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Hiroshima, mon amour

The Nausea of Choice

“What people keep secret is the most common, the most ordinary, the most prevalent thing, the same thing everybody has: the body and its needs, its maladies, its manias – constipation, for instance, or menstruation. We ashamedly conceal these intimate matters not because they are so personal but because, on the contrary, they are so lamentably impersonal.” So says Milan Kundera in *Identity*. And it is true that many of the things that make us intimate with other people are the relative revelation of secrets that are in fact not really secrets at all, but just functions of the body. Now this impersonally personal aspect may be the coming together of two bodies in making love, and at a later stage the realization of one’s partner’s time of the month, their constipation, their flatulence. What makes it an intimate revelation is no more than that the personal aspects of the body are shared with another.

In a brilliant short story called ‘The Blind Man’ D. H. Lawrence writes about a character called Bertie. “He was a bachelor, there or four years older than Isobel. He lived in beautiful rooms overlooking the river, guarded by a faithful Scottish man-servant. And he had friends among the fair sex – not lovers, friends...But if they seemed to encroach on him, he withdrew and detested them.” At the end of the story, though, the blind man encroaches on Bertie’s space, touching his head, and touches the eyes, moustache, the mouth. The friend who watches this imposition reckons, as the story concludes, that Bertie desperately needs ‘to escape from this intimacy, this friendship, which had been thrust upon him. He could not bear it that he had been touched by the blind man, his insane reserve broken in. He was like a mollusc whose shell is broken.’

What both Kundera and Lawrence are talking about is a physical privacy, but what about psychic privacy, the idea that we go through life protecting our private psychic spaces from others, and the problems this creates in relation to living a life in the present? Doesn’t this create a constant sense of eclipse that makes the present almost impossible to live in in relation to the weight of the past? This is central to *Hiroshima, mon amour*, where the profound feelings the French central character feels for her Japanese lover reminds her of the feelings she once had for her German lover during WWII. What happens here is that her notion of integrity, her sense of self, is based on her secret in a way not too dissimilar from the way Bertie tries to protect

his physical environs: the notion of integrity is sometimes tangible and in space; sometimes intangible and in time. We could almost call the latter a cerebral frigidity, where this mental space is protected at almost any cost. But of course though the central character tells her lover that she sometimes has other men, and seems utterly sexually and even emotionally relaxed in her lover's company, we can see the way she closes off when he approaches her psychic domain.

What's central here is the nausea, the vertigo, we may feel in relation to telling/not telling an aspect of ourselves to another or to others. If we decide to talk we feel as though we've lost something intrinsic; if we don't talk the secrets within us feel cancerous and increasingly toxic. This nausea of disclosure, though, may also demand, even if one wants to reveal, a broader discourse to allow for the revelation: it might require a coinciding event in another's life to allow the revelation of a disgraceful affair with a German soldier who was then shot dead, to make sense, and to be expressed. In *Hiroshima, mon amour*, the central character Elle's revelation comes out of her lover being Japanese (an enemy if their affair had taken place fifteen years earlier), and out of a mutual sense of tragedy: hers, individual, his familial and national. Who can even begin to understand the enormity of her loss but a man who has endured loss of his own? But can he really understand her sense of loss if in some ways hers is greater than his happens to be? As Gregory Solman suggests in *Film Comment*, "the Japanese man has no real memory of his own to integrate into the present but those of his dead friends and relations: he's a witness to nothing but earth shattering consequences. It's perhaps why he can't confront the artefacts, but can live in Hiroshima, the scene of the crime. The woman can't even bring herself to recall Nevers, much less live there."

Elle (Emmanuelle Riva) is in some ways consistent with Kierkegaard's notion of a 'shadowgraph'. "I call them shadowgraphs", Kierkegaard says in *Either/Or*, "partly to remind the reader by the very designation that I am summoning them up from the dark side of life, partly because, just like shadowgraphs, they are not visible straight away." Now for Kierkegaard such characters possess a reflective sorrow that can't be read superficially, because the sorrow sits deep within, and is part of an ongoing crisis of comprehension the philosopher sees present for example in Goethe's *Clavigo* through the character of Marie Beaumarchais. As Marie devotes more and more of her being to questioning the nature of an affair in the past, so less and less of Marie lives on the surface. We could say she becomes her wound. To some degree this also seems true of Elle, so that when she angrily chastises herself in front of the mirror for revealing her past to her lover, it's as though she feels she may have lost her essential self, that self which has spent fifteen years in a combination of confronting her past secretly, and denying her past to others. Hence to reveal from such a position demands not just a good listener, in common parlance, but perhaps nothing less than a listener who can eclipse the lover from the past, and give meaning to her life at least equally powerfully as the dead-ex. But then we could say does this not exacerbate the sense of betrayal towards herself, and towards the ex whose death she's made the core of her 'posthumous' identity? How can she move forward: isn't there a chasm opening up between the old self and the potentially new self?

Yet the film also suggests that this is maybe the one moment in the central character's life where the magnitude of the Japanese man's history, and the profound 'microtude'

of her own, can justify her revelation: that there's a coincidence of time, space and history that allows for the revelation. Here Gilles Deleuze proves useful. As he says in *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, "there are two characters, but each has his or her own memory which is foreign to the other. There is no longer anything at all in common. It is like two incommensurable regions of past, Hiroshima and Nevers. And while the Japanese refuses the woman entry into his region (I've seen everything...everything...You've seen nothing in Hiroshima, nothing...') the woman draws the Japanese into hers, willingly, and with his consent, up to a certain point. Is this not the way for each of them to forget his or her own memory, and make a memory for two, as if memory was now becoming world, detaching itself from their persons."

We could say what we have is the relatively impersonal magnitude of memory on the Japanese man's part, and the profound 'microtude' of memory on hers. There isn't an overt similarity: a point made at the beginning of the film when the Japanese lover insists "you saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing," and she lists all the things she has seen in Hiroshima, including "four visits to the museum." It's more an issue of finding the space to reveal emotional pain rather than offer up quantifiable externals. After all what went on in Nevers, finally, that can compare with the tragedy of Hiroshima? Nothing more, and yet nothing less, than one woman's self-collapse. As she says, she was never so young as when she was in Nevers. Yet does her falling in love again return Elle to that state of youthfulness she recalls from her past in Nevers, but at the same time, as she insistently proclaims "oh, how young I was once!", make her aware of the chasm between these two loves - that posthumous persona we've already mentioned? In such a situation the self's attempt at disclosure has all the tentativeness of a walk along a cliff's edge.

It's here critic Richard Roud in *A Critical Dictionary* is absolutely right to insist that "too much of the critical writing about Resnais has concentrated on his themes - time, memory, the past and the present. That time has now come to redress the balance." For Roud what's central in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* is the cinematic nature of that exploration, so that Resnais finds a cinematic correlative, for example, for this hesitancy in the scene where the central character returns to her hotel room after spending the day with her lover. Initially as she returns to the room she walks decisively and Resnais' tracking and cutting matches her assertiveness. But when she returns to her room she decides not to enter, and goes back out into the hall and down the flights of stairs, only to go back up the stairs and return to her room. Here Resnais' cutting is more abrupt and hesitant; his camera still or retreating away from his heroine as she goes back to the room. And then, as she enters the room decisively and goes to the bathroom mirror, again Resnais' technique suggests assertiveness. Our heroine's self still seems predicated on her past rather than on her present, so that as she initially returns to her room she does so in such a way that we can assume she hasn't so much decided to return to her husband and family and reject the Japanese lover, but much more that she's decided to be true to her accumulated memories of her past lover than to the present with her new one. Now the notion of fidelity to her husband and family has almost no meaning here - the moral question is outside the ontological question the film asks.

Sure there's an exchange early in the film where Elle says "I like men. I'm morally

suspect, you know,” and he says, “what do you mean by morally suspect?”, and she replies “suspecting other people’s morals”. He laughs the laugh of someone who thinks she’s just said something meaningless and provocatively perverse, but of course it’s one of the most important statements she makes. She’s had reason to suspect other people’s morals because of the degree to which they’ve used those morals to judge her. What the film wants to do is move towards answering the question: to what degree does conventional morality prove utterly useless in our lives, and that nothing less than a new, contingent ethic might be the only way towards a solution? Have all the affairs the leading character has had been as much a moves towards finding a ‘love ethic’ that she might have found with the Japanese man, rather than simply sexual experiences of little meaning? Have they proved of little meaning not because they were adulterous affairs, but because she couldn’t find within these men – just as she seems not to find it within her husband – a position upon which she can reveal herself?

And thus we could see why nausea might increase, how each affair upon which she embarks, becomes another move towards internal closure, towards closing herself off from the world. It’s a nausea that comes from accepting bodies but being distant from another’s mind. It’s this *Hiroshima, mon amour* scriptwriter Marguerite Duras is getting at when she says in her book *Practicalities*, “I’ve read Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* And Michelet’s *The Witch*. But I don’t have any books any more. I’ve got rid of them and any idea of having them. It’s all over. With those two books it was as if I’d opened up my own body and mind and were reading an account of my own life in the middle Ages, in the forests, and in the factories of the nineteenth century. But I couldn’t find one man who’d read the Woolf book. We’re cut off from one another, as M.D. says in her novels.” Here she’s exploring this problem of distance. But this distance isn’t a belligerent distance – a battle of the sexes perspective – but a wistful, deeply sad awareness of the chasm between men and women. It’s this distance that maybe the central character here needs in order to survive, but at the same time the distance is the very thing she’s created *to* survive.

With each failed love affair in the past, with each affair arriving at incomprehensibility, has Elle both despaired at the failure to confess, and at the same time assumed ever more that her past is a private space not to be shared and the root of her identity? But has this not become her nausea? In this great scene where she goes back to her hotel room so indecisively we see a marvellous example of the indecisiveness of the body, and the empathy of the camera towards this particular form of crisis.

That the decision is absolutely at the core of her sense of self is evident in the scene where she says to her Japanese lover that he’s the first man to whom she’s ever told the story of her affair with the German . He’s enthralled by this, as though he’s not so much jealous of the dead lover to whom she’s still so obviously in love, but delighted that she has confided in him. The only way he can conceivably replace the lover is if he becomes the one to whom she confesses. Thus we should be wary of attributing the same problematic to the central character here as to the neurotic aunt in, say, Bertolucci’s film *Before the Revolution*, a film vital to Pier Paolo Pasolini and his notion of a ‘Cinema of Poetry’. Here Pasolini talks of the film finding visual correlatives for the aunt’s behaviour as Pasolini proposes that the camera is no longer a practical follower of the action, but capable of a free indirect vision that positions

itself between first person narration and third person observation. This doesn't come from the usual points of view (to indicate first person) nor medium long shots to show an observational perspective as we might find in a conventional film. No, instead the whole film is somewhere between an empathic and an objective perspective, as it tries to make sense of a particular woman's singularity, her 'shadowgraphic' nature. Yet Bertolucci remains at one remove from the aunt, and focuses chiefly on the youthful nephew. Resnais' form is radical but the innovations much more obviously reflect the central character.

Here it is as though the film's form tries to find a correlative for Duras's problem illustrated in finding that no man she knew had ever read the Woolf book: Resnais' form as empathy suggests he *has* read Woolf. And though Duras mentions a specific book, it's only really to illustrate a more general problem. This is the nausea of revelation that runs through much late/fifties early sixties cinema, from *Voyage to Italy*, to *Red Desert*, to *Vivre sa Vie*, where women need to find a man who has, so to speak, read Woolf - who can read them, and allow them to read themselves, be it in the form of a character or the character of the form, and ideally both. And of course absolutely essential to this reading of oneself with another is the idea of obliterating the responsibility, the burden of one's own consciousness, even conscience. Julia Kristeva is absolutely right to say in *Black Sun* that in *Hiroshima, mon Amour* the central character, because of 'the horror of Hiroshima [was] somehow liberated...from her French tragedy', but it proved only a partial liberation - it gave her it seems a righteousness towards her own past, but couldn't quite give her the space to disclose that past to another. It's here we can say it isn't enough for a man to make sense of a woman because he understands empathically - the sort of understanding a male reader of the Woolf book might provide - it may require a coincidence of the personal and the historical. Thus if we agree with Kristeva that Hiroshima dwarfed any shame our heroine might have felt as a collaborator with the Germans - simply by taking a German lover - then that is surely because it was nothing next to the enormity of Hiroshima. And who better to tell her personal tragedy to than one who lost family in this tragedy?

What Resnais and Duras suggest is that alienation is not a simple problem of communication failure, but the presence of communication more a wonderful co-incidence, a wonderful coming together of variables that allows communication to take place. This is of course central to our heroine's nausea, because, sure, what Elle has found with the Japanese lover is more than she has found with her lovers in the past, but it also contains something of a possibly unliveable conundrum. Here's a man with whom she communicates, and central to this communication is that he has suffered, if indirectly, from the very tragedy that in some way liberated her from personal feelings of shame fifteen years before: the shame of the nuclear bomb is a much greater atrocity than her own affair. Also, in his very understanding and comprehension, she feels a second and more profound liberation. Now probably none of her other lovers could have provided this; and yet maybe some of her previous lovers could have been more readily absorbed into her life. Her present lover is a man from the other side of the world with a spouse and family - like herself - and any serious relationship would create an obliteration of their socially evolved lives. Thus her nausea is partially created by an emotional paradox. It has taken a man from the other side of the world to understand her pain - based on an emotional and historical

co-incident - but to sustain this comprehension, and this huge interior gain, would she have to sacrifice the rest of her existence?

What Resnais and Duras show very well, though, for all the baggage the central character possesses, is our heroine in the process of making a decision, and finding a form to reflect it. It is, if you like, her first nauseous choice. When Jean-Paul Sartre talks about nausea, the nausea of characters in *Nausea* and in *The Age of Reason*, we sense much more not the feeling of nausea in relation to a decision to be made, but a swirl of nauseousness around the past, the present, the future and space. We can see the difference between the central character in Sartre's *Nausea* and our heroine here. In Sartre's book, the central character says "I haven't had any adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But not adventures. It isn't a matter of words; I am beginning to understand...There was no need for extraordinary circumstances: all I asked for was a little order...I have known wonderful moments, I have had adventures." Where our heroine must make a singular decision into the future, for Sartre's protagonist the indecision of past decisions not quite made decisively, or an inability to see the world in terms of concrete decisions made, causes all sorts of internal chaos that proves phenomenologically problematic. This is as much the case with Mathieu, who says at the end of *The Age of Reason*, "no one has interfered with my freedom; my life has drained it dry", as it is with *Nausea's* central character. In each instance nausea is generated out of the multiplicity of events. In *Hiroshima, mon amour*, though, the decision, in our speculative take on the film, is in the present and in the binary choice.

We could say though that the decision may alleviate nausea from the rest of her life, or it could multiply it. Or maybe no correct decision can possibly be made, and it will be multiplied no matter what she chooses; that the choice itself is so impossibly difficult that her life will be split asunder. Now before, any crisis did not seem to have been a crisis of decision making, but rather that of fatalistic acceptance (an idea that haunts much of Duras's work): her lover was shot dead, she was in disgrace and locked in the cellar; she felt liberated from her shame by an event on the other side of the world, and married, had kids, took lovers, and all the while protected that inner space of secrecy concerning her ex. But now inevitability has given way to a choice, and it is this crisis the film captures so well in the hotel scene we earlier commented upon.

Now the film hits on something interesting here. And it concerns the possible as Kierkegaard phrased it, but one containing a further impossibility. In Kierkegaard's imaginings we have a story of a bourgeois family man reading the newspaper over breakfast who rushes to the window and insists he must have the possible, or he will suffocate. But the impossible comes out of the possible, so that a new form of suffocation might well take place if the form of the impossible allows for a new lover. Where before we see the character caught in an enveloping subjectivity to the detriment of the outside world - as the bourgeois man offers a burst of subjectivity from the depths - after the release from the solitary into the inter-subjective another problem arises: the problem of choice, between leaving one's wife or one's lover. This is the very problem that's faced by Elle, as she assumes, in the fifteen years from her German lover's death to her Japanese lover's appearance, that she merely has to accept the conditions of her state: that her internal world would have little

co-incident with her external reality. We could say that, when she confronts the mirror as she returns to the hotel room in a moment of decisiveness, she's respecting her ex-lover's memory, but we could also say it reflects her unwillingness to confront the radical choice offered to her. Must she subordinate the idea of chance to a notion of fate, must she believe that whether she retreats into the memory of her ex, or advances towards the possibility of love with the Japanese man, she is choosing fatalistically, or at least making a decision based on variables much larger than herself and her own immediate consciousness?

However, if Deleuze is correct then we can see that it is in letting go of one's existential self and the singularity of memory for "a memory for two, as if memory was now becoming world, detaching itself from their persons", so that the radical choice isn't so much denied as sublimated into a bigger world view. Thus at the end of the film the two characters don't declare their love for each other, but recall each others' wounds "Hiroshima...it's your name," she declares. "It's my name, yes," he replies, before saying "Your name is Nevers. Nevers is in France."

There's a nice outburst of interpretation from Jacques Rivette in an *Hiroshima, mon Amour* round-table published in *Cahiers du Cinema* at the end of the fifties: "...the theme of *Hiroshima*: a woman who no longer knows where she stands, who no longer knows who she is, who tries desperately to redefine herself in relation to Hiroshima, in relation to this Japanese man, and in relation to the memories of Nevers that come back to her. In the end Elle is a woman who is starting all over again, going right back to the beginning, trying to define herself in existential terms before the world and before her past, as if she were once more unformed matter in the process of being born." If she is to be reborn, though, it must be through an existential dilemma resolved beyond immediate existence - to a union that even then isn't just inter-subjective but, as Deleuze says, "becoming world". Is it only through this "becoming world", through this co-incident that involves personal and relatively impersonal tragedy that a meaningful, an un-nauseous decision can be made? When one decides to leave a wife and family for a lover, what is it in the decision that is bigger than the existential dilemma, how do we know that leaving one person for another isn't simply leaving the old for the new, and that in the new is the old merely waiting to manifest itself? If Rivette is right that the central character is unformed matter waiting to be born, then she must sense a complete newness in the situation.

Supposedly both Resnais and Duras claimed that the heroine leaves and leaves for good. But as Rivette says, "I don't think it really matters at all, for *Hiroshima* is a circular film...", it is a film containing a problematic, and so the question we should ask ourselves is not so much does she stay or does she go, but if she stays, why will she stay, and if she goes, what will her rationale be for leaving? So we might arrive at the idea that if she stays it's because she's resolved the nausea of radical choice perhaps by a wider acceptance of becoming world, but if she goes it is because she's aware that this radical leap could just prove the first of many. As Rivette says again, this is a woman with a structured life: and it's a life that is both internally and externally structured. Externally, in that she's married with kids and works as an actress; internally, to the degree in which she's predicated her German ex as the basis for her identity. Sure, the Japanese man breaks into that external and internal world, but if she leaves, can it not just be another experience towards health? This would be

a healthy antidote to her earlier experience of the 'enemy', and will allow her to continue her existence not just as 'normal' but as more 'normal' still - normal in the sense of less neurotic, more open to experience the world internally and externally. That is, if we accept, with Kristeva, that the bombing of Hiroshima, helped her over her own despair and guilt, does meeting and making love to a Japanese man to whom she can express that guilty past, move her still closer to health?

In another film of nauseous choice that we've already invoked, *Before the Revolution*, the central character conformed to bourgeois status by marrying the woman whom he was always expected to marry. Fabrizio resolved nausea each step of the way by finding an external event that would match his internal emotional state. He's undeniably presented as a superficial character - superficial in the sense that the decisions he makes have an emotional pragmatism that keeps the depths of nausea at bay. Elle here may also see that the important thing is to keep nausea at a distance, but this is trying to find the maximum amount of emotional health out of a precarious health. When near the very end of the film our heroine cries out to her Japanese lover, "I'll forget you, I'm forgetting you already! See how I'm forgetting you!", it's an awareness of the layers of self that constantly eclipse each other and leave questions of integrity precariously in balance. How do we keep our memories without destroying ourselves; but if we lose them can we even claim to be a self, an integrated being?

However, is this integrated being coming out of dangerous memories solidified, memories made to represent the self, and if so what will happen if you allow these memories to be displaced by 'new' memories? When Elle hysterically says, "I'll forget you, I'm forgetting you already", is it less the cry of a woman forgetting the lover who stands in front of her, than forgetting who she is as she's in the process of forgetting, or rather eclipsing, her late German lover with her Japanese one? Bertolucci's film arrives at Fabrizio's bad faith, but Resnais is more interested in trying to create a problematic where the notion of good or bad faith riddles the very character's being.

We might conclude by saying that what interests Resnais and Duras finally is not whether our heroine will leave or stay with the Japanese lover, but the degree to which they've explored the nature of her being, and what she will lose or gain by staying or leaving, and what we, faced with a similar problem, would do in similar circumstances. The brilliance of Resnais and Duras's film is such, though, and the choice it offers coming from so complex socio-historical circumstances, that to think of the notion of choice in a narrow, psychological sense would surely diminish the work. Opening itself to the problem not at all of the couple in immediate space revealing their bodily secrets as Kundera examines, but to the intimacy of the broadest possible psychic parameters, the writer and director gives us a work of almost infinite complexity: the complexity of the infinite.

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