

DEFERRING THE PROMISE OF THE REAL AND THE ETHICS OF DISPLACEMENT IN ALAIN RESNAIS'S *HIROSHIMA MY LOVE* (1959)

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Abstract

The paper seeks to 'locate' displacement of the gaze and the hermeneutic projects of the male lover in Alain Resnais's films *Hiroshima My Love* (1959) as an ethical response and resistance to his endeavours to procure truth from fixed points of origin. This is achieved primarily through the unnamed female subjects who pose as a hindrance to cumulative understanding and a threat to the interpretative project of their male lover and/or seducer, who seek a straightforward realisation of truth and meaning. The female subject poses as crypt to summon the unrepresentable lurking around the threshold of knowledge, to ruminate on the trauma of her assault and incarceration as a victim of war that surpasses representation. The paper argues that by partaking in the act of negation and refusal she displaces, subverts, and prolongs the hermeneutic anxiety, and defers the archival project of the male protagonist who seek to excavate her past into a self-explanatory causal chain to define, categorise and interpret the present/presence. In doing so, the paper seeks to present trauma as a deconstructive event that defers meaningful closures, encompassing epistemic slippages and betrayal, that are commensurate with the paradigms of trauma.

Keywords: trauma; slippage; anxiety; displacement; causality

Alain Resnais dwells on the aesthetics and ethics of the 'impossibility' of representation. Set in the cold war climate of anxiety and fear, *Hiroshima My Love* (1959) "bears the ineradicable mark of an era still stunned by revelations of Nazi atrocities and traumatized by the spectre of annihilation that accompanied the bomb" (Greene, 1999, p. 31). The film is rooted in mourning, melancholia and trauma, embodied through the female subject who is wounded, missing a sense of identity and even a name (Greene, 1999, p. 32). The paper follows Caruth's theorization of trauma to engage in a critical thematic reading of Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima My Love* (1959) to argue that female subject is a wounded figure who 'haunt' the meaning-making process to summon the traumatic that surpasses representation by delaying closures to the relationship and causing a rupture into the presupposed notion of truth, so as to deny a literal access to the original wound. The displacement of the hermeneutic project of the male lover is an ethical response and resistance to his endeavours to procure truth from fixed points of origin. The female subject pose as crypt to summon the unrepresentable lurking around the threshold of knowledge, to ruminate on the trauma of their assault and incarceration as victim of war and sexual violence that surpasses representation. She displaces, subverts, and prolongs the hermeneutic anxiety, and defers the archival project of the lover who seeks to excavate the past into a self-explanatory causal chain to define, categorise and interpret the present/presence.

In doing so, the paper seeks to present trauma as a deconstructive event that defers meaningful closures, encompassing epistemic slippages and betrayal, that are commensurate with the paradigms of trauma.

Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma is grounded in the "crisis of representation, history and truth, and of narrative time" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 5). Her work on trauma relates to the *aporia* or the paradoxicality of its presence; traumatic events gain its potency because it was not adequately registered in our memory. The paradoxicality relates to the nature of its surfacing which is belated in time and space. It is located at the limits of our knowledge and the threshold of definitions. For Caruth trauma is thus constitutive of fissures and gaps in our understanding, and mostly realised as a "haunting" force that possesses the subject in question. Caruth (1991) writes, "to be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or an event" (p. 3). From a Freudian perspective she insists on trauma as a literal and persistent return of the event in various forms, such as dreams and hallucinations, and various symptoms that bespeaks of the urge to fully comprehend whatever is missing and remains unclaimed. She adds that trauma is also "*true* to the event" even in its repeated flashbacks, and hence, the "truth" of such experiences relates to the symptoms "of history itself" (Caruth, 1991, p. 4). Traumatized subjects are persons burdened with the representation of history that remains undiagnosed and has escaped memory. This is the strangeness of trauma, its "peculiar paradox: that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness" (Caruth, 1991, p. 5). Forgetting is inherent to the concept of trauma, while remembrance is severance. This crisis, gap or slippage in truth, reality and history is the paradoxical way in which trauma operates. Thus, Caruth (1991) defines trauma, via a Freudian lens, as "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (p. 8). Her approach is grounded on the experience of trauma through the symptoms that occur at a later point, and at a different place, and to emphasize of the paradoxical or the *aporetic* nature of it, rather than undertake a vehement search for an origin of the traumatic event.

As an unassimilable event, memory does not adequately register the traumatic experience which is unprecedented in nature. Yet, whenever this memory returns it haunts the subject in question with the sameness of intensity, reduplicating as a copy of the original whenever it surfaces. Roger Luckhurst (2008) claims that trauma is related to Freud's traumatic neurosis, which refers of the "two-stage theory of trauma, the first forgotten impact making a belated return after a hiatus" (p. 8). This apparent 'literality' of the traumatic memory which was originally unassimilated, which returns with the same intensity, at a different time and place, constitutes the paradoxicality of trauma. The belatedness of trauma is inherently a mechanism to reflect on the "scene of unpleasure, by restaging the traumatic moment over and over again" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 9). Hence, the need to return to that scene occurs with a compulsive intensity. Similarly, the impossibility to locate trauma is an indispensable part of comprehending what trauma constitutes of.

Trauma etches a perfect trace of the event in the mind, yet it is subliminal to grasp when it occurs, that imparts a peculiar power to this unassimilated memory. Memories that are not traumatic are easily deformed and constructed at will. Regular memory can be invoked and conveyed through voluntary acts, but traumatic memory because it was not registered, persists at the margins of memory emerging at moments uncalled for. Since regular memory has an experiential aspect to it, whatever is registered under normal circumstances is susceptible to concoction. This is not the case for traumatic memory; it is perennially divorced from intentionality.

Indeed, the cultural theory of trauma is closely related to what Luckhurst claims the “aporia of representation” (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 13) paradigm that is constitutive of a certain strain of poststructuralism relating to a certain ‘lapse’ associated with language and meaning. This lapse, prominent in literature and cultural texts, is associated with the failures and slippages encompassing language and representation. In other words, words fall short in adequately representing the world that exists outside, and this gap or aporia in reference and interpretation leaves ample space for negotiations and further critical responses towards the texts. He reflects quite adequately in his work *The Trauma Question* the critical legacy of the Yale deconstructionists, and a rich confluence of theorists such as Agamben, Lyotard, Derrida, de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and others, who have consequently revised and contributed to the theory of trauma that was preliminarily derived from Freud’s traumatic neurosis. They partake in a rich dialogue expanding on and beyond Freud’s discourse on the elements of sexuality in trauma theory towards a more philosophical enquiry into trauma as a paradoxical phenomenon affecting both individuals and larger communities. However, their takes strikingly converge at the ‘aporia of representation’. Aporia, a term popularised by Derrida in his lecture series bearing the same title refers to a ‘gap’ or a break in thought and speech that impedes the normal flow of communication and reflection. In this apparent gap, the subject is aware of the elements that are ‘missing’, and thereby allows us to critically ponder upon it. In trauma theory, aporia refers to the mode of return, or the way in which traumatic experience makes itself known. At least the ways and forms in which trauma surfaced pointed to the aporia in one’s memory machine. It is both a gap or a break in the normal processes of memory, the ways in which it returns and the ‘kind’ of experience it is. Luckhurst (2008) succinctly frames aporia as the “significant moments of apparent contradiction or irresolution . . . a blocking of passage, a stalling or hesitation, a foot hovering on the threshold” (p. 6): an event that is caught in-between experience and forgetting, absence and presence. Michelle Balaev (2014) reading on a similar line as Luckhurst claims that Caruth’s view is based on the aporia of language and representation, suggestive of “linguistic indeterminacy, ambiguous referentiality, and aporia” (p. 1). The unrepresentable blow to the psyche and the body, the dissociative symptoms that torment the victim, and failures to adequately mark the affective qualities even as it susceptibly etches its claws, encompasses the failures of representation. It is in the apparent silence of the self and the numbness of the response, that trauma unravels its presence.

Trauma disorients and distorts the power to register and account for this apparent contradiction of being. It is a force that negates voice and vocality. The following pages suggest that the female subjects as the wounded figures 'haunt' the meaning-making process of their lovers suggestive of their agency to displace the archival project which is equally traumatic. It argues that the act of witnessing is inherently guided by a 'crisis' of representation because remembrance is severance or incarcerating the self by recalling the traumatic memory of violence.

Hiroshima My Love

Certain blockage prevailed in the early 1958. Already commissioned to work on a short documentary on the atomic bomb, Resnais was unable to proceed. Documenting Hiroshima as Resnais claimed, was artistically and ethically vain, for the impossibility to document the truth of horror impedes a coherent 'objective' documentation of what 'was'. Perhaps Resnais's experience of documenting the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek for *Night and Fog* (1956) perforated a silent mourning and melancholy for the 'lost' time. James Monaco (1978) writes, "the facts of the bomb were different enough from the facts of the death camp, it is true, but the perceptual effect was the same: memories, knowledge of incomprehensible suffering, pain and death" (p. 33). Thus, what was intended as a documentary on the horrors of the atomic bomb, soon turned out to be his first feature film, *Hiroshima My Love* (1959). A film about infidelity and adultery, the oblique horrors of nuclear explosion and war infect their personal present. *Hiroshima My Love* (henceforth referred to as *Hiroshima*) is a work that arises out of the ashes of horror, the guilt and the labyrinth of personal traumas and loss. The historical event and the atrocity that followed was critically analysed from a personal narrative of trauma and incarceration. Inspired by the screenwriter Marguerite Duras's *Moderato Cantabile* (1958), a novel about recounting the private horror of a traumatized woman, the film is centred around a short-lived romance between the French actress from Nevers and a Japanese architect/engineer. It is her infidelity at the end of the narrative that implicates the lingering effect of trauma making an abrupt closure to their passionate affection shared mutually at the beginning of the film.

The film begins at the very closure of the 'film', the action beginning the day before she departs to France with only a remaining scene to shoot. But the mere endings or closures of the film also announces certain peripheral openings: a romance that is outright banal, a renewed desire for eternal love and remembrance, reliving the traumatic past through another body, a cinematic opening of a fiction that documents the internal realism of pain. Both the unnamed lovers also the victims of the Great war, ricochet the impossibility and agony of remembering. Thoroughly entangled in each other's arms, the lovers in this brief episode of romance deny and defer, resist and contest, negate and affirm of seeing, and remembering. Julia Kristeva (1980) writes, "The text and the film open not with the image of the nuclear mushroom as initially planned, but with parts of clasping bodies belonging to a couple of lovers who might be a couple of dying people" (p. 321). The visualities churn out a chiaroscuro of pleasure, love, death, suffering, and apocalypse.; mutilated in love, covered with "the ashes, the dew, of atomic death- and the sweat of love fulfilled" (Duras, 1961, p. 8).

The feeling of horror and suffering suggests the "funnel-shape structure, moving from the infinitely vast to the infinitely small" (Burch and Resnais, 1960, pp. 27-28). The voice of the unnamed Japanese architect negating the affirmation of the French actress "HE: You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing/ SHE: "I saw *everything*. *Everything* (Duras, 1961, p. 15). She affirms and he negates. Her 'everything' consists of the calculated existence of maimed and mutated humans, materials, artifacts, patients, photographs, stones, models, metal, flesh jars, hair, exhibited or preserved or treated in the hospitals, museums, newsreels and more. But the illusion of knowledge is just so 'real', so intricately laced and projected, that tourists cannot but sob. She says,

The reconstructions have been made as authentically as possible.

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, really, but cry?

I have always wept over the fate of Hiroshima. Always. (Duras, 1961, pp. 17-18)

Just as in love, remembrance is an illusion. For the first fifteen minutes her voiceover inspects the images and photographs into a coherent continuum of cause and effect. Seeing is knowing. But there is a restless need to see everything in Hiroshima, to be destroyed and deformed by it. He asks,

HE: And why do you want to see everything at Hiroshima?

SHE: Because it interested me. I have my own ideas about it. For instance, I think looking closely at things is something that has to be learned.

To learn is to remember, to resist the oblivion of forgetting. To escape the "fear of indifference" (Duras, 1961, p. 33).

The man, vehement in his pursuit, denies her memory. "HE: No you don't know what it is to forget...No you don't have memory (Duras, 1961, p. 22). But what is *Hiroshima*? Hiroshima is marked by impossibilities, hallucinations and negations. Duras writes, "All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima. The knowledge of Hiroshima being stated a priori by an exemplary delusion of the mind... Nothing is "given" at Hiroshima. Every gesture, every word, takes an aura of meaning that transcends its literal meaning" (Duras, 1961, p. 9). But Hiroshima, as the film reveals and enacts, is also sacred, a centre that perpetuates the differences, hostilities and converges them. A space where Duras writes, that can

make this horror rise again from the ashes by incorporating it in love that will necessarily be special and "wonderful"... a place that death had not preserved... the common ground (perhaps the only one in the world?) where the universal factors of eroticism, love, and unhappiness will appear in an implacable light. Everything except at Hiroshima, guile is an accepted convention. At Hiroshima it cannot exist, or else it will be denounced" (Duras, 1961, p. 10).

For Duras Hiroshima is also Nevers. The French actress was born in Nevers, located in the province of Nièvre in France, beside the river Loire. The place she abandoned eternally just before the atomic bomb was dropped. At Nevers, roughly eighteen, she fell in love with an enemy, a German soldier during the German occupation in France.

The romance bloomed passionately, to a point of being transgressive and revolutionary. She was consequently disgraced, head shaven and thrown into the warehouse at Champs de Mars and later in her parent's cellar.

She is transient and floating. The internal monologues, at the very end of their romance and the film, is where we discern her 'cryptic self'. As if, a rehearsal of the eternal departure takes place, within the interior space where both the lovers are present. She haunts the Japanese and displaces him from his search for meaning and truth. Being haunted is a condition of being possessed. Caruth says they are possessed by an event or a memory image that grasps them. The past is a character, which we seek to grasp absolutely. But in our desperate search to reclaim it as a part of a continuous project, we fail. This slippage is not only an ontological failure, that is our failure to absolutely frame our past being or self, but also an epistemological failure, for whatever is known further slips away from us or fades. We can but only wait for the return, in a fragmented kind of way, through memories and flashbacks that haunt us, allowing further comprehension. Caruth in discussing Freud's parable of Tancred, argues that certain wounds return, only by the means of haunting, because it is unassimilated, and known at a future point. Both the characters in the film are pursuing some form of truth to seal a connection between the past and the present. But the 'now' is also problematic within the domain of the film, because now and then, the real and the reel are split irrevocably.

The nameless French actress narrates her past while engaged in a passionate encounter with the Japanese architect or engineer. Her past involves a hopeless love affair with a German soldier during the German Occupation of France, who was killed the day of their elopement, on the day of French liberation. She bears witness to a different kind of trauma, a survival that resonates with the nation or a community of survivors in Hiroshima. But what is the common ground of their survival? Both are incarcerated 'sites'. her body and her personal trauma serve as a reference to the subliminal effects of a nuclear disaster. Such that the atomic explosion and the mutilation of feelings, go hand in hand (Kristeva, 1980, p. 231). Quite antithetically, she exists because Hiroshima as a site of destruction exists. In this context, Kristeva (1980) writes, "We are survivors, living dead, corpses on furlough, sheltering personal Hiroshimas in the bosom of our private worlds" (p. 236).

What we witness in Hiroshima is the depiction of a 'crypt' or a 'psychic tomb'. A crypt in its etymological sense is the vault that protects the dead. The refusal to mourn the death is a pathological problem that leads to 'incorporation' or "taking into the body the lost object itself, literally consuming the object but doing so precisely to preserve it, to deny loss" (Wigley, 1993, p. 143). Incorporation or 'preservation repression' is the confinement of unbearable "unwanted, shameful, or untoward reality and our tendency to isolate" such realities to an "inaccessible region of the psyche" (Abraham and Torok, 1994, p. 102). This object of loss that involves pathological mourning is swallowed in. It is appropriated within the self as an 'other' strange or uncanny body. It is swallowed to quarantine the dead, to prevent any risk of further contamination or disfiguration.

Mark Wigley (1993) writes, "The forbidden object is thrown up into some folds in the body's limit, hidden in a space that is neither inside nor outside." (p. 144). The contamination pertains to the exposing and destroying of a secret pleasure that exists with the dead. The secret is the trauma. This fantasy of incorporation is necessary in order to keep the pleasure alive. The crypt hosts the dead as an unnameable ghost. The very fact that her identity is synonymous with the place, the cryptic structure of her identity is further intensified. She incorporates the fantasy of incorporation; of the impossible love affair with the enemy side, a shameful secret revealed for the first time while repeating the pleasure through 'adultery' with the Japanese man. The Japanese lover, at once seems rapt at her opening up, and persuades to excavate deep within her memories. It is an almost impossible exorcism because the crypt not only hides the secret but the secrecy of the secret.

Hiroshima is nothing but the return of the traumatic memory. Her desires, presence and present are contaminated by the absence of mourning. In its very nature of being phantomatic, the cinematic text is encrypted with these traces and unresolved mourning. This trauma is the secret which she has preserved within her; Abraham and Torok (1994) argues that a crypt houses trauma as a secret entombed within the body-vault that leads to "internal psychic splitting" (p. 99). This one body hosts two selves, the living, and the dead. Her cryptic self is revealed when she says, "The moment of his death actually escaped me . . . because even at that very moment, and even afterwards, yes, even afterwards, I can say that I couldn't feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine. All I could find between this body and mine were obvious similarities, do you understand? (Shouting)" (Duras, 1961, p. 65). But she is also the secret, that has been buried alive in the vault, the cellar. It is through this short-lived affair, that she comes to recognize the dead as the departed. It is an act of mourning we participate with her, the past suffusing with the present, emphasizing the difference between the bodies; in accepting the loss she participates in introjecting. *Hiroshima* is introjecting trauma and loss through the process of psychic nourishment, growth, and assimilation of the dead; an ability to surpass and survive the insurmountable trauma of loss or war. Hence Kristeva (1980) writes, that the heroine is a crypt sheltering a "living corpse" "like a dead woman- severed from other and from time... she is mad" (p. 233). She is one with the dead, her lover, creating a strong identification with the object of mourning, and hence the absence of mourning (Kristeva, 1980, p. 233).

In an interview, referring to the heroine of *Hiroshima*, Alain Resnais says, "During the shooting we exchanged all kinds of stories about her, for example, that she's a mythomaniac and that the story she tells to her Japanese friend never happened, or else that she's not really in Hiroshima but in an asylum and she's inventing the whole story" (Higgins, 2021, p. 5). The film maintains that constructing the national past through archival memory and reconstruction of a personal past through memory is a flimsy affair. But "This memory is one that she has kept to herself, that she has, until now, resisted telling. As the film reveals in a late scene, Riva equates narrating this story with forgetting and with infidelity to her early lover, and she evinces a profound ambivalence vis-a-vis this narration" (Anderst, 2011, pp. 360-361).

The ambivalence associated with narration and betrayal, of life and death, of liberation and punishment is thoroughly enmeshed in the film's narrative technique, where super-imposed images translate the haunting power of memory. Caruth (1995) writes, "The focal point of her story is the simultaneous occurrence of the event of liberation and the event of his death" (p. 30). And it is through her trauma and pain associated with remembering that is at the centre of the film. Hiroshima is a setting and a space to encounter the traumatic narrative. It is a text that is invested to think of the origin as lost, that a coherent assimilation of the past, is impossible to trace. The cinematic medium becomes a conduit to understand and approach this incommensurability. Trauma deconstructs absolute meanings to surface the left out and the missing.

Conclusion

Woman as (an allegory of) truth and femininity as the essence of truth have been traditionally depicted to lessen the hermeneutic anxiety. Kaja Silverman writes, cinema projects the male lack 'onto' female subjects. She writes that film theory at its very inception is haunted by the spectres of loss or absence, it is projected onto the female subjects to substantiate this haunting (Silverman, 1988, p. 2). This haunting of the 'lack' is associated with the loss of male subjectivity, threatening to displace the stability of the cinematic space. The feminine and the spectral are the figures or figurations of 'undecidability' that seeks to perturb/displace logos, truth, certainty, and anything that represents the absolute. Similarly, the paradoxical nature of the phallogocentric structure as Laura Mulvey rightly articulates depends on the image of the 'castrated women' to give meaning. Mulvey (1975) writes, the "An idea of woman stands as lynch pin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies." (p. 803). She is the image or the erotic object not only inside the story but also for the spectators who look at from the outside. Both these looks are mutually at work. The man inside is the bearer of the look and it is through her body as Silverman and Mulvey argue, lessen the sutures and cuts or the behind-the scene through the spectacle of the women's body to ensure realism. Mulvey (1975) writes, "the male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (p. 810). Contrarily female figures can displace the look and deny being a 'fetish', both inside and outside, by withdrawing the male subjects' desire for coherence and realism in making visible the illusion. The chapter has sought to bring together trauma and deconstruction into close quarters. Stated differently, the paper has suggested that the Nevers poses as a deconstructive figure to displace the interpretative project of the male lover as an ethical act, to suggest the paradoxicality of registering trauma in its impossibility of representation.

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