese lover. However, the French woman finally succeeds in seeing Hiroshima only after the architect has grabbed her arm, and looked intently at her. Her look could even be said to originate in his, and to be enabled by it.²³

The film thus in fact ends with a striking dramatization of the intentionality of the world to appear. But what is *Hiroshima, mon amour* in its entirety if not a demonstration of the same thing? At every moment in her long journey toward vision, the actress is responding to a solicitation from outside. Her process of recollection is externally driven. She displaces her desire from the German soldier to the Japanese architect in response to his appeal to her to do so. Finally, it is not for her own sake that she either remembers or displaces; it is, rather, for the sake of Hiroshima. But it is only via the last exchange between the French woman and the Japanese architect that we are ready to learn the very unpsychoanalytic lesson that this profoundly psychoanalytic film has to teach us: the world is not “for” us; rather, it is we who are “for” the world.

NOTES



- 1 Although Alain Resnais directed *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Marguerite Duras wrote the script. And crucial as Resnais's contribution to the final product is, the film is already implicit to an unusual degree in the script. I will consequently refer to Duras and Resnais throughout this essay as co-authors of *Hiroshima, mon amour*.
- 2 The script of *Hiroshima, mon amour* is available in English in Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Wiedefeld, 1961); and in French in *Hiroshima mon amour: scénario et dialogues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).
- 3 This is a metaphor the French woman herself uses. In the opening scene of the film, she tells the Japanese man: "I wanted to have an inconsolable memory, a memory of shadows and stones." As she says these words, the camera cuts to a shadow, "photographed" on stone, of a person who died at Hiroshima.
- 4 Conversely, as Cathy Caruth puts it in *Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1996), 30-32, to see the world around her once again constitutes for the French woman the very epitome of betrayal.
- 5 Resnais also emphasizes the non-analogical relation of the story of the bomb and the story of love in his "Réponse à Michel Delahaye," *Cinéma* vol. 59, no. 38 (1959), reprinted in *Hiroshima mon amour*, in *Cinéma d'Aujourd'hui* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1962), 154: "J'ai lu avec effarement que certain mettaient en balance l'explosion de la bombe et le drame de Nevers comme si l'un avait voulu être l'équivalent de l'autre. Ce n'est du tout cela."
- 6 Duras, "Synopsis," in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, 9.
- 7 Duras herself uses a slightly different metaphor. Where the translator uses "incorporation," she uses "faire s'inscrire en." She says: "Et c'est là un des desseins majeurs du film... faire renaître cette horreur de ces cendres en la faisant s'inscrire en un amour qui sera forcément particulier et 'émerveillant.'" Duras' own text thus characterizes the return of the past within the present more as a signifying operation—as the inscription of one thing within another—than as a re-embodiment. I have nevertheless taken the liberty of using the word "incorporation" here because in the Hershey paraphrase this inscription of one thing within another so clearly involves a recorpo-realization.
- 8 Duras herself identifies it as such on p. 19 of the English script, and p. 21 of the French script.
- 9 See, for instance, Freddy Sweet, *The Film Narratives of Alain Resnais* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 29-30; Richard Benayoun, *Alain Resnais, arpenteur de l'imaginaire: de Hiroshima à Mélo* (Paris: Stock, 1980), 64; Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "How history begets meaning: Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959)," in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1990), 180-81.
- 10 I draw here upon Freud's account of transference, as he presents it in "The Dynamics of Transference," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 97-108; "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 12, 145-56; and "Observations on Transference-Love (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis III)," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 12, 157-71.
- 11 Freud, "The Dynamics of Transference," 99-100.
- 12 J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 314-18.
- 13 Jacques Lacan, "Function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 30-113.
- 14 Lacan provides perhaps his most lucid and compelling account of the way in which unconscious memories signify—as well as the one with the greatest resonance for *Hiroshima, mon amour*—in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 1-127.
- 15 Freud, "The Dynamics of Transference," 100-102.
- 16 See "The Interpretation of Dreams," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 5 (1953), 509.
- 17 Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 18 (1955), 18-19.
- 18 As Freddy Sweet puts it, "his concern is not totally disinterested" (30).
- 19 Freud distinguishes between the cure by therapy and the cure by love in "Jensen's *Gradiva*," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 9 (1959), 88-90.
- 20 Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 14 (1957), 85.
- 21 Freud, "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 12 (1958), 69-70.
- 22 As Heidegger puts it in *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 136: "appearance...is...a self-showing that meets a reception and a perception."
- 23 Heidegger also suggests that the look that makes possible appearance might be said to originate in the world itself in *Parmenides*: "What shines is what shows itself to a looking. What appears to the looking is the sight that solicits man and addresses him, the look" (107).