

War Survivors' Fractured Identities in *Hiroshima mon Amour*

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War survivors can suffer from a certain loss of memory and/or an incapacity to articulate their experience. These symptoms of trauma can be either permanent or temporary. The personal experience of the survivor, set in a particular cultural context, can also lead to a crisis in the individual's sense of his/her national identity, by which I mean identity defined in terms of the country to which one belongs. Many artists have tackled the subject, more often than not from an autobiographical perspective. In this article, I would like to examine how this question has been represented in literature and cinema, namely through one very notable *ciné-roman*,¹ *Hiroshima mon amour*, made in 1958. The encounter between a French woman and a Japanese man at the heart of the narrative, although it takes place in Hiroshima, triggers memories of events which took place during the Second World War in France.

I shall examine the role of testimony in this dual circumstance, as well as the literary and visual devices used by Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais (the writer and director respectively of *Hiroshima mon amour*) to represent the different natures and effects of testimony, especially in terms of personal trauma and identity. I shall then look at the historical context of this *ciné-roman*, and identify its wider significance with regard to the political implications of cultural trauma on an individual's sense of national identity.²

1. The Role of Testimony

The perspective of *Hiroshima mon amour* is that of a personal experience, and specifically the testimony of a survivor of the Second World War. Before making *Hiroshima mon amour*, Alain Resnais had already made a film about the Second World War, his famous documentary on concentration camps, *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*), in 1955. In *Night and Fog*, he had managed, through a very effective contrapuntal juxtaposition of peaceful colour images of Auschwitz ten years after the war and unbearably precise black and white archive pictures, not only to refuse the effacement of memory, but also, in a manner of speaking, to summon the dead from their graves to testify. In this documentary, the anonymous faces of the inmates, reduced to a common condition and expression of suffering, represent the crushing of identities, both individual and national, in the concentration camps. The voice-over, a text written by a survivor of the camps, the poet Jean Cayrol, and delivered in a monotone, as if it came from the collective grave of the victims, expresses the permanence of their common trauma.

When Resnais was commissioned to make a documentary on the atomic bomb by the producers of Argos Films, for whom he had already made *Night and Fog*, he had difficulty at first in imagining a new way to deal with the subject of war that would do it justice, so he decided, as he had done in the past (and would continue to do), to ask an established literary figure to help him with the script of what was to be his first feature film. He chose Marguerite Duras, who, in her own writing, had shown a clear interest in using personal experience to explore the human psyche. One of Duras's

literary techniques consists of the insertion of autobiographical material into her fiction, hence her interest in the use of testimony. She wrote in the synopsis of the screenplay for the film that the characters' "personal story, no matter how brief it may be, must always dominate HIROSHIMA."³ The love scenes at the beginning of the film are interspersed with images of Hiroshima after the impact of the bomb, with the physical evidence of the devastation either evoked or plainly visible on human bodies. The visual effect is similar to that of the alternation of archive pictures with colour images in *Night and Fog*: it gives the viewers the uncomfortable feeling that the most horrific events of war can be forgotten, that life goes on, as the natural growth of plants testifies (a theme found in both *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima mon amour*). The personal story, therefore, is of crucial importance, because, drawing on an intensely emotional experience, it is presented as a counter to nature's indifference, as a trauma which, precisely, cannot be erased.

Hiroshima mon amour examines the short but intense and compelling encounter between a Japanese man and a French woman who, through the emotions triggered by this encounter, recalls a personal trauma suffered during World War II in the French town of Nevers. This trauma is directly related to the attitude of her compatriots at the time of the liberation of France,⁴ and to the death of her lover, a German soldier killed by an unidentified, but undoubtedly French, sniper. They had planned to go to Germany to get married after the war. Instead, she found herself unable to mourn him properly, imprisoned as she was in a general atmosphere of hostility and violence: like other women who had had relationships with German soldiers, her head was shorn publicly, in the town square, and her dishonoured family could think of nothing better to do with her than to lock her up in their cellar, pretend she was dead and, after her hair had grown again to a so-called "decent" length, let her disappear from their self-righteous and typically provincial French lives. The film joins her twelve years later, in Hiroshima, where she is acting in a film.⁵ It is her last day in Hiroshima. The night before, she has met a Japanese architect. The first verbal exchange we witness between them is on the subject of Hiroshima, but the dialogue is about to shift to her recounting, for the first time ever, her ordeal twelve years earlier in France.

I have focused thus far on the woman's story because it largely dominates the film; but this does not mean that the story of the Japanese man is not relevant. He was a soldier away from Japan at the time of the bombing, and was spared. His entire family, however, was killed. He is, therefore, interested in *listening* to the testimony of a civilian war-crime witness, while she needs to *give* her testimony. Viewers are sometimes frustrated that his experience is left untold, but in reality his presence in the film is crucial as he acts as a catalyst for her testimony. During her narration he occasionally acts the part of the German soldier. Spurring her on to speak, he asks at some point: "When you are in the cellar, am I dead?"⁶ In this way he shares her burden and her solitude. Their common pain at the war crimes they either witnessed or of which they were, directly or indirectly, the victims, is what brings them close together, possibly unconsciously. For the first time since her ordeal, the female protagonist is able to communicate what happened to her in Nevers; she has never been able to speak about it, even to her husband. The unexpected encounter with the man in Hiroshima revives the memories of the events of Nevers. And her strong attraction towards him encourages the possibility of remembrance: he inspires in her the same combination of passion and pain that she once felt for the German soldier. She suddenly has a sense of

having found, for the first time since her trauma occurred, a responsive interlocutor: “Naturally you can also understand this”,⁷ she says to him, referring to the near-madness of the grief and resentment she felt following the events in Nevers. These have never left her. She tells her Japanese lover that Nevers is “the thing” she thinks about least and dreams about most.⁸ Her story becomes the articulation of what has been, until now, inexpressible.

The woman thinks she understands the pain and horror of Hiroshima because she considers that Hiroshima is linked to her personal history. But, in the early stage of their relationship, when she speaks about Hiroshima, the man continually denies the knowledge and understanding she claims to have of Hiroshima. For Duras, it is “impossible to speak about HIROSHIMA. One can only speak about the impossibility of speaking about HIROSHIMA. The *knowledge of HIROSHIMA* being, at the outset, presented as an exemplary delusion of the mind”⁹ — hence the choric line in the dialogue between the two protagonists: “You saw *nothing* in Hiroshima. Nothing. / I saw *everything. Everything.*”¹⁰ He will only begin to understand why she may legitimately feel this way when she starts relating her story to him. According to Shoshana Felman,

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.¹¹

The French woman thus concentrates her attention on Hiroshima because it is both related to her experience and removed from it, which gives her enough distance to discuss Hiroshima objectively, something she cannot do with her past experience in Nevers. At first, instead of talking about herself, she describes the plight of the victims of Hiroshima, using secondary sources of information, like the museums in Hiroshima or the news-reel images of the victims of Hiroshima, punctuating her various examples with empathic phrases such as “I did *see them*” or “I did not make *anything* up” or “I know *everything*”¹² — claims which are all in turn denied by her partner: “You did not see anything.” “You made everything up.” “You know nothing.”

2. Personal trauma and identity

When she eventually offers her own narrative, the French woman does not give practical, objective details such as dates and figures. She no longer offers borrowed memory but rather a recollection of an agonising moment in her life. She describes how she stayed with her German lover until his body went cold, and how she went mad with grief after his death. She describes what was done to her by the people of Nevers, alternating direct and indirect speech, a device denoting the mental numbness generated by the traumatic pain she suffered: “They shear my hair carefully, all of it. They think it is their duty. [...] Someone says she should be paraded through the town.”¹³ She seems to have been more or less oblivious to the injustice done to her then, because her thoughts were focused principally on the idea of the death of her lover. It is clear that, because she repressed the trauma, she did not undergo a natural mourning process. The tone of her voice while telling her story is also reminiscent of that of the commentary of *Night and Fog*, reminiscent, therefore, of that film’s ‘voice

of the dead'. Looking at her own reflection in the bathroom mirror, she says to her dead lover: "You were not quite dead. I told our story [...]. It *could* be told, you see."¹⁴

The device of the mirror is important. The mirror, like the river which plays a big part in *Hiroshima mon amour*, has been used elsewhere in cinema (as in literature) to signify death, or the passage from the world of the living to the world of the dead. In Cocteau's *Orphée* (1949), for instance, when the hero tries to reach his deceased wife, Eurydice, he passes from one dimension to the other through his bedroom mirror. The orphic theme is also one that was central to a film which came out at the same time as *Hiroshima mon amour* (in 1959) and which received the Palme d'Or in Cannes that year, *Orfeu Negro*, by Marcel Camus. And Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1984), which deals with the testimony of the victims of the Holocaust, also resembles Resnais's work in this regard, as Emma Wilson points out:

Lanzmann films the verdant countryside and the extraordinary peace which surrounds the place of horror. We see a middle-aged man in a boat which is steered by an elderly boatman along the course of the dark river Ner. The image signifies a crossing over. The river recalls for a moment the river Styx which mortals cross to reach the Underworld in Greek mythology. [...] Lanzmann illustrates visually the path we will take to enter his film and the Underworld which will be his subject.¹⁵

Jean Cayrol, the script-writer of *Night and Fog*, was, in his literary work, interested in the figure of Lazarus, another mythic figure associated with death and resurrection. The cathedral mentioned by Duras in the screenplay was originally supposed to be that of Saint-Lazarus.¹⁶ This symbolism is related to an aspect of testimony, that of the sense of guilt which haunts survivors, and which, according to psychiatrists in this field of study, is quite typical amongst people who have witnessed torture or murder during a war, but who, having survived, feel as if they have betrayed their companions, as if they have left them behind. The French word "*hantée*" (haunted) is emphasised in the indications given by Duras during the crucial narration scene in the café. The French woman considers herself a traitor to her German lover; it is as if telling their story had undermined the intensity of what happened between them, both in terms of extreme passion and extreme pain, reducing and banalising her trauma in the process. Walking alone in the dark in Hiroshima, she recalls scenes of her first love and castigates herself: "Sad little novelette, I consign you to oblivion. [...] Little girl from Nevers. Little slut from Nevers. [...] Shorn little lamb of Nevers I consign you to oblivion tonight."¹⁷

According to Willy Szafran, the transformation of an endless mourning — by which he means a mourning that knows no end because of a sense of guilt which is never overcome — into a "normal clinical" mourning, could be achieved through a phenomenon referred to as "*historisation*", in which the survivor attempts to transcend his/her personal drama by placing it in its historical context.¹⁸ This is what the French woman unwittingly endeavours to do: by focusing her attention and speaking of the horror of an historical event, she slowly finds herself able to speak about her own trauma and then able to deal with it — which helps her, eventually, to face her loss. The end of her act of witnessing may be seen as the end of her mourning, if not altogether as her recovery. This process is represented visually by Resnais in a

succession of images and sounds mixing Hiroshima and Nevers. As the woman walks the streets of Hiroshima alone in the darkness, all that is heard is her interior monologue, addressed to both her German lover and her Japanese lover (who is following her from a distance). This monologue is accompanied by a succession of images of Nevers and Hiroshima, underlining her experience of despair in Hiroshima, which really started many years previously in Nevers. The soundtrack (Japanese music, street noises and outside voices), accompanied and juxtaposed with some easily identifiable French cultural features (such as street names, plane-trees, slate-roofed houses), emphasises the impossibility of forgetting, or of recovering from, the trauma of war. The realisation and acceptance of this eventually allow the protagonists to recognise their identities, including their national identity.

There is a double irony in the temporal indications concerning the woman's grief: it spans the time of the liberation of France, whilst her own liberation, represented by her departure from Nevers and her arrival in Paris, coincides with the bombing and the *news* of the bombing of Hiroshima. It is precisely because Hiroshima is synonymous for her with extreme pain, the kind she suffered to the point of near-madness whilst other people were celebrating the liberation of France, that she seems to have detached herself totally from her French identity, especially from the *renewed* sense of French identity generated by *la Libération*. Describing the evening of the day of the cropping of her hair, she says: "*La Marseillaise* is being sung all over the town. Darkness falls. [...] My father's pharmacy is closed because of the disgrace. I am alone. Some people are laughing. In the night I make my way home."¹⁹ She clearly expresses here the total break between herself and her compatriots, from the avenging crowd responsible for her humiliation, and also the distance between herself and the geographical and political contexts of her situation. Without emotion, she describes what is going on and what she is doing, cut off from her people, place and time.

Although the nationalities of the characters are underlined throughout the film, the notion of a national identity is clearly questioned here. The French woman has become rootless, and identifies with all the victims of war, without any distinction of nationality. The film she is acting in — the reason for her presence in Hiroshima — is about peace. She tells the Japanese man that it is not a French film, but an "international" one.²⁰ While she is constantly referred to as "la Française" in the script, she is not really seen as a representative of her country. She plays the part of a nurse in the documentary being filmed, a role she already had in Nevers and which brought about her encounter with the German soldier (he had hurt his hand and had gone to her father's pharmacy to have it looked after). This time, however, she is a Red Cross nurse, a role which develops the character's statelessness (Duras adds in the script commentary that she should be perceived as the eternal nurse of an eternal war²¹).

This loss of identity is further reflected in the fact that none of the characters has a name. She is "Elle" (she) and he is "Lui" (he). She mentions that, after her lover's death, she kept repeating his German name, but the name is never given.²² Their sense of individual identity has been crushed by the war. Yet, as the testimony ends, a new identity emerges. Indeed, the film concludes with the two protagonists about to separate and giving each other a name for the first time: "Hi-ro-shi-ma. Your name is Hi-ro-shi-ma", she says to him. "Yes, it's my name," he replies and adds: "And your name is Nevers, Ne-vers-en-France,"²³ The sites of their respective traumas have become their individual identities. This is how it must be: there is no possibility

of forgetting the trauma, because that place is, as the Japanese man puts it, the place where one became the person one is and will continue to be.²⁴

3. Political implications

Duras and Resnais complement each other perfectly in this film. Duras deals with causes of trauma in times of war, such as xenophobia, murder, and specific brutalities like that of the denunciation and punishment of women at the end of the war for their relationships with German men. Indeed, the choice of characters here is significant, as both the French woman and the Japanese man would hardly have been perceived as war victims at the time the film was made — rather as collaborator and aggressor, respectively. In an interview, Resnais spoke of both his and Duras's deliberate attempts at creating anti-heroes.²⁵

Resnais, through his unique filming technique, establishes a parallel between Hiroshima and Nevers, thus conferring a unity upon completely different places and situating trauma within a cultural context. Duras and Resnais fuse together two times, past and present, two places, France and Japan, and two stories, thus representing the universality and the timelessness of trauma and crises in identity for war survivors. Duras also explores the notion of “the enemy”, specifically in the scene where the protagonist explains why her compatriots shaved her head at *la Libération*: “My dead love is an enemy of France.”²⁶ It is significant that she does not say “my dead lover”. What is being punished, therefore, is what she allowed herself to *feel*. This injustice is what made Duras consider having the notion of patriotism clearly denied in one of the woman's lines, “I wish I no longer had a homeland” — a line which was not retained in the final script.²⁷ Her rejection of France is rendered instead in the evocation of the joyous celebrations taking place while she is locked in the cellar. She recounts the cacophony of the playing of *La Marseillaise* and the ringing of the church bells. She also describes how society passes by above her head;²⁸ imprisoned in her cellar, she is nonetheless the outsider. The heart of Nevers, “la Place de la République” (the Square of the Republic), in the woman's narrative, is set in stark contrast with the heart of Hiroshima, “la Place de la Paix” (Peace Square), as if she were unable to reconcile the notions of a French republic and peace.

One should not forget that, at the time the film was made (1958), France, as both victim and perpetrator of war atrocities, was far from having dealt with all its World War II demons, and was indeed in the process of dealing with new ones, those generated by the war of independence in Algeria (which lasted from 1954 to 1962). It is worth noting that the Battle of Algiers took place in 1957, the year given by Duras for the story, and that Duras joined the *Comité des intellectuels contre la poursuite de la guerre d'Algérie*, an anti-war committee whose rallying call was precisely the refusal to condone the oppression of the Algerian population carried out in the name of France. One need also take into account that the war in Indochina, which ended in 1954, only four years before the film was made, was a war to which Duras would have been particularly sensitive, since she was born and had grown up in Indochina.²⁹

These elements reinforce the notion of autobiography and, more importantly, of testimony which, as I mentioned earlier, was important to Resnais. In 1966, Resnais asked Jorge Semprun, who not only had been a prisoner of the camps but also an anti-Franco activist, to write the script of his next film, *La Guerre est finie* (*The War is over*). In *L'écriture ou la vie*, Semprun revealed that his script for Resnais was

strongly autobiographical, taking the form of a personal testimony on trauma and identity.³⁰ Between 1955 and 1966 the representation of war survivors' fractured identities was the central subject of Resnais's films,³¹ as expressed through the testimonies of both his characters and his script-writers — a fracture which was the result of the difficulty in reconciling one's sense of a national identity with cultural trauma in times of war. Far from offering any totalising explanations, Resnais was insisting that these questions ought to remain open to further reflection. By enabling us to sympathise with one exemplary experience of cultural trauma, he addressed difficult social and historical issues, and at the same time encouraged new ways of considering our moral responsibility towards recognising and helping the sufferers of such trauma.

Notes

1. The term *ciné-roman* (which can be translated as filmic novel) was created by the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet when he himself started his cinematic work with Alain Resnais, a couple of years after Marguerite Duras. Resnais can, therefore, be seen as the inspiration for this original conception of cinema, and the term be applied to his work with Duras. The term *ciné-roman* is now used to describe a novel written to be filmed, with filmic images in mind, but distinct from a scenario insofar as it does not contain images or technical details. The *ciné-roman* is an independent text which can be read as a novel on its own, but which is inseparable, from the point of view of its reputation, from the film. For further considerations on this subject, see Brigitte Le Juez, "Filming with writers: Alain Resnais's literary cinema", in *Reading across the Lines*, C. Shorley & M. McCusker (eds.), Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 2000, 221-228.
2. On the subject of cultural trauma, see *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztomka, University of California Press, 2004.
3. "Toujours leur histoire personnelle, aussi courte soit-elle, l'emportera sur HIROSHIMA." Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1960), 12, my translation. The English translation of dialogues is taken from the subtitles offered in the English version of the film (Argos Films).
4. Duras gives the dates of July 1944 (Duras, 132) and of the 6th August 1945 (Ibid, 27).
5. The bombing of Hiroshima happened in August 1945 and the time given by Duras for the story is August 1957 (Ibid, 9).
6. "Quand tu es dans la cave, je suis mort ?" (Ibid, 87)
7. "C'est vrai que ça aussi tu dois le comprendre." (Ibid, 59)
8. "Nevers, tu vois, c'est la ville du monde, et même c'est la chose du monde à laquelle, la nuit, je rêve le plus. En même temps que c'est la chose du monde à laquelle je pense le moins." (Ibid, 58)
9. "Impossible de parler de HIROSHIMA. Tout ce qu'on peut faire c'est de parler de l'impossibilité de parler de HIROSHIMA. *La connaissance de Hiroshima* étant a priori posée comme un leurre exemplaire de l'esprit." (Ibid, 10)
10. "Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien. / J'ai tout vu. *Tout*." (Ibid, 22)
11. Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, New York: Routledge, 1992, 5.
12. "Je les ai vues", "Je n'ai rien inventé", "Je sais tout." (Duras, 27-30)
13. "Ils me tondent avec soin jusqu'au bout. Ils croient de leur devoir de bien tondre les femmes. [...] Quelqu'un dit qu'il faut la faire se promener en ville." (Ibid, 96-97)
14. "Tu n'étais pas tout à fait mort. J'ai raconté notre histoire. [...] Elle était, vois-tu, racontable." (Ibid, 110)
15. Wilson, Emma, *French Cinema since 1950. Personal Histories*, London: Duckworth, 1999, 86.
16. The figure of Lazarus is twofold: he appears, in the *New Testament*, as the man (John 11-12) whom Jesus restored to life, and also as the beggar, in Jesus's parable (Luke 16: 12-31), who lay at the gate of the rich man who, having died and finding himself in Hell, wishes that the beggar, also dead but in Heaven, could go back to the world of the living to warn his rich brothers against their fate. The

cathedral in the final version is that of Saint Etienne (Saint Stephen), considered as the first Christian martyr.

17. “Histoire de quatre sous, je te donne à l’oubli. [...] Petite fille de Nevers. Petite coureuse de Nevers. [...] Petite tonduée de Nevers je te donne à l’oubli ce soir.” (Duras, 118)

18. Willy Szafran, “Les morts dans les témoignages de la vie concentrationnaire (*Les Dibboukim*)”, in *Écriture de soi et trauma*, Jean-François Chiantaretto (ed.), Paris: Anthropos, 1998, 141: “... sur le plan clinique je m’étais formulé une hypothèse selon laquelle le deuil chez les rescapés serait possible grâce au phénomène de ‘l’historisation’ par lequel le rescapé tenterait de transcender son drame personnel en plaçant ce dernier dans son contexte historique.”

19. “On chante *La Marseillaise* dans toute la ville. Le jour tombe. [...] La pharmacie de mon père est fermée pour cause de déshonneur. Je suis seule. Il y en a qui rient. Dans la nuit je rentre chez moi.” (Duras, 97)

20. “C’est un film français ?

- Non. International. Sur la Paix.” (Ibid, 65)

The Japanese man, the script insists, must have “international looks”. He also, curiously, speaks fluent French.

21. “Eternelle infirmière d’une guerre éternelle.” (Ibid, 13)

22. Ibid, 90.

23. “Hi-ro-shi-ma.

- Hi-ro-shi-ma. C’est ton nom.

- C’est mon nom. Oui. Ton nom à toi est Nevers. Ne-vers-en-France.” (Ibid, 124)

24. This is said before the testimony begins, when the Japanese man insists on knowing more about Nevers and after the French woman insists on knowing why: “C’est là, il me semble l’avoir compris, que tu as dû commencer à être comme aujourd’hui tu es encore.” (Ibid, 81)

25. See the *Livret* which accompanies the DVD of the film by Argos films / Arte France Développement, 2004, 4 (taken from an interview of Resnais published by *Cinéma 59* No. 38).

26. “Mon amour mort est un ennemi de la France.” (Ibid, 97)

27. My translation of “Je désire ne plus avoir de patrie.” (Ibid, 114) The injustice of the treatment of women who had relationships with German soldiers during the war extended, after the war, to their children. For more information on these subjects, see Fabrice Virgili, *La France ‘virile’. Des femmes tonduées à la Libération*, Paris, Editions Payot et Rivages, 2000, and “Enfants nés de couples franco-allemands pendant la guerre,” www.ihtp.cnrs.fr/recherche/enfants_franco_allemands.html. There is also a documentary, *Enfants de Boches*, by Christophe Weber (France 3, 2002).

28. “*La Marseillaise* passe au-dessus de ma tête... C’est... assourdissant...” (Ibid, 88); “La société me roule sur la tête” (Ibid, 89); “Les cloches de l’église saint-Etienne sonnaient... sonnaient...” (Ibid, 100).

29. Born in 1914, she only arrived in France in 1932.

30. Jorge Semprun, *L’Écriture ou la vie*, Paris: Gallimard, 1994. As an intellectual opponent to fascism and nazism, he was sent to Buchenwald.

31. After *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima mon amour* and before *The War is over*, Resnais tackled the subject once more with *Muriel ou le Temps d’un retour* (1963), dealing partly with torture and murder during the war of independence in Algeria.