

Hiroshima Mon Amour, inscription on the body and the promise of justice

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“Our inability to see what we see is of critical concern. To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter. And if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war it is precisely to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be. ...this restriction works to undermine both a sensate understanding of war, and the conditions for a sensate opposition to war. This ‘not seeing’ in the midst of seeing...became the visual norm, one conducted by the photographic frame in the scene of torture.¹

In the past few years, Judith Butler has published two books which deal with pressing ethical issues concerning modern military conflicts. They ask questions concerning what constitutes ‘war, especially post 9/11 and the part that images and photographic representation of ‘bodies’ in war play in the West’s conceptualisation of, ‘grievability; what ‘to grieve’ now means in the rush to execute war on terror and which lives are ‘human’ and hence even ‘grievable’ at all.

Referring to Levinas’ meditation on our absolute responsibility for the ‘face’ of the other in all its vulnerability and how that precariousness and vulnerability may be erased either by the normative repetitions of its framing or simply by absence, Butler makes the case for a *sense* of vulnerability and precariousness as a political necessity, grief, vulnerability, precariousness as new *political* concepts to mobilise a true ethical relation to the otherness of the other *rather than* a confused narcissistic or universalising sense of the normative ideal of ‘humanity’ or nationhood.

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of a political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the ‘we’ is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against [without] denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation...grief displays the thrall in which our relations with others hold us...we are [both] gripped and undone by these relations...²

As Butler suggests this structure of grief is also that of desire-both gripped and undone- and ‘*one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel*’.³

This structure, of being strewn between prospect and memory, memory and prospect is also surely the temporal structure of the ‘promise’.

This is Derrida’s structure of the time out of joint, crossing time, as the promise of justice without end, found in his *Spectres of Marx*.⁴ The promise as a structure without end, is endlessly open to the other, not because Derrida does not think of the need for justice for finite groups in the present, but because even as there are finite groups, there is the infinite within the finite; those who perish in the fire, for whom even the ash does not remain; a community without ends.⁵

Derrida’s temporal structure is complemented by what I characterised as the spatial structure in Jean-Luc Nancy’s conceptualisation of the inoperable community without ends, as our response and responsibility to each other. This is a responsibility premised upon our exposure one to another *not* in the manner of communing but precisely in the manner of difference –touching and not touching in a bodily sense- bound together but apart- indeed, as with Butler, gripped and undone; the body touched and undone by the other and this never coming back to itself.⁶

1) The critical role for visual culture; 2) grief and precariousness as ‘political’ concepts; 3) the structural relation between grief and desire; 4) the ‘promise’ of justice for the dead, all lead me to the question of the fictional film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* which could be said to ‘play out’ all those features.

Hiroshima Mon Amour was first released in France in 1959, directed by Alain Resnais with a script by Marguerite Duras.

Resnais had been commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture to make a film about the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima by the Americans in 1945. Resnais had previously made a documentary film about the Nazi Death-Camps (*Night and Fog*, 1955). He gave up on the initial idea of a documentary on Hiroshima, “just

another *Night and Fog*” and enlisted the help of Marguerite Duras to make a different type of film.

That does not mean to say that elements from *Night and Fog* are not present in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. One of these is Resnais’s interest in how memory and mental images of the camps relate to the actual documented footage, at what point does this documented past become the past and *for whom?* The other is the reference to French collaboration in the process of internment. The questions of ‘*how you remember?*’ and ‘*whose sense of the past is it?*’ are central to Resnais.

Hiroshima Mon Amour produced a sort of “false documentary” as Duras termed it.⁷ From the outset of her synopsis, it is clear that this film is to approach the horror of Hiroshima by way of a calculated subversion of the genre of documentary, which in its reliance upon *the repetition of images* reduces, *by its very amplitude*, the horror to banality.

The film’s approach to the proposition of ‘*false documentary*’ is to place a love story at the site of Hiroshima twelve years after the bombing, a chance one night affair between a Japanese man and a French woman. This story is itself overwhelmed by the female protagonist’s emerging memory of love, horrific death, punishment and ‘madness’ in her home town of Nevers in France, as this previously *repressed* memory is provoked by the new love affair.

Formally it is a false documentary in that it is a film, which *foregrounds its own apparatus* with an elaborate montage of images from newsreels and reconstructions of the aftermath of the bombing and the exhibits in the Hiroshima museum with a voice-over dialogue which, *contrary to the norms of documentary*, *disputes rather than confirms the relationship between what is seen and knowledge of the event*. With this montage of images the male voice-over contends that despite the woman’s voice-over affirmation of the archive footage, she has *seen* ‘nothing’ at Hiroshima.

Seeing/looking at the representations of the aftermath of the bombing is refuted both thematically and operationally. The cinematic camera lens and projection screen ‘plays’ between technological devices and emotional/corporeal states; the camera

movement and editing producing an erotic or atomic charge, ending with the orgasmic declaration of love voiced over the ‘Universal banality’⁸ of scenes of modern Hiroshima.

The viewer is invited to understand the focus on these bodies and the disturbance of the senses it provokes, as a critique of the usual form of visual representation as a means by which a collective response to mass death is instituted. If the erotic touch upon skin disturbs vision as part of a critique of visual representation’s “dissimulation” of the truth, this is accompanied by an orchestration of cinematic effects designed to disorient the spectator. As suggested previously, the idea of testimony is put into question as the woman’s voice-over declarations of the truth of what she has seen are denied by the man’s voice-over.

What she is testifying to, of course, are the images and museum exhibits, already remains, ‘empty’ cadavers of the event. It is here that the film does all it can to foreground the application of the temporal and spatial dynamics of cinema and its apparatus to these objectifications. Tracking and panning violently collide with close-ups of Museum exhibits; charred remains, hair damaged and lost by radiation, bodies stopped in their tracks by the conflagration, ‘shadows cast in stone’ and inter-textual reference to Resnais’ own famed tracking shots in *Night and Fog*, and the walking feet of the Museum visitors which are, perhaps, deliberately reminiscent of Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City*.

There is deliberate confusion between the ‘captured’ instant and the flux, when the spectator is lured to confuse a photograph with an ‘actual’ body, a ‘charred landscape’ with a scale-model, and the theatrical with the literal in the inability to distinguish between ‘actualities’ and reconstructions. All set within the sharp, clean, ‘relentless’ ultra modernist architectural space of the ‘new’ Museum. This foregrounding of the cinematic apparatus is reinforced later by the woman’s role as a film actress and the scenes on the set for the film about peace, with their emphasis on the machinery and artifice of filmmaking and the film elaborately shows the location sets and all the cinematic machinery involved in constructing this commemorative film.

The story that is provoked by the French woman's chance encounter with the Japanese man, at the site of Hiroshima, is of her previous tragic love affair with a German soldier, who is shot dead during the Occupation of Nevers. Her recounting of her madness at his death and subsequent punishment, as her head is shaved for collaborating with the enemy (a *femme tondue*) and she is confined as 'mad' to a cellar, happens in images which, borrow from and repeat those of Hiroshima's aftermath, and is narrated via fragmented 'recall' images, which echo or imitate scenes from the Hiroshima newsreels and Museum.

This contributes to the complex 'time' of the film (it is notable that the affair in the present appears equally riven with separation and loss, as the lovers have met in the interrupted time of a chance encounter and have to 'kill time' before her imminent departure) and the difficulties of distinguishing between what is 'real' and what is 'imaginary'. On the one hand, the woman's personal memory appears to be provoked by and continues to be *imaged by her through the later images of Hiroshima*, on the other hand her *memory images serve as an artistic device through which the collective images of Hiroshima are re-thought and given a bodily connection and a 'truth'*.

The images of Nevers appear to be both a memory emerging from a deeply interiorised (traumatised) event *and* the interminable exteriorised repetitions of death at Hiroshima. And yet it is here that the Japanese man appears to seek a meaning for memory, somewhere else, in the French woman and her *forging* a link with the experience of Hiroshima.

He listens to her, that is, out of his own not knowing, out of the impossibility of confrontation with his own past... he can discover, even as she tells him of the impossibility of her own life, the survival of another for whom she unwittingly speaks in the double testimony of her response.⁹

The Japanese man is drawn by the threads of this story into a quasi identification with the dead German lover of the past. Having 'told her story' and in that sense both remembered by bringing to the 'surface' and thereby 'forgotten' her German lover and 'betraying' him, by *consigning him to a narrative*, the film appears to end with

the separation that has been there all along and no closure. She admits to ‘beginning to forget’ the Japanese man. He is desperate for her to stay, yet treasures a ‘memory of forgetting’. In the end,

‘...*nothing* happens. Both are reduced to a terrifying mutual impotence...They simply call each other once again. What? Nevers, Hiroshima. For in fact, in each other’s eyes, they are no one. They are names of places, names that are not names...’¹⁰

There are different versions of the reactions to the film on its first release but there is some agreement amongst historians of film that it caused a scandal.¹¹ The objections ‘officially’ raised concerned the anticipated displeasure from the Americans over images of Hiroshima, but the film intertwines a number of ‘scandals’; the plight of the ‘*femmes tondues*’, women whose heads were shaved like sacrificial scapegoats for their sexual collaboration with the enemy during the Occupation; the subtle yet pointed reference to the Hollywood film *Casablanca*, which sets love and maverick American resistance against Vichy France at a time (1941) when America’s attitude towards the Vichy was at best ambivalent; and of course, the association of harrowing images of death with an erotic encounter.

The film still generates unease (considerable criticism from the Japanese themselves) because of the apparent analogy it makes between the personal anguished memories of a woman’s tragic love affair and subsequent punishment, and the collective commemoration of a nuclear devastation. Can these be commensurable?¹² In Duras’s terms the answer may be ‘yes’ and ‘no’, in the sense that in both cases the suffering can be deemed to be ‘absolute’ (and *thereby* incomparable). Yet this personal distress is inextricably bound to the world-historical events of World War Two, “To shave a girl’s head because she has loved – really loved – an official enemy of her country, is the ultimate of horror and stupidity”.¹³

I am interested in what we can glean from this film and those particular readings that find its critical import in its approach towards inscribing the impact of mass death on a particularly, whilst we might argue ‘obliquely instanced ‘body’ and how we might connect the approach of this film, its critical impact and what it might be saying to us about the comprehensibility of mass death and the precariousness and indeed ironies

of 'life', with recent critical concerns with how we apprehend the 'grief' 'assigned' to 'bodies' and whose bodies in recent conflicts. What is at stake is precisely how the film is understood as a filmic object that recognises the "crisis of representation" to which it has to respond.

The readings I am thus interested in are those which recognise how this film in contrast to 'received conventions of documentary repetition' *inscribes* the horror on a particular 'body' in the interests of , what we might refer along with Butler as "a *political community of a complex order*".

These readings articulate four major elements:

This is a piece of '*cinema*'; it is *a fiction*; it tells 'one' story' through another as an allegory of sorts; it is prepared to reach the 'ethical' promise of 'justice for the dead' *through the structures of 'desire'*.

Gregg Lambert, reads the film by way of Gilles Deleuze on the basis of Deleuze key philosophical appropriation of Nietzsche's notion of the "true world become fable".¹⁴ Lambert's reading traces some key themes from Deleuze using *Hiroshima Mon Amour* as an exemplary 'text'. Deleuze's writing on cinema, in *Cinema Two: The Time Image*, is profoundly influenced by Nietzsche's destruction of the pretension of philosophical metaphysics to know the truth.¹⁵ Deleuze sees cinema as itself taking up the *problem* of truth, centrally concerned as it is, in its very technique, with 'the world of appearances' and its relation to the 'real world'.¹⁶

What is cinema after all, but a world constructed by pure appearances? ...[inasmuch as] [T]he representation of a truth in itself is revealed as a purely *conventional* means of establishing a relation between terms or elements of a given narration... cinema discovers a new means of producing description that, although it unfolds in the proximity of a 'world' or 'a subject', does not find itself organised or coordinated by the terms that are located there, as if cinema has found the means of disconnecting itself from the 'true world' and becomes immanent to itself, a world of pure appearances.¹⁷

The point to note from this reading of the ‘falsifying’ function of cinema is that it undermines and renders ineffective any distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ in a ‘*moral-juridical*’ sense. On the contrary, it demonstrates the extent to which that which is deemed ‘true’ is that which *has hidden appearances* “and provides them with an alibi”.¹⁸ In the context of Hiroshima this is a crucial question in terms of the *effectiveness of a representation of the event*, ‘the *showing of horror by horror*’, as the means by which the event can be *known*.

So, if memory becomes a function of purely cinematic time, it provides the opportunity to ‘*forge*’ an articulation of memory that allows for the exploration of those ethical-political questions concerning exactly how, for whom and by whom memory is ‘produced’, where the lines are drawn between past, present and future and how we can go beyond or get ‘inside’ *the mere repetition of ‘what happened’ in the past tense*.

The voice-over dialogue raises the issue of the ‘recollection-image’ or ‘documentary-image as an *effect* of cinematic representation. Lambert puts it thus:

...any attempt to construct a series of recollection-images in order to gain access to ‘what happened’ at Hiroshima, in short to ‘Remember Hiroshima’ necessarily leads to an impasse – Nothing is “‘given’ at Hiroshima”¹⁹ – and actually projects a false image or a sterile double of the past that is *evacuated of all its force* (that is, *the duration that connects it to the living body of the present*), producing instead its corpse, or an empty and dead zone in time.²⁰

It is precisely ‘her’ *appropriation* of these images for ‘her memory’ which is to provide Hiroshima with its connection to ‘*the living body of the present*’.

Lambert argues that it is *the ‘made to order’ documentary images that abandon Hiroshima*. The realistic documentary images are in effect, “*a convention that is made in order to avoid or turn away from the subjective condition of mutual past moments, all of which converge around an artificially constructed present*”²¹, but as realist repetition, they imply a logic and *claim a moral force*, an imperative of ‘never again’, combining an informative with a *prohibitive* function. However, such representation has become “*naturalised* ...although it intends to prevent the event it

represents from being actualized, *it must nonetheless assert the 'nullity' (the horror) of the event by reducing it to information that can be endlessly repeated **without touching the place where the past actually resides.***"²²

It is this "prohibitive and pedagogic function which it projects upon future actors"²³, that renders those actors both *passive before the image and confronting a future which is vague and indeterminate, on the basis of this passivity.*

Contrary to this [the impasse of the recollection-image] we might see in 'her' story, as well as in his, a certain 'living connection' that is established with the past.; the desire to seek out the memory of Hiroshima where it was – at Nevers – and to establish a living connection that is signalled by the transference of the past of Nevers onto the past of Hiroshima.²⁴

The *erotic* becomes a vehicle for transference of memory from its *abstract* to its living dimensions, in order to dialectise the relationship between the two. It is the erotic that establishes the memory '*right where it was*', *where the living dwell*, as opposed to the 'in-itself' of abstract repetition. Eroticised repetition, i.e. transference, will 'heal' the trauma which is occluded by *abstract repetition* by the process of working through, however 'demonic' or 'painful' these dimensions of the erotic may be. Such an interpretation of the erotic appropriates it in terms of a necessary immanent *embodiment*, of joy, pain, and suffering felt right on the body in order to transcend them, *transformed* in survival.

By passing through all these stages represented by the journey that is enacted from Riva's [the woman's] point of view, *Hiroshima is thus transformed from the name of death to the proper name of love that survives the horror of its own past.* Thus the story is that of a survivor, one who survives the end of the world and who must live after Hiroshima. In telling her story she offers a way out of Hiroshima by *filling the place with a love that is 'wonderful'* as Duras writes.²⁵

It is here that I would question whether there is a 'way out' of Hiroshima by 'filling the place' etc. This sense of plenitude and 'closure' is not how I read the film's transformative effects in a 'promise' of justice. The promise of justice seems to me to

reside in that which we cannot 'fill', the *limits* of remembrance, representation, and narration. It is here that 'trauma studies' speaks to those important thoughts about the *limits* of memory and the opening for justice that occupy Derrida. As Kyo Maclear suggests:

"Even as we enlist artefacts and images to 'name' and 'picture' the dead *the limits* bid us keep our minds open to the...sufferings that *cannot be* captured."²⁶

"...all description and narrative constitute [not the plenitude but] the limits of remembrance because [the atomic bomb] experience conjures an excess that cannot be fully incorporated we are pressed to explore the ethical implication of partial and 'fragmented' memory...²⁷

As Derrida suggests throughout his writings it is these *excesses, not filled, without closure* that require our infinite responsibility.

Given that this film provides both an *attempt to inscribe suffering on the body as a 'lived' relation for the viewer and at the same time enact the limits of vision*, we can be acutely aware of the 'crisis' of representation whereby we cannot have adequate frames for historical events but it is through this very inadequacy, through this gap; through separation, through the astonishment of 'always unfulfilled desire'

-the film ends with this in Duras's synopsis-

...A moan of utter sadness. The light of the city in her eyes...He looks at her, she at him, as she would look at the city, and suddenly, very softly, she calls him. She calls him from afar, lost in wonder. She has succeeded in drowning him in universal oblivion and it is a source of amazement to her...²⁸

-through as Butler says, *grief as a political community of a complex order*, that the promise of justice remains.

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¹ Butler, J *Frames of War* (London Verso 2009) 100

² Butler, J *Precarious Life* (London Verso 2004) 22-24

³ Butler, J op.cit 23-4

⁴ Derrida, J *Specters of Marx* trans Peggy Kamuf, (New York, Routledge) 1994

⁵ See Derrida, J *Cinders* trans Ned Lukacher (Lincoln USA and London University of Nebraska Press) 1991

⁶ See Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Inoperative Community*. Edited by Connor, P, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 1991 and Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Sense of the World*. Translated by Librett, J, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 1997.

⁷ Duras, M., 'Synopsis', *Hiroshima Mon Amour Screenplay*, (New York: Grove Press) 1961

⁸ Duras, M., Screenplay, 24.

⁹ Caruth, C., 'Duras, Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*' in Caruth, C., *Unclaimed Experience: trauma, narrative and history* 25-56, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press 1996 40-41

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13

¹¹ See Higgins, L., *New Novel, new wave, new politics*. (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1996).

¹² In their book "*Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*", Leo Bersani makes much of the pitting of what amounts to a bourgeois love story against the atrocity of Hiroshima and suggest Resnais's 'vision' was 'compromised' by the involvement of Duras, see Bersani, Leo, and Ulysses Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*, (Cambridge UK), 1994.

¹³ Duras, M., 'Synopsis', 12. The film, in Duras' hands, is a positioned 'anti-war' text, which refuses to disconnect the atrocity of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima with the atrocious behaviour of some of those in France at the time of the Liberation. The violence, conflict and shame of Liberation is a 'truer' picture than the nationalist fervour of celebration with De Gaulle as a national hero which went on to legitimise the government of De Gaulle in 1958 in the wake of the war against Algerian independence.

¹⁴ Lambert, G., 'How the true world finally became fable.' In *The Non-Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2002), 102. In this chapter of his book on Deleuze, Lambert traces the genesis of Deleuze book on cinematic time from Nietzsche's reflections upon the crisis of truth and the will to power.

¹⁵ Lambert summarises this thus: Philosophy and Christianity are exposed by Nietzsche as producing nothing but the history of error, in the guise of truth, by way of the different ways of thinking about the relationship between truth and appearance, which has been at the core of philosophical and Christian thought from Plato to modernity. "Truth is accessible to the sage, the virtuous and religious man; it lives in him, whose figure is identical to the true world qua expressed: 'I, Plato, I am the truth'. This is followed by the several avatars who substitute for this original identification of truth [with]...the truthful man. In the second stage, represented by the Christian world...the 'true world' is inaccessible in the present, but is permitted to the sage and virtuous man through suffering and penance. In the third stage, the true world becomes both inaccessible and undemonstrable, it cannot be promised...although it can be imagined, and this in itself becomes a kind of consolation. [qua Kant's philosophy]. In the fourth stage, the inaccessibility of the 'true world' becomes itself open to question and philosophy finds itself offended by the idea that the source of obligation and truth would derive from an unknown and unconscious source [qua positivism]. Finally, in the fifth and sixth stages, the idea that was found offensive and contradictory in the fourth stage now appears useless and no longer bears any power of obligation; it is no longer worthy of belief or of faith. It is Nietzsche himself who represents both these moments under the name of Zarathustra, a moment, which bears a Janus-face that casts a glance both forward and backward, and encompassing the entire unfolding of 'truth as a history of error'. Thus, the character of Zarathustra represents the twilight of the concept of truth, the death of the truthful man and the collapse of every model of truth (that is, the entry into the long night of insomnia, pessimism and even nihilism); however on the other slope his appearance marks the dawn that breaks into the long

night of insomnia and promises the return of good sense and a spirit of happiness and joy (that is the affirmation of this world which comprises the meaning of the Eternal Return).” *Ibid.*, 92-93. The ambiguity between these two slopes of ‘passive’ and ‘active’ nihilism, summed up in Nietzsche’s aphorism, that with the vanquishing of ‘the true’ world the world of appearances vanishes as well, marks the very character of a certain cinema and literature in Europe post-WW II, of which *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is a key example.

¹⁶ Deleuze, G., *Cinema Two: The Time Image*. Trans. Tomlinson, H. and Galeta, R., (London: Althone Press, 1989. Resnais features amongst Deleuze’s list of post-World War II filmmakers who represented an entire shift in cinema from the ‘movement image; to the ‘time image’. Pre-war cinema could orientate itself to the combination of percept, affect and action in the creation of a unity between movement/action and situation. The crisis in time and history brought about by the horrors of World War II precipitates a crisis in thought reflected in cinema as a critical engagement with time. Action gives way to the complexities of time and memory, which belie the straightforward notion of the image as reflecting the external world and the subject of consciousness. This puts into question the relationship between seeing and ‘reality’ and truth and fiction and this question becomes central to cinema, along with its preoccupation with the internal relations of time within the cinematic event. This is clearly relevant to *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

¹⁷ Lambert, G., *op.cit* p. 94. The quotes from Deleuze are from *Cinema Two: The Time Image*, 132-135.

¹⁸ Deleuze, G., *Cinema Two: The Time Image*, 146.

¹⁹ Duras, M., ‘Synopsis’, p.9.

²⁰ Lambert, G., *op.cit*, 100.

²¹ Lambert, G., *op.cit*, 108.

²² *Ibid.*, 108.

²³ *Ibid.*, 109

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁵ Lambert, G., *op.cit* 110.

²⁶ Maclear, K ‘The limits of vision, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and the subversion of representation’ in Douglass A and Vogler, TA eds. *Witness and Memory the discourse of trauma* (London Routledge 2003) p.236

²⁷ Maclear *op.cit* p. 236

²⁸ Duras, M., ‘Synopsis’ p 83