Hiroshima as a Personal and National Allegory: Revisiting *Hiroshima mon amour* and *H Story*

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President Truman's decision to drop the first atomic bomb ever on the city of Hiroshima left a profound mark on human history. About two weeks after the decision was made, on August 6, 1945, a single airplane nicknamed "Enola Gay" dropped one bomb over the city of Hiroshima. The damage was immense, and more than 70,000 people perished instantly in the ball of fire. Nine days later, following another bomb on Nagasaki and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, Japan surrendered. The titanic and bitter struggle of almost four years was over. The bombing of Hiroshima was perhaps not a small step for Truman, but it certainly became a giant predicament for mankind. In 1945 it confronted Japan with the risk of national destruction on an unprecedented scale; however, four years on, when the Soviets tested their own bomb and the risk for a nuclear war became real, it placed all humanity in peril of total extinction.¹

The bombing of Hiroshima at once became a synonym for destruction and suffering, and in the following years it acquired additional symbolism. Hiroshima came to symbolize the fragile existence of humanity in modern life, the madness and suffering in modern wars, and the terror mankind brings upon itself. For some it conjures up the Pacific War, American evil, or fanatic Japanese aggression, whereas for others it still remains a token of their lost families and prewar lives. For most of us, Hiroshima stands as a symbol rather than a place name. It has acquired a firm position in our collective memory. Yet this memory is constantly changing.²

Human memory has a neural base. Stored in the synapses of our brain, it functions when dealing with personal events, as well as with anything that surrounds our world. Such a memory, however, has its limitations. Individuals are selective in what they remember, and memories can be created, reshaped and distorted.³ Neural memory is short-lived, and if its content is not told or recorded it is lost with the individual's death. While the mechanism of individual memory is intriguing, it is a fairly circumscribed topic, treated by certain disciplines. Collective memory, by contrast, is by far a more fuzzy concept, and as such it is treated by diverse disciplines, from literature, history, and sociology to political science, to name only a few.

The fuzziness begins with the definition of collective memory. Events remembered in this kind of memory do not require a neural base. They may recall personal memories, but alternatively they may resort to records (such as books, oral history, documents, films, and artistic works) and sites (such as monuments and museums). Intuitively, people think of collective memories as the sum of the personal memories of the members of a given group. Their memories are regarded as authentic, and thereby they seem to differ from official histories. However, these images are at best wishful thinking. Often the sources of collective memories are under control and manipulation, making them particularly susceptible, as Jan Assmann notes, to politicized forms of remembering propelled by governments in particular.⁴ For this reason collective memories vary immensely, depending mainly on the identity of the group and the time of the memory.⁵ When examining a specific collective memory we should first inquire who the group is, what the memories contain, and how the knowledge is accessed. Apparently, collective memories can be shared by a small group or all humankind, and they may be short-lived or long-lasting. One example of a universal memory, which will probably endure for a long time, is the bombing of Hiroshima. The various representations and usages of this specific event provide us with a fascinating case study on the way collective memories are shaped and manipulated.⁶

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¹ On the decision to use the bomb see Alperovitz 1995; Maddox 1995; Newman 1995; Wainstock 1996; Walker 1996.
² For various "memories" (narratives of remembrance) of the bombing of Hiroshima see, for example, Boyer 1996; Shono 1986; Yoneyama 1999.
³ On the creation of false memories see, for example, the works of psychologists Loftus and Ketchum 1994.

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⁵ On the manipulation of collective memories in the United States see Bodnar 1994.
⁶ On governmental and municipal forces that shaped the collective memory of Hiroshima in Japan and the United States see, for example, Yoneyama 1999; Walker 1996.
On the national level, however, Hiroshima was one of the greatest taboos. For much of the six-and-a-half-year Occupation era, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the outcomes of the bombs, were not mentioned in the Japanese media. Employing more than 5,600 people, the American authorities, and particularly the Civil Censorship Detachment, kept a close eye on any utterance regarding this issue. John Hersey’s book Hiroshima, for instance, could not be published in translation in Japan before 1949, and only a year later were ordinary Japanese citizens allowed to watch for the first time some visual images about the damage inflicted on the two cities and their inhabitants. It was as late as summer 1952, four months after the end of the American Occupation, that the Japanese public first became aware of the full destruction wrought by the bombs. Thereafter Hiroshima became the focal point of a new discourse. Wartime images of heroic soldiers and resolute males were now replaced by images of “blameless, self-sacrificing maternal females.” Hiroshima began to turn into a shrine of Japan’s national victimhood, while simultaneously serving as a veil to hide and suppress any discussion of the nation’s wartime aggression.

The city of Hiroshima did not succumb to the ravages of the bomb. It grew rapidly, doubling its prewar population by 1974 and tripling it about a decade later. It became a symbol of Japan’s vitality and its postwar recovery. For most Japanese, however, it continued to mark their tormented past, a living warning for the future. Obviously, a place laden with such profound symbolism, all relevant to contemporary Japan, would attract spontaneous artistic attention. Nonetheless, much of the image of Hiroshima and its place in the local and foreign collective memory was the result of well-orchestrated efforts. Many of them stemmed from within Japan, mostly on the part of the national and prefectural governments, but some originated abroad. One of the seminal artistic works that established Hiroshima in the universal collective memory, especially in the West, was the French film Hiroshima mon amour – the fruit of a single collaboration between director Alain Resnais (1922-2014) and writer Marguerite Duras (1914-1996). This essay focuses on the way this film contains the tragedy of Hiroshima, and analyses its role in reshaping Hiroshima in various collective memories in the context of the late 1950s.

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8 Lowenstein 2004: 149.
9 Hiroshima and Nagasaki, John Dower points out, have become “icons of Japanese suffering – perverse national treasures capable of fixing Japanese memory of the war on what had happened to Japan and simultaneously blotting out recollection of the Japanese victimization of others.” In Dower 1999: 133.

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The Film Hiroshima mon amour and the Atom Bomb

Hiroshima mon amour tells the personal events of two people who meet briefly in Hiroshima in August 1957, twelve years after the bomb. Of the two, the chief protagonist is a Frenchwoman (whom Duras simply refers to as elle – she). She is an actress in her early thirties, who comes to the city to perform in a film on peace. The day before she leaves she meets a Japanese married man, an architect (referred to as lui – he), and the two have a one-night affair. Lying naked in a hotel room the two characters (played by Emmanuelle Riva and Okada Eiji) discuss Hiroshima – an undefined concept that seems to include, at least for the visiting actress, both the physical city and its traumatic past. This encounter with the city and the local man is not easy for Elle. It provokes an emotional crisis and the sudden recall of her own traumatic experience 14 years earlier, during the final months of World War II. At that time she was in love with a young German soldier in her hometown of Nevers. The youthful liaison ended tragically with the death of soldier at the hands of the French Resistance, the girl’s punishment and ostracism by her compatriots, the disgrace of her family, and her subsequent temporary insanity. With the emergence of these suppressed memories, Lui attempts to persuade Elle to stay in Hiroshima. The film ends at the railway station without a clear indication of her decision.

Staying in the city for more than several days and having visited its monuments and museums, Elle feels she has seen everything in Hiroshima. Lui, however, replies that she has seen nothing. As the short and drowsy conversation between the two proceeds, the audience is exposed to what Elle has seen: still images representing Hiroshima during the first moments and days after the bomb; horrible scenes of wounded people and scorched bodies. This provocative exchange about the ability to “see” Hiroshima is to underlie the entire movie: to what extent are we able to grasp a past event? The visitor’s approach, as one of Resnais’s critics suggested, might be “touristic and superficial.” But even if she stayed much longer and tried harder, the doubt remains: how much could she see, merely by visiting the local museum? Could she experience anything of the horror by looking at photographs? Can a single person understand, feel, and experience at all such a tremendous catastrophe?

In early 1958 the young director Resnais faced similar questions. Three years earlier he had completed a documentary on Auschwitz entitled Nuit et Brouillard (Night and Fog, 1955) in which he sought to deal with the memory of

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10 For a detailed analysis of the “mental units” of this part see Callev 1997: 104-112.
11 Sweet 199th.
another colossally traumatic experience. The film won high acclaim, and consequently Resnais was commissioned to make a short documentary on the atomic bomb. His point of departure was similar, and rather than dealing directly with the bombing he wanted to examine the memory of the physical site and its meaning. But after several months of futile efforts to conceptualize a script Resnais felt blocked. Although the background of Hiroshima was totally different from the Holocaust, he could not envision any images different from those he had already created in his earlier documentary: sorrow and death, memories of unfathomable pain and suffering. Before relinquishing the project, he suggested to his producers, Anatole Dauman and Samy Halton at Argos Films, who had initiated the project and produced his Nuit et Brouillard, to try this time a woman's perspective on the issue. As the scriptwriter he thought first of François Sagan or Simone de Beauvoir, but eventually felt someone more "feminine" and less intellectual would be appropriate. He was willing to proceed with the project "if someone like Duras were interested ..." She was, and in two months of intensive writing and almost daily meetings with Resnais she completed the assignment.

Duras's script was very different from what Resnais had initially envisaged, but he liked it. It integrated her idea of a love story with some features of his early conception of a documentary film. During the latter half of 1959 Resnais directed this, his first feature film, with some scenes shot in Japan and some in France. The following year the script was published in book form, first in French, and soon after in English. Although Resnais and Duras were responsible for the film, financially and ideologically it was a Japanese-French co-production, and the budget of 12 million yen was realized mostly by the Japanese studio Daiel. So not surprisingly the framework of the film was bound to very specific requirements: at least one major sequence in the film should be shot in each country, and similarly one of the main characters must be French, the other Japanese. Duras's screenplay conformed well to the agreement, although the film's origin as a documentary is evident throughout. The first full 15 minutes, for example, are devoted to documenting Hiroshima—the Hiroshima of August 6, 1945, and like in Nuit et Brouillard this section consists of real still photos and

look-alike documentary footage of the ruined city soon after the dropping of the bomb.

This "false documentary," as Duras referred to it, was a Japanese requirement, and as we shall see later it suited a certain hegemonic idea at that time about the place of Hiroshima in collective memory. This part, therefore, provides the geographical and emotional setting to the film. But very soon, mostly as the outcome of Duras's script, the focus of Hiroshima mon amour shifts towards the personal story of the two protagonists. In her synopsis she writes that this personal affair, "however brief it may be, always dominates Hiroshima." Domination is an understatement. Hiroshima is almost forgotten in later parts of the script, and instead the spectators enter into the realm of memories from France.

The Problem with Hiroshima mon amour

My reading of Hiroshima mon amour is not intended to be an exhaustive overview of the film. Instead I want to examine the way it presents the tragedy that Hiroshima experienced in August 1945 and its contribution to the memory of this city. I also do not seek to discuss Duras and Resnais for their cinematographic achievement in detail, especially since I consider their film an enthralling masterpiece. Indeed, there is fairly wide consensus on this. Soon after its release the film received prizes from six French organizations, and in 1960 it won the awards of the French Syndicate of Cinema Critics and the New York Film Critics Circle. French audiences were not deterred by the highbrow praises and made the film one of the great successes of 1959-60. In the following years it received further adulation, and at present it is regarded as an avant-garde classic, if not as the opening of the French New Wave. So well was the film that James Monaco, one of Resnais's critics, argues that Duras and Resnais prepared themselves in this film against any possible criticism. "Hiroshima is a closed system", he maintains,

impartial to judgment. It feeds on its faults. You may not like it, but it does not matter in the least. Your reaction is the subject of the film, and

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12 On this film and its background see Leahy 2003. For further background see also Ladjer 2007 and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis 2009.
14 On the writing of the script and the cooperation between Duras and Resnais see Monaco 1997: 34-36. For Duras's life and work, see the recent Meule and Beaulieu 2009.
15 Duras 1960. The English translation was published as Duras 1964. In this essay I cite the English translation.
16 Monaco 1997: 34.
18 Even in 2006 (the year this chapter was first presented) some 2,700 internet searchers who bothered to rate the film in IMDb, the most important internet site devoted to films, rate it on average 7.9. By April 2014 the rating remained the same whereas the number of raters grew to some 14,570. This score is very high, the highest. In fact, that any feature film of the celebrated Resnais has won (together with L'avant-dernière à Marienbad of 1964). See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067553/ (last accessed April 20, 2014).
its objective. Some of us see nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing. Others see everything. Everything. That is the point.²⁹

Nonetheless, as a mirror of Hiroshima the film involves several problematic issues, which are certainly more noticeable some five decades after its release. My reconsideration of this work first requires a short clarification about its objectives. What is the film about? For Monaco, the theme of the film "is the impossibility of making the film."³⁰ Michael Roth, however, contends that the film is endowed with memory as it remembers that forgetting happens.³¹ Similarly, film critic Freddy Sweet finds the theme of memory and the process of psychological accommodation to memory as "the dynamic center of the film." Hiroshima mon amour, he contends, "is a film about memory."³² I tend to differ only slightly from these views, as I argue that the film concentrates on forgetting rather than on remembering.³³ Forgetting, of course, is an aspect of memory, but it centers on the loss of memory, the void that is left by the need to forget. Forgetting is closely associated with collective memories, as people tend to repress traumatic memories, personal or collective, in order to keep on functioning in their daily lives. There are even times when forgetting is a condition for sanity. By contrast, the tendency to remember collective traumas through commemoration is enforced by the group for collective reasons. It is done against the individual will and because of it.

Both Elle and Lui aim at complete forgetting, but Elle is less successful. She remembers her life in Nevers, whereas Lui does not have a past. His earlier life remains obscure throughout the film. He wants to keep the memory of the present, whereas she utters in the final moment of the film: "I'll forget you! I'm forgetting you already! Look how I'm forgetting you! Look at me!" Facing him, she suddenly equates forgetting with Hiroshima and exclaims, "Hi-ro-shi-ma. Hi-ro-shi-ma. That is your name." And he replies: "That's my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers in France."³⁴ Cut! The film ends. Duras, as the end of the film suggests, does not have much interest in Hiroshima. In the same vein, the presence of Nevers in the final line of the film should not surprise anyone. There is much more of the memory of Nevers in Hiroshima mon amour than of Hiroshima, to the extent that the film critic Donald Richie wondered once "Why Hiroshima? Why not Yokohama, mon amour?"³⁵

The limited presence in the film of the "physical" Hiroshima, either the city or scenes of the bombardment, is the first problematic feature I wish to discuss. Although Lui is equated with Hiroshima, no trace of the city is to be found in either his or her earlier life stories. The treatment of Hiroshima is usually very personal, occasionally seeming exploitative and over-egocentric. More precise ways were probably available to exploit the name Hiroshima.³⁶ We could amend the film's title, Deborah Glassman proposes, and change it to "Hiroshima et mon amour, Hiroshima est mon amour, Hiroshima ou mon amour or Hiroshima, mon amour?"³⁷ But the vague title was surely more than intentional. It aimed to lure spectators, and it has succeeded. Misleading was the name of the game. Indeed, French audiences who thronged the cinemas soon after the film's release were all misled by the billboards. They said: "Hiroshima mon amour, a love full of gentleness, tenderness desire."³⁸

The omission of the historical context of the bombing is another thorny feature that deserves a closer look. While exploiting the sacred name Hiroshima, Duras virtually avoided the historical context of the city's tragedy. In her eyes, the story of Hiroshima seems to begin in August 6, 1945. The violent past of Hiroshima as a major naval and military base for more than forty years is never mentioned. In dealing with the bomb the script also disregards the context of an all-out and bloody war — a racial conflict contaminated by numerous war crimes — and even eschews the question of whose responsibility the war was. Remains's Nuit et Brouillard three years earlier provided a detailed background of the origins of the Holocaust in the first few minutes of the film. Duras, by contrast, skirts it. In her narrative Hiroshima becomes a site of civil suffering, an emblem of human tragedy detached from any war and from Japan.

Hiroshima mon amour was made during a decade (1955-1964) historian James J. Orr identifies as "a critical period of common acceptance...of the mythologies of Japanese war victimhood."³⁹ Like earlier slogans that used history to mobilize support for common political goals (e.g., "Remember what Amalek did unto thee" or "Remember Pearl Harbor"), the slogan "Remember Hiroshima" played an important role for both peace activists and right-wing Japanese, who sought

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²⁹ Monaco 1997: 37.
³⁰ Ibid.: 37.
³¹ Roth 1995: 24, 211.
³³ Sweet (1981: 27) concludes that Hiroshima mon amour is "a film about memory that consistently affirms man's necessity to forget."
³⁵ Richie 1996: 35.
³⁶ Curiously, when the film was released in Japan its title was changed to Nijūjikan jōji (A Twenty-Four Hour Love Affair), which totally avoids the sacred name Hiroshima.
³⁸ Cited in Vicomtelet 1994: 199. In the first 49 days 255,000 French people saw the film.
to tilt the debate on Japan's war responsibility. Apart from this context, Duras's script was shaped politically by the Cold War, fear of a third world war, and the struggle to free France's colonial holdings (four years after the battle of Dien Bien Phu and four years into the bitter struggle over Algeria).

The turn to Japan, Hiroshima in particular, seems to have served Duras in fulfilling her political objectives, but also her personal needs. At that time her ex-lover, Dionys Mascolo, was increasingly active in the anti-war movement. Mascolo, from whom she had parted a year earlier after a 15-year love affair that resulted in her divorce and the birth of her only child, was still living in Duras's apartment. In July 1958, the month Duras was wholly absorbed in writing her script, he launched the anti-colonial and anti-de Gaulle journal *Le 14 juillet.*

One wonders if Duras's writing on Hiroshima, with all its symbolic meaning for the anti-war movement, did not serve as a gesture to Mascolo; or was it perhaps even the result of her identification with his new venture? This is a political and personal context, Elle's reply to her lover's question about the film she plays in suddenly does not seem too cynical. It is "a film about Peace," she says, but asks instinctively: "What else do you expect them to make in Hiroshima except a picture about Peace?" Duras seems to allocate to Hiroshima the role of a shrine to pease and love, and she refers to the city only in this light. To be sure, at that time Duras knew little about Japan, nor did she join Resnais in Hiroshima for the shooting of the film.

If bypassing the historical context suited the Japanese narrative on Hiroshima, the emphasis on the experience of the French protagonist seems to have suited Duras. Treating Hiroshima as a symbolic rather than a living place, *Hiroshima mon amour* turns into an extreme case of Eurocentrism. Duras's ignorance of Hiroshima is pronounced in the view of Elle. Asked about the meaning of Hiroshima for her before arrival in Japan, she replies:

"They" means the Americans. Elle does not mention the Japanese, nor does she harbor any empathy for their narrative. Even at the end of her sojourn in Hiroshima Elle shows little interest in its tragedy. Bored, she goes to visit the museum, but it does not arouse in her even minimal curiosity about the victims and their fate. More than the tragedy of Hiroshima and the long stay in the city, it is the sexual and emotional encounter with Lui that suddenly awakens in her some suppressed memories of another site in another period. But her liaison with a German soldier in wartime Nevers is a personal story, and Elle's focus on it feels egocentric. It has nothing to do with Hiroshima, and it distances her from her Japanese lover. He becomes a symbol, a monument for a fallen enemy lover. Lui's memories, those linked to Hiroshima or at least to wartime Japan, receive no reference at all. Not once does Elle express any curiosity about her lover's parallel wartime experience, and mercifully Lui, as Duras portrays him, does not try to reveal it.

Still, my concern here is not Elle's egocentrism. In my view it is but a mirror of Duras's own Eurocentrism. Although Lui declares right from the start that his French lover has seen nothing, the script does not reflect his viewpoint, or the Japanese narrative concerning Hiroshima. Duras was not interested in Japan or Hiroshima before or during the shooting of the film. She wrote fast and without much research, although she admitted that she modified and enlarged the initial text during the cutting of the film, using some "documents" Resnais brought back from his short stay in Japan.

Admittedly, Duras does not reveal any explicit dislike for Japan, but she shows nothing in favor of it either. Nowhere in the script does she not imply, even slightly, that she has a problem with Elle's myopia. Moreover, Duras did not include in the script even a single testimony of a survivor of the atomic blast. For her, as for Resnais, the city and its tragedy are only a pretext for another work in a series on human memory and remembrance. The name Hiroshima, Duras seems to feel, can provide the required halo effect, to lure the audience and the critics to the worst tragedy a community can suffer. Halo effects are potent only initially. Soon enough Duras returns to her safe haven, France. She leaves Hiroshima in the realm of metaphors and introduces us to the wartime experience of real human figures in an unknown French town called Nevers. But would you care for a film entitled Nevers mon amour?

Duras's early biography provides some hints as to her later attitude to Hiroshima and the Japanese experience. She was born in Saigon a few months before the outbreak of World War I to a family of French colonial civil servants. Her father was a superintendent of education, her mother an elementary school

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31 On Duras's relations with Mascolo see Vircondelet 1994: 75-76.
32 Duras 1961: 34. The turning of Hiroshima into a site of peace was a deliberate decision of the prefectural government, if not of the national government. See Yoneyama 1999: 43-47.
33 Duras 1961: 32.
34 See a note in Duras 1961: 17.
teacher. Her father died when she was four years old and her mother sank into a struggle for survival, possessing thereafter a far less comfortable residence, fewer servants, and a lower social rank. At 15, after relocating a few times in the colony, Duras returned alone to the capital Saigon and engaged in a scandalous love affair with a Chinese man, whom she would depict decades later in two books, \textit{L’Amant} (The Lover, 1984) and \textit{L’Amant de la Chine du Nord} (The North China Lover, 1991).\footnote{Both books were translated into English. See Duras 1985, and Duras 1992.}

While still implicit in \textit{Hiroshima mon amour}, race and color would become significant themes in these two late books. There Duras becomes aware of her “white” color and the meaning of this designation, and simultaneously focuses on the feminine body of her Chinese lover. Duras “is very capable of identifying herself erotically and exotically other-than-white, as well as nationally other-than-French ...” suggests Kate Ince in an article on the depiction of race and color in her late career. She is “a sexual, racial and national hybrid, who flirts between fixed categories of identity according to the moment.”\footnote{Ince 2000: 125.} In writing \textit{Hiroshima mon amour} Duras also flirted with racial identities and racial tensions, but in an undertone.

Evidently, Duras was well aware of the theoretical implications of racism. Only a few months earlier she had written an essay entitled “Racisme à Paris”, in which she voiced her condemnation of racism.\footnote{The essay tells the story of a waitress who dates an Algerian man and consequently is harassed by the police.} Yet this did not hinder her from eroticizing the exotic. Uncharacteristically for that period, Duras chose to focus on the desiring gaze of the woman, whose object is the male body. If she did not want to cause extreme provocation, she must have sensed that such a gaze would be accepted by both spectators and critics in the West (the so-called “hegemonic” spectators) for the simple reason that the woman is European and the man is Japanese. Elle attains this “subject” position usually reserved in literature and films for males, Earl Jackson points out, “through her privilege as a white European woman relative to the Asian male, whose Otherness is more extreme and more in need of neutralization.”\footnote{Jackson 1994.} Duras, I further contend, was conscious of the effect of the Other’s particular appearance on French (and Western) spectators. This is evident from a short but revealing note (entitled “Portrait of the Japanese”) she wrote at the end of the script about the desired appearance of her Japanese protagonist. There she emphasized the need to choose a Western-looking Japanese actor. “A Japanese actor with pronounced Japanese features,” she reasoned,

might lead people to believe that it is especially because the probations is Japanese that the French actress was attracted to him. Thus, whether we liked it or not, we’d find ourselves caught again in the trap of ‘exoticism,’ and the involuntary racism inherent in any exoticism. The spectator should not say: How attractive Japanese men are, but ‘How attractive that man is.’ This is why it is preferable to minimize the difference between the two protagonists.\footnote{Duras 1981: 109.}

This ostensibly humanistic approach notwithstanding (and she was right in her prediction that it would not become a central theme in the film), Duras’s note seems to project her own attitude to Asian and Japanese appearance.\footnote{Ince 2000: 125.} Ordinary Japanese in Duras’s eyes cannot be attractive. They must have a Western look to be considered attractive. But even such Western-looking Japanese do not deserve a true place in Duras’s script. While not dehumanizing her Japanese protagonist, she simply marginalizes him. She ignores his past and his viewpoint of Hiroshima, and emphasizes instead his single-minded desire for the white woman. Curiously, Duras’s oeuvre suggests she was far from being a racist and was an anti-colonialist. Yet her depiction of the Japanese man as a passive and sexualized observer only a few years after the demise of the French colonial regime in Indochina reveals that she had not rid herself of the colonial legacy, according to which native people and Asian sites serve only to elucidate the life, desires, and fading memories of Europeans. This critical view should not be a surprise, at least in the case of Duras. Examining her two semi-autobiographical books written about four decades later, Ince concludes that Duras reveals “a desire to be white, extremely white, the white of colonial social elites, of the lady who is the ultimate object of desire.”\footnote{Sweet 1986: 25.}

Freddy Sweet argues that one may experience the meaning of “Hiroshima” only when she (the Frenchwoman, in our film) “opens herself to a recognition of her personal tragedy.”\footnote{There is, of course, an alternative interpretation to Duras’s wish that her Japanese protagonist looks like an “international type.” By making him non-Japanese, Hiroshima – with which he is identified – becomes a universal tragedy rather than a Japanese tragedy. Hiroshima as a universal site is even farther removed from its historical context and placed in the realm of an allegory.} But can a personal tragedy, however great, encompass
the extreme human suffering in the scale of Hiroshima? Can “Hiroshima” really be described?

In the past five decades many artists, including a number of film-makers, have attempted to capture and commemorate the tragedy of Hiroshima. Japanese film-makers, in particular, have treated this topic from various angles, but with an unmistakable preference for an allegorical presentation which leads spectators to interpret the film as having a hidden meaning, typically moral or political. The collaborative masterpiece of Duas and Resnais can be interpreted in terms of an allegory. So much, in fact, that one of Resnais’s critics found it to be “a film about the impossibility of making a documentary about Hiroshima,” while another regarded it as “a documentary on the impossibility of comprehending.” Duran herself declared that one of the main objectives of the film was to avoid describing the horror by horror. The horror, she advocated, ought to be animated by love – an exceptional and wonderful love. Budgetary considerations may lead film-makers to avoid extensive portrayals of mass destruction and prefer instead minimalist allegories. But this is not the only reason. The topic seems too heavy and demanding, although mass tragedies and other cases of genocide did receive often realistic depiction. A number of films on the Holocaust, for example, were considerably successful in depicting the immense scale of the catastrophe as well as the legacy of its trauma.

Postwar Japan has been prominent in its delicate but also indirect way of dealing with the memory of its modern history. Japanese film-makers were no exception. They were less keen to deal with this topic, partly perhaps because of its political and social repercussions. Imamura Shôhei’s Black Rain (1989), perhaps the most important film on this topic to date, may serve as an example. It depicts the social tragedy, and ultimately also the physical ramifications of exposure to radioactivity, through the heartbreaking story of a young woman living in the vicinity of Hiroshima when the bomb explodes. The social and physical stigma attached to her after the war seems vindicated when she finally succumbs to a radiation sickness. Nonetheless, even Imamura avoids any reference to the historical context of the bombing, and his film, notes Carole Cavanaugh, lacks “an honest reconciliation with history beyond allegory.”

While a few Japanese film-makers dealt with the topic in a relatively straightforward manner, especially during the first few years after the end of American censorship on this topic, the majority followed the same approach as Resnais and Imamura. They avoided the horror in favor of allegories. This style may be as critical and painful as in realistic films, but somehow allegories on Hiroshima have tended to facilitate a special form of collective memory – an overmysterious memory dissociated from history.

Hiroshima in H Story

Hiroshima has not ceased to attract Japanese film-makers. One of the most notable films on this topic, and certainly the most relevant to our discussion, is the Japanese pseudo-documentary or rather autobiographical docudrama entitled H Story. Directed by Suwa Nobuhiro and released in 2001, it is less of an allegory, but it still reflects the ongoing difficulties to deal with the issue of Hiroshima, this time on the Japanese side. The story is about an aborted remake of Hiroshima mon amour. Some rumors, perhaps by Suwa himself, suggest that initially he did intend to film a remake of the French masterpiece, but due to disagreements with his prospective star and writer Machida Kō, he abandoned his original plans. Instead, he picked a Japanese student based in London who, unlike Machida, could speak French. The new actor, however, was incapable of matching Béatrice Dalle, the director’s choice for the role of the Frenchwoman. Eventually, so goes the gossip, Suwa decided to turn this limitation into a virtue. He restructured the script into a mix of false documentary and fiction, and casted Machida in the Japanese male role.

The tortuous road of the production and the true story behind it is much less important than the final outcome. H Story combines two parallel axes: the central axis of the film, at least in its first half, is the abortive attempts to make a remake of Resnais’s film. The second axis developing simultaneously turns into the central one in the second part of the film: it is a new fictional behind-the-scenes documentary of the discommunication, and perhaps a would-be affair, between Dalle and Machida, whose role in the film is unclear, perhaps a writer.

44 Cited in Baier 1999: 32.
45 E.g., the TV mini-series Holocaust (1978), Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah (1978), Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993), and Roman Polanski’s The Pianist (2002).
46 Cavanaugh 2001: 252.
47 The first Japanese film to depict the atomic bombings was Oba Hideo’s Nagasaki no kaze (The Bells of Nagasaki, 1955), followed by Shin’ichi Kaneto’s Genbaku no ko (Children of the Atom Bomb, 1952) and Sekigawa Hideo’s Hiroshima (1954). See Dessler 1995.
48 The list includes Gojira (Godzilla, 1954), Hiroshi Teshigahara’s Suna no onna (Woman in the Dunes, 1963) and Tanin no kaze (The Face of Another, 1956), Koyabaiishi Masaki’s Kowaidan (1964), Shin’ichi Kaneto’s Onibaba (1964) and Yaku no as: kuroeno kuro (Kuroeno, 1968), and to some extent also Mizoguchi Kenji’s Ugetsu monogatari (Ugetsu, 1953) and Kurosawa Akira’s Kikumon no kiroku (Record of a Living Being, 1955) and perhaps also Rashomon (1950). See Lowenstein 2004: 160; Dessler 1995.
perhaps a mere observer craving inspiration. Nevers, whose memory in Resnais’s film is the center, is hardly mentioned in Suwa’s film. Instead it focuses on the French actress, “Béatrice” (never mentioning her full name Béatrice Dalle), and the way she responds to Japan and the city of Hiroshima.

The choice of Dalle as the foreign protagonist does not seem accidental. Greatly differing from the public persona of Emmanuelle Riva, who played the role of Ille in Resnais’s film, this former French symbol of wild sex had in real life a long and well documented history of violence and drug abuse.49 So Suwa may have realized that he could portray her in a negative light, as a capricious actress who genuinely lacks any intellectual or emotional interest in the film and the site. Dalle indeed seems indifferent to Hiroshima, as a contemporary living place or as a symbol. She asks no questions about its past, nor does she explore the city in her free time. She “frankly” admits in the supposedly “documentary part” that she prefers to stay in her hotel room. In one scene, Machida takes Dalle to a local museum of contemporary art, where a large exhibition is dedicated to the bomb. Meeting the curator of the museum, Machida introduces Dalle as “my friend Beatrice” (omitting her family name, not to mention her profession), but soon the two ignore Dalle completely and discuss the exhibition in Japanese, a language the French woman obviously does not understand. Her reaction does not promote our sympathy for her. Dalle, as portrayed by Suwa, does not evince the slightest interest in the exhibition, and after a few minutes’ impatient waiting without looking at the exhibits, she walks out.

H Story may be regarded as a response to Hiroshima mon amour, or even as a Japanese response to a French colonial film. If Duras was fascinated with East Asia, Suwa is fascinated with the West (and indeed, the two movies he directed since H Story were done in France with French actors). The departure point of this fascination is one’s home, and Suwa was born in Hiroshima. Accordingly, the thrust of his film is transferred from the French obsession with their own war to Japan. Suwa reacts to Duras’s presentation of her Japanese protagonist by his treatment of his own local protagonist Machida. As depicted in H Story at least, Machida has no craving whatsoever for Dalle, or any wish to persuade her to stay. In fact, there is very little communication between the two as the latter speaks only French and the former only Japanese. In one of the last scenes, the two take a stroll late at night and pass by a group of young Japanese playing music. Machida asks Dalle in Japanese which music she likes, and not for the first time she replies, “I don’t understand, but it’s ok.”

49 Half a century after the filming of the movie, Riva eventually published her memoir with regard to the making of the film. It is revealing that the Japanese translation appeared earlier than the French original. See Riva 2008 and Riva 2009.

H Story presents the French actress as not having even the slightest pretension of interest in Hiroshima. Is she supposed to represent all foreigners? Does Suwa imply that Hiroshima is a Japanese issue, which foreigners, Westeners in particular, cannot understand and do not even sense? These questions, if Suwa indeed intended to raise them, are valid but smell of ethnocentrism, this time made in Japan.50 If foreigners cannot “see” or feel Hiroshima at all, and Hiroshima is a local issue, one wonders what Suwa and Machida feel for Hiroshima. In fact, while the film presents many sights of contemporary Hiroshima, it does not delve much into the old city (the bombed Hiroshima). Occasionally, it shows a few photos and short clips of the bombed city, but Suwa’s depiction seems more like lip service and is not much different from that of Resnais. In one of the first scenes Machida asks Suwa why he uses the same text Duras wrote more than 40 years before; after a pause the director does not bother to reply. As the film only cites or challenges Hiroshima mon amour, but stays unclear about the tragedy and the war memories, one wonders what its makers were trying to say.

Suwa and Machida belong to the postwar generation. They were born in the early 1960s and grew up into a period of economic prosperity and seemingly eternal peace. They did not see Hiroshima in its worst moments, and their earliest memories are associated with sights at least two decades after the day of the bomb. By and large, their personal memories were shaped by the collective memories of the Japanese nation. They differ substantially from those projected in Hiroshima mon amour. Watching Suwa’s film, I tend to conclude that his memories seek to set the city as a shrine of national victimization which foreigners cannot grasp and in which they have no place.

But was Hiroshima mon amour so different, even if unintentionally? The images it projected were welcomed by the Japanese state in the late 1950s and ultimately served similar purposes to that of Suwa and Machida’s H Story. After all, both helped to emphasize Japan’s victimhood and so minimized its war guilt. However, as a foreign film made in a much more critical period, it was Hiroshima mon amour which played a substantial role in aiding the Japanese to be accepted again into the “family of nations” with relatively limited self-scrutiny and reconsideration of its past. H Story, by contrast, is nothing more than its byproduct. It owes its existence to its predecessor. It could not be made or

50 In this context see Geoff Baker’s comment about the presumed inability of most Westeners, who opposed Japan during the war, to comprehend the tragedy of Hiroshima: “I myself must confront on reading or watching Hiroshima mon amour: How could the Westeners in the audience ever expect to grasp the tragedy that they originally celebrated as the end of the war?” In Baker 1999: 393.
even envisaged, without the milieu created by films and other artistic works, such as the Duras and Resnais's masterpiece.

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