

Jessica Aliaga Lavrijsen  
University of Zaragoza

***BETWEEN REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING:  
TIME DISTORTIONS IN PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA  
IN HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR***

**Keywords:** *personal trauma, collective, time distortions, working out, acting out, survivors, memory.*

**Abstract:** *Hiroshima mon amour (1959), directed by Alan Resnais and script by Marguerite Duras, has been considered the first modern film of the sound era. The film's structure, full of temporal distortions and repetitions, mirrors the consequences of the terrible past experiences that the two main characters couldn't cope with. The film does not explain the traumatic events, but rather represents the inaccessible un-narrativisable traumatic events through the testimony of the two protagonists. Both survivors live in durational rather than chronological time; that is, they continue to experience the horrors of the past through internal shifts back in time and space rather than experiencing the past as differentiated from the present. This horror, conveyed both through the documentary images and through the personal voice over, is felt by the listener/viewer, who gets ethically involved in the remembering of the traumatic event. The transmission of this horror is guaranteed by the very temporal structure of trauma, in the latency period which is inherent to trauma and that has as an effect the unveiling of the traumatic event in another time and space, through those who listen to that story.*

*Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), directed by Alan Resnais and script by Marguerite Duras, has been considered the first modern film of the sound era, since it “liberated filmmakers from linear construction” (Jones). The film is full of temporal distortions and repetitions, but those deviations of linear narrative have not a merely aesthetic or experimental function. The film's composition cannot be separated from its deep meaning: the form and the content are indissoluble, since the very structure mirrors the consequences of the terrible past experiences that the two main characters couldn't cope with, as we are going to see.

A young French woman travels to Hiroshima to participate in the filming of a documentary. She spends her last night in Hiroshima with a Japanese man she has met. This experience triggers her immersion into the traumatic memories of the death of her first lover, a German soldier who was killed at the end of the Second World War in Nevers (France), fourteen years before she encounters this Japanese lover to whom she will tell her personal hidden story. Trauma and memory are at the very core of the narrative, since both an individual traumatic event —the killing of her lover and the later humiliation by her family and neighbours—, and a collective trauma —the tragedy of the Hiroshima bombing during WWII and its terrible consequences for Japanese population— meet in this work.

It is worth noting that in the film both horrible events were followed by physical results: After her lover's killing, the woman's hair is cut and she is confined home, and later she is, significantly, hidden in the basement; and the population of Hiroshima also suffered for a long time the devastating effects of radiation on their own bodies after the dropping of “Little Boy”. Some images draw connections between both the individual and the collective trauma, as for example the shots that show her short hair after her personal traumatic event, and the documentary shots presenting the hair loss of many Japanese citizens after the bombing.

The longstanding traumatic outcomes are not only psychic but also physical, as is emphasised in Resnais's film, full of fleshy images, where the distorted and wounded bodies function as symptoms of metaphysical aberrations. Not in vain, the film starts with a shot of unclear and ambiguous flesh. The linking of mental and physical effects is not gratuitous at all, since trauma has been defined as: “an injury (as a

wound) to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent”; and “a disordered psychic or behavioural state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury” (*Merriam Webster’s Dictionary & Thesaurus*).

A subject who has suffered a strong traumatic event may suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD, diagnosed in the 1980s —almost three decades after the filming of *Hiroshima mon amour*— is characterised by the persistent re-experiencing of the event, through flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations, compulsive repetitions, etc.; and a persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma (e.g. inability to talk about things even related to the experience, avoidance of things and discussions that trigger flashbacks and re-experiencing symptoms fear of losing control) (American Psychiatric Association 249).

As Cathy Caruth has stated, a traumatic event fractures the very experience of time: “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, only in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 4-5). Consequently, a traumatic event cannot be fully remembered or understood because of this gap between the event and its assimilation. The horror of the event cannot be fully sensed when it is actually taking place, since trauma is by definition inaccessible to memory or knowledge. In this sense, trauma must be understood in terms of absence — the absence of something that became located in time or space. As she comments to her lover, she did not experience the death of the German soldier: “the moment [...] actually escaped me”. She missed this terrible moment and therefore she is forced to compulsively repeat or recall the event, always indirectly, belatedly: “I remember having already seen before — before — when we were in love, when we were happy. I remember”. Likewise, he was actually absent when the bombing occurred; his family was in Hiroshima, but he was fighting abroad, so the war saved his life, as she comments.

In the same way, we as spectators have access to these traumas only belatedly, indirectly, through complex codified systems. Representation is at the core of the story, since both the personal and the collective trauma have to be narrated so that the subject is capable of working-out the trauma rather than acting-out. I shall briefly summarize both concepts: Acting-out (from Freud’s *agieren*) refers to the discharge by means of action, rather than by means of verbalization, of conflicted mental content. It is, thus, related to the repetition-compulsion. The past is undistinguishable from the present, and thus past occurrences are relived (through flashbacks, nightmares, repetition of words or phrases, etc.). Working-through allows the person to gain some critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. For the victim, this means his ability to say to himself: “Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming [...] but I’m existing here and now, and this is different from back then”. Via the working-through, one acquires the possibility of being an ethical agent.

In a sense, the spectator is witnessing a fictional testimony. According to Vickroy, survivors’ experiences resist normal chronological narration or normal modes of artistic representation. Instead, certain techniques that try to draw some similarities towards the belated experience of a trauma are used. Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study; they internalise the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures (Vickroy 3). And because of this, these trauma narratives reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance and repression, among others.

*Hiroshima, mon amour* does not explain the traumatic event, but rather represents the inaccessible un-narrativisable traumatic event through the testimony of two survivors. The anxiety they feel arises from life rather than death, death is not directly experienced nor understood, it escapes knowledge and meaning. Both of them, she and he,<sup>1</sup> didn’t die; as the female character narrates: “I remember [...] I see my life. Your death. My life that goes on. Your death that goes on...” As in a nightmare she cannot get rid of, she’s stuck in a never-ending repetition of the past.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that the characters in the film are referred to as “Elle” and “Lui”.

Survivors, as she or he, live in durational rather than chronological time; that is, they continue to experience the horrors of the past through internal shifts back in time and space rather than experiencing the past as differentiated from the present (Vickroy 5). As it is cleverly shown in Resnais' film, on the first morning they spend together, as she watches him sleeping she cannot differentiate her present Japanese lover from her past German lover. The identity of both, the sleeping and the dead, blur, ignoring time and space, as she watches his hand move unconsciously. She missed the terrible moment and therefore she is forced to compulsively repeat or recall the event, always indirectly, belatedly, maybe even distorted by the action of memory, by the passing of time. It is only by the telling of her silenced story to the other, to him, that she is capable of working-out her trauma.

Moreover, for the traumatized subjects, the past is not remembered in a conscious sense but relived in an emotional way (Vickroy 169). This horror, conveyed both through the documentary images and through the personal voice over, is felt by the listener/viewer, who gets ethically involved in the remembering of the traumatic event. The transmission of this horror is guaranteed by the very temporal structure of trauma, in the latency period which is inherent to trauma and that has as an effect the unveiling of the traumatic event in another time and space, through those who listen to that story. As Caruth stated: "the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another" (Caruth 10-11). Personal and communal memories are thus explored and questioned through this non-linear narrative that represents or rather recreates the conflicts of traumatic memory. For Caruth, the testimony of the traumatized subject does not transmit an understanding of the horror, but horror itself, amorphous and incomprehensible, like some images in the film.

Nevertheless, if the subject is capable of making up a story, of constructing a narrative for the traumatic event, he or she may be capable of working-through the trauma. According to Dominick LaCapra, working-through is a medium to escape the circularity of traumatic memory and, consequently, to gain a sense of ethical agency (LaCapra). It is only when she is capable of talking about the event to an other that she starts the working-through, that she can escape the traumatic past and remember/project in a more positive way. "Listen to me", she commands. And she tries to put it in words, and he listens. Her Japanese lover assumes the position of the dead lover — "When you are in the cellar, am I dead?—, and by doing this she is capable of repeating, representing the absent event and confronting it, indirectly. Moreover, her acting-out allows him to experience his own absent event, his own death: the anxiety of the survivor of the mortal black rain is spoken aloud. The Japanese lover who is alive cannot help imagining himself dead and, in a sense, this change of subject position allows him his own working-through. Both their personal and in-transmissible experiences at Hiroshima and Nevers are brought together in an imaginary space at an imaginary time created just in the fictional here and now.

James Monaco analyzed the film as containing two different independent stories which work against each other: the one containing the false documentary about Hiroshima and its tragedy, and the love story between Elle and Lui (Monaco 45-49). In my opinion, this analysis misses the point since it is only indirectly, through other narratives, that one can refer to trauma. Moreover, both traumatic events, which happened in different spaces —Europe and Japan— and different times —fourteen years separate the two events— are blended in the film through the rhythmic —symptomatic— repetition of images, the music and the voice over. The spectator is presented a single story, and not two, since, as Inez Hedges pointed out, point of view, focalization all function as the film's main structural principles (Hedges 288). The parallelisms and identification processes existing between the lovers and their particular stories —linked by image and sound— are essential for the understanding of trauma(s). Moreover, the interaction of both stories and characters immerses the reader in an ethical move — both presented in and demanded by the film — facilitating working-through processes.

To conclude, we could state that the film seems to emphasize, on the one hand, the personal need to forget, or rather to assimilate the traumatic event(s), the necessity of a process of working-through; and, on

the other, the importance of personal testimonies, and the communal need to remember, in order to avoid a dangerous collective amnesia that would permit the repetition of the horror, as if it were a haunting presence.

As Shoshana Felman has put it, literature [and film] play an essential role in human experience, since art can be “one of the ways we tell one another about aspects of human experience that cannot be contained by ordinary modes of expression and that may even exceed human understanding” (Felman 253). In this sense, *Hiroshima mon amour* is the fictional testimonial story of real wounds that cry out, and it assumes an ethical responsibility in its contribution to the transmission of some aspects of human experience that exceed human understanding.

### Works Cited

- American Psychiatric Association. “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder”. In *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd ed. (DSM-III-R). Washington, 1987: 247-251.
- Anon. *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary & Thesaurus*. In the digital version of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 8.0., 2008.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Felman, Shoshana. *Writing and Madness: (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)*. Transl. Martha Noel Evans. Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press. 2003.
- Hedges, Inez. “Form and Meaning in the French Film, ii: Narration and Point of View”. In *The French Review* Vol. 54, no 2 (December 1980): 288-298.
- Kent, Jones. 2003. “Hiroshima mon amour: Time Indefinite”. *Criterion Collection Web*. 11 December 2008 <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/291>>
- LaCapra, Dominick. Interviewed by Amos Goldberg in Jerusalem. Cornell University. 13 January 2009. Accessed at: [http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203648.pdf](http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203648.pdf)
- Monaco, James. *Alain Resnais*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1979.
- Vickoy, Laurie. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press. 2002.

