Hiroshima mon amour (1959)

Axelle Germanaz

dir. Alain Resnais; prod. Samy Halfon; screenplay and dialogues Marguerite Duras; photography Sacha Vierny, Takahashi Michio; music Giovanni Fusco, Georges Delerue. 35mm, black/white, 91 mins. Pathé Entertainment, distrib. Cocinor.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

In a 1960s interview, Alain Resnais was asked if in *Hiroshima mon amour* he had deliberately introduced »transgressive« ideas—of interracial love, female sexuality, adultery—to decry France's prevailing social norms. His response was candid: »This is not a social problem film, it is a sentimental film« (Ravar 214, all translations are mine). Indeed, *Hiroshima mon amour* is not only a cinematographic inquiry about the meanings and conditions of modern life after World War II, but it is also a deeply sentimental account of love and intimacy in the Atomic Age.

Set in Hiroshima in August 1957, twelve years after the United States bombed the city, the film follows the short-lived love story between *Elle* (»Her,« played by Emmanuelle Riva), a French actress appearing in an international film about peace, and *Lui* (»Him,« played by Eiji Okada), a Japanese architect involved in city politics. As Elle prepares to return to Paris, the couple embarks on a twenty-four-hour affair, punctuated by a prolonged series of intimate and painful dialogues about their lives, loves, and war traumas. Born from the collaboration of New Wave director Alain Resnais and New Novel author Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* stages a melodramatic love story between two anonymous modern subjects. Their names are, in fact, irrelevant to the storyline: They are made to be no one and everyone at the same time. The lovers are casualties of their social realities (past and present), their affective states, and a new geopolitical situation they inhabit: the postwar world, or, the Atomic Era. Their romance, seemingly trivial and static, triggers, in reality, a slow geographical and psychological odyssey for both characters. As we follow the couple through the serpentine streets, hotel staircases and hallways, and into the empty bars of Hiroshima, a grander story of universal loss and trauma emanates from their brief encounter. While the movie, gen-

erally regarded as an art film, is not a typical Sirkian melodrama with colorful imagery, heightened action, and a Manichean worldview, it nevertheless rests on a set of melodramatic tropes acute to the postwar moment. The movie deploys dramatic speech and music, centers on suffering subjects, and introduces the »double temporality« typical of melodrama, representing »›too-late-ness‹ at the same time as it conveys the hope of its circumvention« (Frank 541). Furthermore, it is—seemingly despite Resnais' original intentions—a powerful social critique of the postwar world, and in particular of nuclear proliferation. Finally, it is, as one irritated reader of *The New York Times'* 1960 review of the film bluntly puts it in a brief op-ed, »sickeningly sentimental and romantic« (Perrota 363).

The opening of *Hiroshima mon amour* is phantasmatic. The film begins with a close-up of two naked bodies gently moving. They are locked in a soft embrace, caressing each other, while being covered with what seems to be falling ashes of nuclear fallout, then glitter, then »rain, dew, or sweat, whichever is preferred« (Duras 15). As Elle begins to speak about what she has seen of Hiroshima, we see archival photos and footages from Akira Iwasaki's 1946 documentary, *The Effects of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, recorded right after the blast and soon after censored by the Japanese Army and U.S. forces. We see ruins, scorched bodies, deformed objects. We see victims, with their skins burned, opened, scarred and hear about their progenies, born with or developing malformations. We also see Resnais' own shots of the reconstructed city, its inhabitants, and its strange flourishing atomic tourism. Elle's lyrical declamation about the extraordinary suffering that has engulfed Hiroshima, emphasized by Giovanni Fusco's score, only heightens the emotional reception of those sensational images. By weaving together glimpses of the romantic embrace with brutal images of Hiroshima, the audience is rendered spectator of both the lovers' erotic act and the horrors of nuclear war, and the effect is unnerving. Indeed, the fifteen-minute opening sequence is built on conflict, unease, and awe. As Elle recounts her memories of news reports on the bombing of Hiroshima, Lui ritually interjects, not only to negate her experience of the bombing, but also, ultimately, ours. Lui says: »You saw nothing, in Hiroshima. Nothing,« and Elle replies: »I saw everything. Everything.« In a later conversation Elle states: »I have always cried on the fate of Hiroshima. Always.« To which Lui replies: »No. What would you have cried on?« The drastic incomprehensibility of each other's life stories and war traumas, along with the incommunicability of what happened in Hiroshima, is at the core of this postwar love story.

Resnais makes use of the melodramatic mode to offer his audience ways to cope with postwar social issues and the »extraordinary« feelings they give rise to. In particular, this is done through nuanced and affective representations of the war, forms of radical subjectivity and realism, a haunting dramatic music score, and a focus on tragic love stories during and after the war between wounded characters. As an audience, we are left disconcerted by the hopeless love depicted on screen. The characters are themselves but spectators of their conditions, and it is as fellow spectators that we identify with their feelings more than with their actions. Through melancholic music and vivid flashbacks, we are made to feel Elle's torment at the loss of her first love, a German soldier stationed in her hometown, Nevers. We are made to feel her distress at his sudden murder, then at her own social death as she is publicly shamed and ostracized by her community for falling for the »enemy.« Likewise, we are made to feel Lui's guilt as he reveals that he is the only member of his family to survive the atomic bomb. »What luck,« Elle tells him after hearing that he was dispatched by the Imperial Army when the city

was razed to the ground, to which he bitterly answers »Yes.« We are made to feel his desire as he pursues her throughout the city, seeking to fulfill his need to love and be loved unconditionally. And we feel their despair toward a world seemingly bound for self-annihilation: »It will happen again,« Elle says. »Two hundred thousand dead. Eighty thousand injured. In nine seconds […]. It will happen again.«

The characters' respective concern with memory is also a core theme of this melodrama. During the central scene of the film at a tearoom by the Ōta River, Elle recounts the story of her forbidden love with the German soldier and realizes that she is slowly forgetting him. She suddenly screams, breaks down, and buries her face in Lui's hands. He listens carefully, (re-)collects her story, and even enacts her fading memory as he once speaks for the German lover. Another key scene of the film towards the end is also poignant for its representation of memory—or of its failure to do so—and the dislocation and solitude provoked by the war: Late at night, Elle enters a bar called the Casablanca (note Resnais' nod to Michael Curtiz's 1942 → *Casablanca* about another melodramatic wartime love story embodied by another iconic cinema couple). Lui follows from a distance, then finally sits at a table opposite her. Their looks never detach, yet not a word is uttered. An unknown man sits by her side and engages in a series of flirtatious questions to which she absently nods. Lui, still lost in her eyes, smokes alone, accompanied only by his shadow on the adjacent wall—the silhouette, so stark, so salient, emphasizes a sense of fragmentation and isolation. Then suddenly, he lifts his gaze to the ceiling: His eyes widen, and his mouth slightly opens. He appears in shock, as if he was, at this exact moment, witnessing the drop of the bomb twelve years earlier. However, this can only be a futile reenactment of an event he himself did not experience, but which he knows through collective memory. He then drops his head and slowly raises his gaze, safely sinking it back into hers. This fleeting moment exposes Lui's own haunting trauma, consummating loneliness, and the salvaging bond he experiences with Elle. These two scenes testify that the acts of forgetting and remembering are equally excruciating for the postwar subject. How does one manage the unbearable personal pain that comes with the vital duty to remember the collective, traumatic past?

Hiroshima mon amour engages with important epistemological and existential questions about memory, identity, affect, and intimacy at the dawn of a new geopolitical era. Resnais relies on the melodramatic mode to not only bring the unspeakable, the unimaginable, and the repressed into the realm of representation, but also to dissect it—viscerally and poetically. As Christine Gledhill notes, melodrama disentangles the intricacies of the social world and »organises the disparate sensory phenomena, experiences, and contradictions of a newly emerging secular and atomising society in visceral, affective and morally explanatory terms« (228-29). As such, *Hiroshima mon amour* is an investigation into the ways both World Wars have shattered and reorganized modern subjects' affective, moral, and sociopolitical spheres. In the end, the film is a plea for peace and human understanding. It never pretends that communication and connection are easy. On the contrary, it is acutely aware of the immense difficulties such potential dialogue can engender. Nonetheless, the international love story at the heart of the film—itself a product of transnational cooperation—argues for human understanding and compassion. In the aforementioned interview, Resnais spoke more about the hopes he had regarding the impact of his film. He wished it would encourage spectators to remember Hiroshima's fate, and, most importantly, to love: »There is [in the film] something of ›hurry up and fall in love, life is short, enjoy it terribly, really, we only have little time‹« (Ravar 216).

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