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AN UNLIKELY EMBRACE: RESISTING LANGUAGE / EMBRACING LOVE IN HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR

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The opening frame of *Hiroshima mon amour*, directed by Alain Resnais and written by Marguerite Duras, presents the viewer with a purposefully ambiguous embrace. Uncertainty lies in the parts of the body that the viewer can see, complicated further by the mysterious substance atop the bodies. Seemingly, ash covers the bodies, then glitter, and then sweat or possibly rain—ambiguity clouds the exact material on the lovers' contrasting light and dark skin. The embrace signals an intersection between history / fiction, private / public, memory / loss, and love / pain that persists throughout the film. The ambiguous bodies anticipate the impossibility of representing a previously inconceivable crime committed in an inconceivably short amount of time. Indeed, the story, or documentary (as the film initially signs itself), resists representing the horrific event of Hiroshima through the opening repetition of phrases like "you know nothing" and "you saw nothing." Yet, *Hiroshima mon amour* proceeds to represent the unrepresentable—a representation the film acknowledges as always incomplete, always a failure—through an artistic, lapidary endeavor driven by poetics, language, images, and music. Only the ambiguous medium of art can come close to grappling with the annihilation of life that occurred at Hiroshima. Throughout the film moments of intersection occur between history / fiction and love / pain, and the film shows how memory and art (alone) fail to represent the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By blending the story of a love affair with the historic events at Hiroshima, *Hiroshima mon amour*, skeptical of memory, encourages the viewer to undergo the empathetic exercise of reconsidering alterity as the location of evil, instead locating the hope of this anti-war film in the space held open between fiction and history.

The framing embrace serves as an entrance into the ambiguity featured in the film. Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* illuminates the ways that *Hiroshima mon amour*'s frame figures the content of the film. The embrace, footage, and photos of Hiroshima "work," and

Derrida demonstrates how the frame draws the viewer inside the frame: “Neither inside nor outside, it spaces itself without letting itself be framed but it does not stand outside the frame. It works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, gives it work to do” (Derrida, *Truth* 12). From the very beginning of the film, the frame opens up ambiguity and anticipates the bleeding of the frame into the narrative, a frame revisited throughout the film at critical-creative moments. Derrida’s conception of the frame as disrupting the inside and outside of the painting proves fundamental to the ways the embrace frames *Hiroshima mon amour.* From the very beginning, the viewer can foresee the ways that the film encourages ambiguity and uncertainty. Brian Macaskill speaks specifically to the framed embrace:

> It is also at least a protopolitical act attempting to reflect in some sense the political event that preceded it, an act which plays the gap between individual identity and abstract form, between banal love story and the horror of Hiroshima, between the cinematic “inside” and the historical “outside” of the celluloid frame. Metonymically, the image suggests the dependency of preclusive histories and partial memories on other historical acts and mental fabrications, personal as well as public. (260-261)

As Macaskill uncovers, the image of the embrace persists throughout the entire film at the intersection of these various binaries considered to be entirely separate from one another. The “celluloid frame” causes a confrontation between the two seemingly opposed ideas. These opposed ideas (history / fiction, inside /outside, love / pain, et cetera) appear segregated, but through the requisite “postmodern” rupture of thought and art demanded by violent twentieth-century events like Hiroshima, writers and directors like Duras and Resnais reveal how binary oppositions collapse into themselves and intersect. What individuals might once have considered

separate ideas come together in *Hiroshima mon amour's* celluloid frame, which shows how these ambiguous oppositional intersections come closer to representing the horror of Hiroshima than a strictly "historical" approach could effect. Furthermore, the very idiom after which Derrida titled his book demonstrates the impossibility of achieving absolute verisimilitude in a painting or film. Derrida plays with this idiom for its multiple meanings, but the second meaning of "the truth in painting" is: "That which pertains, therefore, to adequate *representation* in the order of fiction or in the *relief* of its effigy" (*Truth* 5). *Hiroshima mon amour* understands the impossibility of achieving an exact representation of atrocities. Film footage, testimonies, and images that populate the film can never capture the horror of Hiroshima—even language resists capturing the full affect and effect of the bombings. The image of an embrace falls into the narrative of a love story between protagonists, Elle and Lui, a narrative that has inspired a vast amount of scholarship.

Since the release of *Hiroshima mon amour*, many scholars have written about the film's portrayal of the historical event. The discursive structure of this essay follows a series of embraces between two seemingly ideologically opposed concepts, a disruption that Godelieve Mercken-Spaas acknowledges regarding how Resnais blurs the distinction of various binary oppositions (246). Without delving into the details of the interrelated themes, Mercken-Spaas's brief description of the film's form aligns with the structure of this essay, where the juxtaposition of two themes also relates to a complex network of other inexhaustible themes.

Representations of memory in *Hiroshima mon amour* also catches the attention of many commentators. For example, Nina Varsava explores the paradox of expressing the inexpressible in *Hiroshima mon amour* and extends this issue to the documentary film genre more broadly. Varsava locates this inexpressibility through resignation and consignation and draws upon

Derrida's idea of consignation or "that ordering of signs associated with an event into a system that 'makes sense,' but never belonged to the event in the first place, 'assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression'" (115). Through Adornoian ethics, Varsava addresses the complexity of representing historiographies and commemorations of violent historical events; instead, she invites viewers to maintain a skeptical eye towards memory. For Varsava, Duras and Resnais purposefully leave spaces and gaps in their film to avoid posing an absolute history of Hiroshima and to capture how commemoration always involves forgetting (120).[1] Additionally, Leah Anderst speaks to represented memory in *Hiroshima mon amor* as well but does so through cinematic terms. Anderst adopts Flaubert's free indirect style into the cinematic universe and discusses how this benefits the instances of represented memory in *Hiroshima mon amour*. Resnais's cinematic technique of "plural narration," or when narrative agency becomes uncertain because of multi-visioned moments, call Elle's memories into question, and therefore demonstrate the difficulty of capturing history and memory (Anderst 358). Acknowledging the impossibility of grasping the events of Hiroshima due to the instability of memory that Varsava and Anderst describe, false narratives (fictions) can prove helpful to understanding the historical events at Hiroshima—or seeing fiction as a possibility for commemoration. The film moves away from relying on memory (by challenging historical truth) and accomplishes this by playing with temporality.

The bodies in the opening frame exist in an unusual conception of space and time:

[1] Gabriel Josipovici points to the paradox of forgetting / remembering in *Forgetting.* Touching on the Western world's fear of forgetting, Josipovici blends genres—historical narratives, journalistic accounts, autobiography, and so on—to register how this paradox impacts the commemoration of atrocities.

transitions occur in the shifting of material on their skin but unmarked by time.[2] Not until the viewer sees the full bodies and begins to learn the story of the love affair between a French woman only called Elle (portrayed by Emmanuelle Riva) and an Asian man called Lui (played by Eiji Okada) does the viewer enter into time. Elle, as a name, doubles as the French singular subject pronominal, and Lui (posing in the film as a name) doubles as a singular indirect object pronoun. Both doublings play into the ambiguous and empathetic exercise at work. Narrative—that is to say fictive—time starts when the lovers' identities are fully revealed, both their entire bodies and "names." After the lovers' faces fully appear, the two of them establish that Lui is fully Japanese and Elle has green eyes; suddenly, they hear a man cough, and she says: "Every day he passes at four o'clock. And he coughs" (*Hiroshima* 00:17:00-5). A harsh entrance into time occurs through this cough because lovers often exist in "nontime." Julia Kristeva speaks to the "nontime of love" and writes:

> Love and the loved one erase the reckoning of time…. The *call,* its call, overwhelms me with a flow in which the upheavals of the body (what people call

[2] Roland Barthes writes about the lover's embrace:

> Besides intercourse (when the image repertoire goes to the devil), there is that other embrace which is a motionless cradling: we are enchanted, bewitched: we are in the realm of sleep, without sleeping; we are within the voluptuous infantilism of *sleepiness*: this is the moment for telling stories, the moment of the voice which takes me, siderates me, this is the return to the mother ('In the loving calm of your arms,' says a poem set to music by Duparc). In this companionable incest, everything is suspended: time, law, prohibition: nothing is exhausted, nothing is wanted: all desires are abolished for they seem definitively fulfilled. (104)

The framing embrace exists outside of time in a way that speaks to the elements and qualities of love contrasted with the historical elements of footage, photos, and memorials of Hiroshima.

> emotions) are mingled with a whirling thought, as vague, supple, ready to pierce or to wed the other's as it is vigilant, alert, lucid in its impetus. (5-6)

An upheaval occurs in Elle and Lui's embrace and the upheaval of time and oppositions. Furthermore, for Kristeva, love transgresses and mixes boundaries: "The *meeting*, then, mixing pleasure and promise or hopes, remains in a sort of future perfect. It is the nontime of love that, both instant and eternity, past and future, abreacted present, fulfills me, abolishes me, and yet leaves me unsated" (6). Opening with the embrace of Lui and Elle captures this erasure of time and poignant emotions, an opening that initiates the intersection of variously contingent temporalities and ideas that also touch. In order for the film to progress beyond this embrace and to intersect the lovers' narrative with Hiroshima's historical narrative, the film must acknowledge and refigure time that occurs when the film transitions into the lovers' narratives by way of the passing man's cough.[3] Thereby, the film produces the space to continue to develop the intersection of the lovers' fictive time with historical time.

The film plays with fictive time and historical time by showing images and scenes from the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing with the lovers' voice-over. While the opening scenes focus on Hiroshima by providing images from the bombing and the voiceover of the unrevealed lovers, the embrace intersects history and fiction through time. Paul Ricoeur discusses the connection between history and fiction through time in his chapter, "The Interweaving of History and Fiction." Although viewers may feel inclined to separate history and fiction, Ricoeur states: "history in some way makes use of fiction to refigure time and, on the other hand, fiction makes

[3] Although, Elle does not know the identity of the man who coughs, a possibility exists that the cough serves as a reminder of the lingering health effects from the bomb in addition to the "timing" of bodies.

use of history for the same ends. This reciprocal concretization marks the triumph of the notion of figure in the form of 'imagining that'; or more literally: 'providing oneself a figure of'" (*Time and Narrative* 181). *Hiroshima mon amour* benefits from the interweaving of fiction and history through intersections of time and embrace.[4] By way of this interweaving, the film can attempt to put cinematic language to the horrors of Hiroshima in a way that history or fiction alone cannot. As Ricoeur claims, fictional narrative is quasi-historical because unreal events are past facts for the narrator and history is quasi-fictive for incorporating the imaginary into what has-been (Ricoeur *Time and Narrative* 181, 190). In embracing this play between history / fiction, *Hiroshima mon amour* lifts the constraints bound within the genres of history and fiction and opens onto an imaginative variation that brings the cinematic language closer to representing the bombing of Hiroshima. Without the confinement of reflecting historical truth, the film possesses

[4] Ricoeur mentions fiction's tendency to use the past tense or the imperfect, but Ricoeur argues that these tenses possess no temporal function: past tense and the imperfect relax the reader and communicate a specific mode of communication (*Time and Narrative* 189). Throughout his work, Ricoeur complicates traditional notions of linear time and connects the past, present, and future—even in a chronological narrative. This relates to Roland Barthes's passage in *A Lover's Discourse* on remembrance, where, like Ricoeur, Barthes complicates the notion of linear time. Lovers tend to use the imperfect tense to lose themselves in the past "The imperfect is the tense of fascination: it seems to be alive and yet it doesn't move: imperfect presence, imperfect death; neither oblivion nor resurrection; simply the exhausting lure of memory" (Barthes 217). For Ricoeur, tenses possess no direct temporal connection—similar to Barthes who argues that this lover's remembrance is anamnesis that never fulfills or lacerates because lovers cannot ever fully remember a love (or event) authentically. As a result, this notion of memory in the lover's discourse disrupts time and alludes to a fictional history of love. The discussion of the constraints of genre for historical narratives also anticipates the progression of this essay to discuss the inadequacy of memory in relation to love and atrocities.

different possibilities to play with meaning.

Hayden White in the chapter, "Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," investigates the ways that various theorists conceptualize narrative as a way of communicating history, and then recognizes the need of using narrative to represent history as not factual truth but literary truth. Starting the chapter, White discusses how "historical" stories privilege content over form and causes the prospective narrator to "find" the historical events over construct them (27). Historical discourses in its dissertative mode of address, or looking for truth in a story, can never fully be mimetic or representational of true events because no matter the attempts to be objective or accumulate facts another interpretation can be given, new facts introduced, or bias found within in the narrative (28). White draws upon Barthes's essay "The Discourse of History" to demonstrate the challenges posed to traditional historiography and nineteenth century realism as completely objective; consequently, Barthes exposes the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation (White 35). Since narrative cannot represent, Barthes claims that narrative constitutes a spectacle of celebrating language. White argues that constructing narrative history as only ideological and scientific does not give theorists sufficient reason to deny narrative history any substantial truth value. Instead, White sees narrative as inevitable in sharing any kind of historical events that leads White to conclude:

> The historical narrative does not, as narrative, dispel false beliefs about the past, human life, the nature of the community, and so on; what it does is test the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning that literature displays to consciousness through its fashioning of patterns of "imaginary" events. Precisely insofar as the historical narrative endows sets of real events with the kinds of meaning found otherwise only in myth and literature,

> we are justified in regarding it as a product of *allegoresis*. Therefore, rather than regard every historical narrative as "mythic" or "ideological" in nature, we should regard it as allegorical, that is, as saying one thing and meaning another. (45)

These historical narratives transform events into patterns of meaning opposed to literal representations that could never fully be achieved. Narrative does not exist solely for the pragmatic purpose of communicating information, and imposing these limitations on historical narratives leads to the reduction of possibilities for meaning. Understanding White's notions of historical narrative helps the viewer conceptualize the complex intermingling of fiction and history in *Hiroshima mon amour*.

Hiroshima mon amour further complicates the dynamic of truth in historical narrative by inventing two fictional characters impacted by the historical events at Hiroshima, events that are terrifying facts of history, a point worth reiterating in a post-fact age. By positioning (plausible) fictional accounts of a love story instead of testimonials, Resnais and Duras bring viewers closer to the horror through a fiction—alongside word and music—that engages with rather than retreats from ambiguity.[5] When Elle's German soldier lover is shot, she is isolated in the cellar of her parents' home. Elle recounts her experience in the cellar to Lui, but the viewer does not

[5] Kyo Maclear's chapter "The Limits of Vision: Hiroshima Mon Amour and the Subversion of Representation" similarly examines Elle's narrative as lacking factual truth, but from the approach of the limitations between perception and reality. Maclear coins the term "transmemoration" to reckon with the absence of factual truth in narrative. By transmemoration, Maclear means a collection of disparate experiences, knowings, languages, cultures, times, and geographies, albeit a collection that excludes nonhuman animals (245). The film's opening documentary footage shows a dog injured by the bomb; therefore, transmemoration should include the memories of all species, human and nonhuman, alike.

depend on factual accuracy of the events or the chronology of events. Lui says to Elle that she leaves eternity, and she responds:

> Yes, it takes a long time. They told me it had taken a long time. At six in the evening, the bells of the St. Etienne Cathedral ring, winter and summer. One day, it is true, I hear them. I remember having heard them before when we were in love, when we were happy. I'm beginning to see. I remember having already seen before when we were in love, when we were happy. I remember. I see the ink. I see the daylight. I see my life. Your death. My life that goes on. Your death that goes on and that it took the shadows longer now to reach the corners of the room. And it took the shadows longer now to reach the corners of the cellar walls. About half past six. Winter is over. (*Hiroshima* 00:56:04-57:38)

Time echoes all throughout Elle's narrative. At Elle's most potent point of madness, Elle exists in an eternity outside of time. Viewers do not concern themselves with the factual accuracy of whether the bells of St. Etienne Cathedral rang during Elle's period of madness or perhaps did not ring at all during this period. Instead, viewers concern themselves with the immense amount of pain evident in the absence of time, sight, and sound that Elle endures during these moments. The viewer does not pursue the most factual time or events Elle witnesses or sees; the viewer's concerns lie in the pattern of meaning opposed to the accuracy of the events portrayal. Engaging with poiesis rather than noesis, narrative produces meaning differently than a chronicle (White 42). Chronicles are not necessarily less "literary," but narratives are poetic in form rather than oriented solely to representation; instead, the narrative constitutes a spectacle. In intertwining the historical location of Hiroshima and events with a fictional love story, Duras and Resnais collaborate to call attention to the ambiguity present in historical narratives that are oriented

towards a poetic truth otherwise unavailable to the historical discourse alone.[6]

Some academics mistakenly conflate White's historiography with the idea that all history is fiction; however, White calls attention to how all historical narratives include the configurational dimension of time. White sees history and fiction as narrative acts, not as equivalent genres. Lubomír Doležel criticizes White, with regards to the Shoah, in "Fictional and Historical Narrative: Meeting the Postmodernist Challenge."[7] For Doležel, White fails to produce a theory that deals with the traumatic past such as the Shoah:

> In order to assess the 'fidelity' of 'competing narratives' a theory of history cannot expel the concept of historical fact and truth-valuation of historical representations; that to allow modes of emplotment to dictate the choice of historical events to be included in the representation means acquiescing to distortions of the past; last but not least, that a formalist theory of historical writing deprives historiography of any sociopolitical or ethical significance. (Doležel 252-253)

Again, White does not make the claim that history and fiction are equivalent to one another. White turns towards a truth in narrative not associated with fact or information: "the 'truth' of narrative form can display itself only indirectly, that is to say, by means of *allegoresis*" (White 46). Because historical narratives tend to introduce bias, and since reality is mediated by

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[6] White further discusses the ambiguity of the term history and the notion of narrative itself in his chapter "Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," pp. 29, 56-57.

[7] English-speaking countries tend to use the word Holocaust to describe the killing of Jews in Europe under Nazi Germany, but Holocaust means "sacrifice by fire," whereas, Shoah is the Hebrew word for "catastrophe" ("What is the Shoah?"). This paper shall use the word Shoah.

language, White locates truth through the *form* of narrative events. Historical narratives are structured with a temporality that is culturally and historically important to *Hiroshima mon amour*, and Resnais and Duras register the overlap of history and fiction in their use of temporality, flashbacks, and a love story coinciding with the historical event of Hiroshima. Furthermore, *Hiroshima mon amour* registers that history and fiction share narrative acts and Duras and Resnais deploy both narratives that here coexist—a love story and history. Strengthening their artistic credibility, Resnais and Duras recognize that a strictly historical narrative tends to rely on the authority of factual accuracy, and that without unmediated access to history, *Hiroshima mon amour* does not retreat from language or narrative. This is precisely the film's strength. In the synopsis of the screenplay, Duras writes the exchange between Elle and Lui claiming to have seen nothing: "Thus their initial exchange is allegorical. *In short, an operatic exchange*. Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima" (Duras 9). Refusing to retreat from language, Duras captures the allegorical truth of atrocities, and love's resistance to language within the exchange between Elle and Lui. The combination of historical and fictional narrative shows how Duras and Resnais orient themselves towards *allegoresis* and not the factual accuracy of history that continues to fail.

Blending history and fiction assists the film because the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima utterly annihilated the possibility of a full witness due to the scope of destruction, a topic taken up by Giorgio Agamben, in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive.* While Agamben speaks specifically to the horrors of the Shoah, the book overlaps with the impossibility of witnessing events that resist language and that seek to annihilate witnesses. Agamben speaks to the issue of testimony in Auschwitz stating:

> At a certain point, it became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to. As a consequence, commenting on survivors' testimony necessarily meant interrogating this lacuna, or more precisely, attempting to listen to it. (13)

Hiroshima and Auschwitz cannot be equated, but like Agamben's notion of lacuna, *Hiroshima mon amour* notices the impossibility of representation, as does Duras in the synopsis of the screenplay: Duras and Resnais proceed, however, to listen and attempt to convey the horrors at Hiroshima through an artistic endeavor in the same way that a testimony persists to try and capture the atrocity. Early on in the film, Elle asks Lui "Were you here in Hiroshima?" and Lui responds "Of course not" (*Hiroshima* 00:17:20-30). Elle acknowledges her foolishness in asking this question because those in close range to the bomb were completely annihilated. Lui survived the bombing because he was away at war. Seemingly, Lui struggles with survivor's guilt and shares his pain with Elle. Lui's narrative intertwines with the public history of the bombing of Hiroshima and the private history of Lui's family that died from the bombing of Hiroshima.

Public and private histories intertwine between Elle and Lui's love affair and the setting of Hiroshima that presents two histories: a public history of atomic bombs and a private history of lovers' memories of the bombing mediated by images, words, and music. The audience hears Elle and Lui's intimate memories, possibly fictional and possibly truthful, from the lovers of where they were when the bombs hit. Elle asks Lui if he was in Hiroshima during the bombing, Lui laughs and states no, but reveals that his family was there while Lui was fighting in the war (*Hiroshima* 00:17:30-35). These revealed private histories play with public history and appeal to

an empathetic and private understanding of the bomb's impact on individuals.[8] Of course, all narratives possess public time: "the art of storytelling retains this public character of time while keeping it from falling into anonymity. It does so, first, as time common to the actors, as time woven in common by their interaction" (Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 175). Private memories of previous lovers and the war interact with public time and bring the viewer into the intimate moments between lovers as an empathetic practice.[9] This is to say that "private time" is always, to some degree, already public.[10] Viewers now engage with the intimacy Lui and Elle share

[8] Hegel discusses historical discourse as "not the real story of what happened but the peculiar relation between a public present and a past that a state endowed with a constitution made possible" (White 29). Historiography is ambiguous for Hegel, and Hegel intersects public / private and past / present to make this point. A love affair for Hegel is constantly present, but the outward existence of political constitutions is an imperfect present that requires a knowledge of the past (29). In other words, Lui and Elle exist entrenched in various laws and customs that makes their private love affair interact with public customs and laws.

[9] Derrida plays with the public / private distinction in the book *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond.* The post card resists any singular distinction of the public / private: the post card is private but the message is accessible to anyone who stumbles on it. Derrida then goes onto claim "this opposition doesn't work neither for psychoanalysis, nor the post, nor even for the police...the secret circulates with full freedom, as secret you promise I swear, this is what I call a post card" (Derrida *The Post Card* 185). Similarly, in *Hiroshima,* this "secret" love affair exists in the public because the love affair belongs to a narrative carrying the film forward.

[10] Sarah French uses Kristeva's theory of female subjectivity and the issue of when private suffering overshadows the public domain of history and politics (French 3). French argues that historical events are viewed through a personal lens that stems from individual memory opposed to collective and cultural memory; in turn, this causes historical events to be measured only by human suffering and demotes the importance of public space as the space of history and politics (10-11). While the film follows the love affair between Elle and Lui, French neglects how the spaces (setting) that Elle and Lui occupy impact the narrative. Elle and Lui's love interact with public spaces and

through the narrative's progression. Repetition of the lovers' memories continues throughout the narrative, but the repetition proves impotent due to the inadequacy of memory.

In the opening framing sequence, the viewer sees various memorials endeavor to demonstrate the devastation brought on by the bombing (*Hiroshima* 00:05:05-7:10). The reconstructions, the photographs, and films are as authentic as possible (*Hiroshima* 00:07:03-12). Yet, Lui repeats "you saw nothing" after interacting with the most authentic recreations, photographs, and film footage, because people still cannot grasp or rationalize this horror in language. The viewer can see these remnants, images, and film clips: the atrocity remains unrepresentable. Again, the lovers' story intertwines with this dark history when Elle states, "Just as in love this illusion exists, this illusion of being able to never forget, so I was under the illusion that I would never forget Hiroshima. Just as in love" (*Hiroshima* 00:09:40-53). Furthermore, beyond the concern with representation, another problem emerges—the issue of forgetting. The illusion of never forgetting in the framing sequence anticipates the later discussion of how Elle begins to forget her former lover (a German soldier). Despite the amount of pain endured, Elle feels the pain and love of that experience fade away. In remembering this loss, Elle again appears in the throes of madness—distant and upset. At one point, Lui slaps Elle in an effort to snap her out of madness, and Duras in the script describes this slap: "She acts as though she didn't know where it had come from. But she snaps out of it, and acts as though she realized it had been necessary" (66). As Elle becomes aware of how much she has forgotten about her dead lover, the more increasingly upset and mad she seems. After recounting the loss

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their love occurs because of the bombing of Hiroshima—the private and public cannot be separated because both Elle and Lui are impacted by Hiroshima, and the lovers impact Hiroshima.

of her lover, Elle remarks about her dead German lover: "I don't even remember his hands very well. The pain, I still remember the pain a little […] But one day I won't remember it anymore. Not at all. Nothing" (*Hiroshima* 01:03:22-43). As demonstrated in the framing sequence and Elle's love affair, memory does not suffice in preventing atrocities: memory fails.

Even the repetition throughout fails, a repetition that usually helps individuals remember or learn. Ultimately, Elle will forget Lui along with the German lover. Tzvetan Todorov points to the inadequacy of memory and memorial in *Memory as a Remedy for Evil*. For Todorov, evil continues and prevails because we locate evil in the other:

> The remedy we are seeking will not consist in merely remembering the evil to which our group or our ancestors were victims. We have to go a step farther and ask ourselves about the reasons that gave rise to evil. Once the crime has been committed, we can only console the victims, not undo the crime. But we can have an effect on the criminals, on those who committed crimes in the past, so they don't repeat their crimes on the future criminals. (80)

As long as people continue to locate evil in alterity and fail to recognize the capacity for evil within every individual, evil will persist. The unwillingness of many humanimals to recognize their complicity and ability to commit evil perpetuates evil, because often humanimals do not take responsibility for the pain caused to others.[11] Todorov then turns to restorative justice as a

[11] The usage of "humanimal" in this essay refers to Kaplana Rahita Seshadri's discussion of issues in regards to silence, law, and language. Seshadri sees the spacing between species in language as possessing implications to law, and she writes:

> Thus, I hazard that spacing of species impropriety would perhaps be structured by a chiasmus—one that emerges between the opposed pole of human on the one hand and animal on the other and

way to help criminals recognize the harm caused by their crimes. Teaching criminals to empathize with their victims proves more effective than encouraging others to remember criminals' crimes. Resnais and Duras demonstrate the fear of forgetting since the artists know this struggle themselves.[12] All humanimals are forgetful, which prevents the possibility for the kind of critical reflection on evil acts necessary to prevent further crimes.[13] *Hiroshima mon amour* alludes to the fault of memory by adding the inability to represent atrocities in language, and posits an alternative way to resist and prevent evil: the empathy between Elle and Lui that emerges in a brief thirty-six-hour love affair, though such empathy of course does not guarantee a resistance to evil.

While these two lovers experience vastly different conditions of suffering, the lovers nonetheless embrace one another. Elle, ostracized for loving a German soldier, and Lui, a man who lost his family in the bombing of Hiroshima, exchange vastly different memories from

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> the opposed pole of language at one end law at the other. I warrant that to parse this indistinct zone of mute silence and the inhuman would entail a significant disclosure of the (contingent) relation between language and law. (21)

The disaster of Hiroshima impacted both the human and nonhuman; henceforth, I gesture to this loss through the use of "humanimal" and in recognition of Seshadri's writing on this topic.

[12] See Gavin Wilson's essay "Negotiating Autobiographical Truth: Embodying Sensation in the Narrative Screenplay" for more on Duras's autobiographical tie to Elle's narrative. Wilson also argues that screenwriting emerges as a form of truth through representations of sensations.

[13] Forgetting for Samuel Beckett is also horrifying. In *Waiting for Godot,* Estragon and Vladimir reflect on their thoughts and discuss how less thoughts lead to less misery. Vladimir then goes on to call the mind a charnel-house because of the number of skeletons and forgotten memories that exist inaccessible to the mind (Beckett 54-55). No matter how much hurt or love we endure, we forget: the mind is a charnel-house.

World War II. Duras writes in the screenplay a synopsis about the location of this love affair and the differences between the lovers themselves:

> And this is one of the principal goals of the film: to have done with the description of horror by horror, for that has been done by the Japanese themselves, but make this horror rise again from its ashes by incorporating it in a love that will necessarily be special and 'wonderful,' one that will be more credible than if it had occurred anywhere else in the world, a place that death had not *preserved*. Between two people as dissimilar geographically, philosophically, historically, economically, racially, etc. as it is possible to be, Hiroshima will be the common ground. (Duras 9)

Only this love affair can occur in Hiroshima and open up these lovers' wounds to be shared with one another.[14] Elle and Lui embrace one another in solidarity of love and pain: a love not interested in the particularities. Particularities of the lovers' background prove unimportant because Elle and Lui understand each other's pain (a rare occurrence). During a metafictional moment, Lui asks Elle what the film she has a role in is about, and Elle responds: "A film about Peace. What else do you expect them to make in Hiroshima except a picture about Peace" (*Hiroshima* 00:24:35-40). In this metanarrative moment, *Hiroshima mon amour* reveals itself also as a film about peace. It turns towards love, a love that acknowledges the subjective suffering each person faces through empathetic practice. Love, of course, exists synonymously with pain; hence, this turn to love proves difficult because it requires enduring more pain, like in Elle's recollection of her German lover's death that caused an episode of madness.

[14] The lovers share their memories and traumas because the two lovers are mediated by the comforts of love.

The most powerful scene of simultaneous love and pain occurs in Elle's recollection of her lover's death and her descent into madness. Losing her impossibly powerfully love causes Elle to go mad, and Elle only experiences this powerful love again fourteen years later in Hiroshima—a place perhaps no longer preserved by death, but capable of finding new love (Duras 9). Once Elle finds her German lover's body, she lies on top of it: "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?" (*Hiroshima* 01:00:00-29). Love promotes empathy occurring at a bodily level for Elle. The dead lover's body feels like Elle's own—the lovers (all three) seemingly share a potent pain of loss and separation.[15] Empathy manifests itself when Lui seemingly becomes the dead German lover. She calls Lui "you" and does not use the distant pronoun "him" to represent the German lover.[16] Lui does not love Elle out of obligation, nor does Lui listen to Elle's story out of obligation: Lui listens because he loves Elle and shares her pain alongside her.

A common criticism levelled against *Hiroshima mon amour* is that the film revolves around Elle's experiences during the war over Lui, but these critics fail to see the benefits of

[15] In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes responds to the idea that madness causes depersonalization: "For me as an amorous subject, it is quite the contrary: it is becoming a subject, being unable to keep myself from doing so, which drives me mad. *I am not someone else*: that is what I realize with horror" (121). Elle ends her story of madness where the story began: the realization that her lover's body is not her own and they must part in death.

[16] Furthermore, Barthes discusses compassion as the fear and jealousy of the lover suffering alone and concludes: "So I shall suffer with the other, but without pressure, without losing myself. Such behavior, at once very affective and very controlled, very amorous and very civilized can be given a name: delicacy: in a sense it is the 'healthy' (artistic) form of compassion" (Barthes 58). Embracing a lover's suffering does not occur out of obligation, but from genuine compassion and care that Lui and Elle exercise for another.

ambiguity and empathy in the film. Specifically, Sandrine Sanos critiques the film's narrative as problematically Eurocentric and gendered in her article "My Body was Aflame with his Memory': War, Gender and Colonial Ghosts in Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959)." Sanos believes that the film erases difference and causes Lui to be an "empty, blank, figure" (737). Duras and Resnais avoid reproducing a play by play of the events at Hiroshima since this has been done by the Japanese themselves (Duras 9). Resnais and Duras's interests lie in the response to the atrocity outside of Japan; instead, they approach the horrors of Hiroshima from outside of the events and question how one can "see" the bombing of Hiroshima even with the most authentic recreations. With Lui's presence, the film acknowledges those more closely tied to the bombings (like Lui, who lost his family). Additionally, the film opens with the dilemma of representation for those not present during the atrocity in the exchange between Elle and Lui, where Lui insists that Elle saw nothing; even though, Elle sees the museums and footage. Elle and Lui's experiences in the war are vastly different, and along with experiential differences are demographic differences: *Hiroshima mon amour* does not exoticize these differences but makes nuanced and subtle references to difference to encourage empathy despite those differences. When Elle reveals past trauma to Lui, Sanos sees this as Lui becoming a catalyst to her suffering and as not possessing any knowledge of his own despite his own experiences (739). Yet, the similar trauma that Lui and Elle experienced—the loss of their lover—allows them to make this potent connection. Lui does not lack knowledge or agency: the love Lui feels for Elle causes him to comfort her and listen to her story and empathize. An affirmation of life exists in the fact that Lui can still love and feel an impossible love for Elle after the atrocity of Hiroshima. Events that resist representation and language itself leave the viewer with the opportunity to empathize and recognize that these representations always remain in excess—unable to be represented in their

totality. Duras and Resnais refrain from representing Hiroshima through a totalizing lens and leave the film riddled with necessary ambiguities. Sanos misses the ambiguous treatment that Duras and Resnais must give to a film of this nature and fails to see how the ambiguity contributes to the film's themes. At the end of the article, Sanos claims: "The love story thus substitutes the troubling terms of a messy historical past for the promise of a bright clean future" (746). *Hiroshima mon amour* does not promise a pain-free future, since the film revolves around the pain associated with love and loss and resists a linear retelling of the events. Both Elle and Lui have experienced traumatic and unexpected loss that shows how uncertainty can be a significant burden to carry. The representations of time in *Hiroshima mon amour* tell the viewer that events cannot so easily be wrapped into packages of past, present, or future; instead, Duras and Resnais make a post-colonial gesture by refusing the staunch linearity of colonialist historical perspectives.[17] Elle and Lui's trauma make the two fear the potential of loss in the

[17] Paul Carter discusses the issue with linear narratives and colonialist writing:

> Linear reasoning, whose segmentation of narrative into a sequence of self-contained steps, prevents the emergence of complexity (all that is understood by the conventional narrative plot) and treats the relations of traditional knowledge holders – the stories, for example, of human and non-human interdependence that underwrite customary law – as nonscientific and primitive: planning elites and custodian communities talk past one another Western governance systems (across legislature, judiciary and executive) take language literally, employing an 'atomistic, reductionistic model that sees the world as constituted by discrete institutional entities and problems, approaching these problems largely in isolation from one another, while non-western conceptions of law and order are relational and dynamic, qualities that tend to locate emancipation not in the law book but in the place of human encounter and exchange. (19)

Hiroshima mon amour resists a linear narrative through the incorporation of flash backs and showing

future.

Pain occurs in Elle's fear of loving again. Once again, Elle could lose Lui and feel the profound pain of loss once again. Hélène Cixous's essay "Coming to Writing" locates the desire to write from love—and not strictly in the libidinal sense. "Coming to Writing" opens with Cixous's fear of death that emerges at birth due to the similarity of non-existence. With the dread of death looming, Cixous continues to love:

> I didn't adore that-which-is-going-to-disappear; love isn't bound up for me in the condition of mortality. No. I loved. I am afraid. Because of my fear I reinforced love, I alerted all the forces of life, I armed love, with soul and words, to keep death from winning. Loving: keeping alive: naming. (2)

Within this brief poetic moment, Cixous injects writing with the power of life. Although death produces fear and can lead to anguish, Cixous persists in writing to keep love alive—resonating with the earlier passage from Duras on how Elle and Lui can still fall in love in a Hiroshima (a place associated only with death). Love persists in Hiroshima and love persists in Elle's affair with Lui. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, Duras and Resnais demonstrate the possibility of pressing on in spite of the fear of death; their writing and filmmaking perform the embrace of writing and love in the sense Cixous speaks to:

> Writing and Loving are lovers and unfold only in each other's embrace, in seeking, in writing, in loving each other. Writing: making love to Love. Writing with love, loving with writing. Love opens up the body without which Writing becomes atrophied. For Love, the words become loved and read flesh multiplied

various memorials (photos, footage, and belongings) unmarked by time.

> into all the bodies and texts that love bears and awaits from love. Text: not a detour, but the flesh at work in a labor of love. (42)

Writing, filmmaking, and loving embrace in *Hiroshima mon amour*. The framing embrace of the film stems from love: the love between Lui and Elle and the love infused in the writing of the film's script and the creation of the film. Cixous does not allow the fear of death to engulf her—and neither do Duras and Resnais, nor Elle and Lui.

Hiroshima mon amour sees the connection between love that resists language and atrocities that resist language.[18] *A Lover's Discourse* follows a discursive structure of naming terms or concepts relevant to the lover's discourse, where each term describes various moments that occur in love and that resist language even as Barthes writes. The book begins with Barthes calling the lover's discourse one of extreme solitude, stating that

> This discourse is spoken, perhaps, by thousands of subjects (who knows?), but warranted by no one; it is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages:

[18] Reni Celeste looks at the collision of love and catastrophe in *Hiroshima mon amour.* Celeste builds upon Levinas's understanding of love and tragedy through Kant's notion of the sublime. Levinas's conception of love, stemming from his text *Time and the Other,* speaks of love as infinite difference opposed to totality or unity (173). Furthermore, Celeste diverges from Levinas's philosophy in the belief that love and tragedy exist inseparably from one another, then applies the concept of sublime to the works of art that represent the collision of love and tragedy using *Hiroshima mon amour* as an exemplary model of the theory. Barthes's and Levinas's philosophies overlap in their theories of the inability to totalize or fully represent love in language and coincides with the inability to capture the atrocity at Hiroshima. Celeste's essay takes interest in the collision of the tragedy and love; whereas, this essay investigates the possibilities of empathy in regards to love. Of course, the lover cannot fully consume or become the Other, but empathetic potential emerges in the relationship between Elle and Lui.

> ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts). Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the 'unreal,' exiled from all gregarity, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation.* (1)

Calling upon various terms and conceptions of love from other authors, Barthes offers various moments of affirmation from the lover's internal discourse. What Barthes writes on these terms overlaps with the love-story narrative in *Hiroshima mon amour.* The viewer, and reader, can reflect on these affirmations of love throughout the film, in part to see how Lui and Elle's action affirm love and how Elle and Lui's love fails to be captured in language. One of the concepts Barthes examines is "*comprendre* / to understand" and on this matter Barthes acknowledges his failing to understand love in writing, or language:

> Hence, discourse on love though I may for years at a time, I cannot hope to seize the concept of it except 'by the tail': by flashes, formulas, surprises of expression, scattered through the great stream of the Image-repertoire; I am in love's *wrong place*, which is its dazzling place: "The darkest place, according to a Chinese proverb, is always underneath the lamp." (Barthes 59)

The closer the lover is to that love, the less likely the lover is to identify those moments as affirmations or identify the love itself. Chasing love's affirmations, Barthes knows he can never fully seize those affirmations in their entirety through language. Rather, Barthes lays out the various thought processes a lover endures through an "Image-repertoire" that proffers various realties for the lovers—true realities or not (Barthes 6-7). Examining the Image-repertoire, Barthes indicates that love resists language and *Hiroshima mon amour* registers love's resistance

to language in combining Elle and Lui's love story with the history of Hiroshima.

Elle and Lui's embrace encompass both a thinking body and a feeling mind when the film's frame is taken as a whole: the opening pleasurable embrace is always connected to the painful departure of the other that love obscures and attempts to repress. The film's ending turns to a different form of embrace, a grasp, a grasping to prevent departure. Lui now grasps Elle's wrists to prevent her departure, the (Derridean) supplement to the pleasurable embrace that appears at the onset of the film. From embrace to grasp, the frame comes full-circle by showing the connection between the seemingly ideological difference of grasping and embrace. The embrace occurs in moments of pleasure, but those moments still recognize the imminent possibility of departure. The grasp occurs in moments of pain and hopes to reproduce the love associated with the lovers. Gabriel Josipovici discusses a similar holding and grasping in the context of mothers and sons. A son holds his mother's hand every day on their walk, and one day the hand is not offered which causes the son's world to collapse, and he recognizes his need for the familiar hand that he had taken for granted (Josipovici 29). Once the child receives the hand again, this time he clings to the owner the of hand frustrating the mother and creating drama in an activity that once seemed simple (30). This conflict makes Time the only victor because the "familiar" changes leads to desire and frustration (31). Josipovici then goes onto suggest that "The novel, this novel [*In Search of Lost Time*] suggests, is always in search of a lost paradise, of the paradisal state which existed before it was propelled into existence, and it will not rest till that state is found again" (32). Writing, or filmmaking, seeks to acknowledge the trauma and loss experienced in love and atrocities, and the best art does so in affirmation of life. Lui desperately grasps Elle's wrists because Lui cannot reconcile with the loss of this potent love affair. Hoping that Elle's body will remember the embrace, Lui touches Elle, holds Elle, hoping that the touch

will produce an emotional effect and incite memories about their pleasureful touches. Knowing the history of Elle's body, Lui wants Elle to feel the previous embrace in this grasp and will stay in Hiroshima. *Hiroshima mon amour* illuminates the ways that one attempts to grasp onto memories and love, despite time, which always triumphs in the end. Time causes loss of memories and love. Duras and Resnais aim to capture this loss in their film and rebuild a paradise at a location that suffered a significant loss of life from an unspeakable atrocity. Memory alone cannot succeed, but art achieves an empathy with others; viewers experience the losses alongside Elle and Lui.

The embrace turns to grasping, and the touching between Lui and Elle begins and returns to the collision between not only bodies but ideas. Ideas touch like bodies (Nancy 65), and Elle and Lui's bodies come to represent a multitude of ideas throughout the film. Ambiguity that persists and leads to associations between ideas seemingly opposed. Interweaving the frame with a historical narrative and fictional narrative causes history / fiction to touch and causes tension. Elle and Lui's love connect dead and alive lovers, souls and bodies, and the bodies of those lost in the bombing of Hiroshima. The lover's narrative starts in ambiguous conceptions of time because love exists in nontime, but Elle and Lui's love affair is brought into historical time due to the location of the film and creates tension between nontime and historical time. This vertigo of temporalities further expresses the importance of ambiguity to this project. By positioning the time of the love affair with the location of Hiroshima, the film's orientation is directed toward the life-affirming work of poetic art. Blending a fictional narrative with historical narrative has the potential to create various correspondences between the public and private that produce empathy within viewers. Lui's private love affair intersects with the public history of the bombing of Hiroshima, and the narrative's public nature makes the private love affair public as

well. Furthermore, Duras and Resnais are acutely aware of the ways that the atrocity at Hiroshima and love itself resists language. The viewer knows by the end of the film why Lui and Elle embrace: to ensure that the lovers do not lose one another, that is, that they will not lose themselves. Lovers similarly grasp onto memories of love and pain, but nonetheless Lui's final grasp will not succeed. Whether Elle stays in Hiroshima, or whether the two are separated by death, memory and grasping will not succeed in a physical keeping; therefore, turning to practices of empathy proves more promising than memory alone. *Hiroshima mon amour* demonstrates this empathetic exercise between two people who become lovers by chance. Despite their differences, Elle and Lui resist locating alterity in the other and instead embrace one another. An unlikely embrace in an unlikely place mediates the film an image of two lovers suffering with very different pain. This image of lovers who found love in a city utterly annihilated—and courageously rebuilt—blends history with fiction, private with public, love with pain, and memory with forgetting. At the end of the film, the ash-glitter-dew settles or dissipates, and the viewer sees the embrace in all of its ambiguity. The embrace speaks that which language itself cannot.

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