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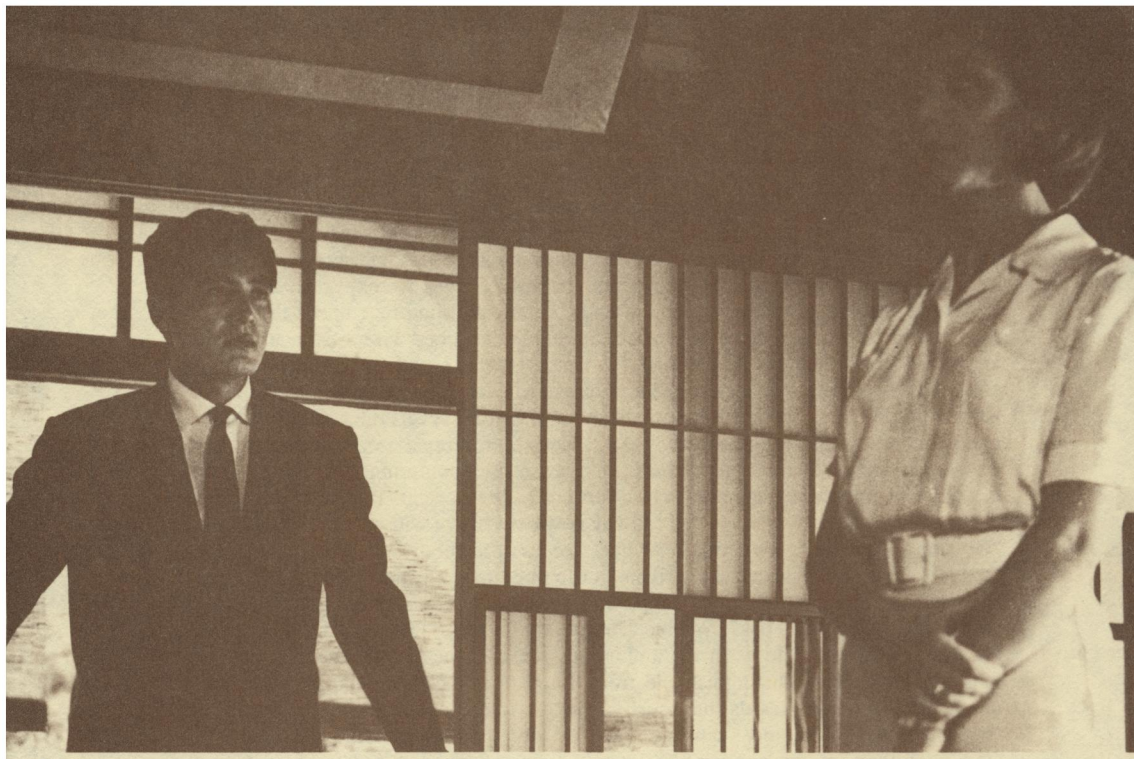
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Vision Denied in *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*

He: You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.

She: I saw everything. Everything.¹

It is with this paradox that Alain Resnais begins his first feature film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. We are forewarned: the veracity of all that we are about to see in the film's documentary prologue is suspect—the hospital, Peace Square, the newsreels, even the exhibits within the museums. For, if the first speaker is correct, if the other is witness to all these signs of Hiroshima's past yet “sees”—understands—nothing, then how can we, at an additional remove from them, trust our eyes? But of course we do. As image after image of the documentary prologue is projected onto the screen, we do believe what we see. Despite any intellectual objection to the contrary, we feel the camera doesn't lie to us, that as André Bazin would explain, each of these photographic images, independent of its “documentary value,” is an indexical trace, “a kind of decal or transfer,” sharing “the being of the model of which it is a reproduction . . . after the fashion of a fingerprint.” Whether consciously or not, all filmmakers, by the very nature of their medium, exploit this “transference of reality” from life to its imprint, “the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith.”² Resnais, however, is one who intentionally exploits this faith—or, more accurately, subverts the power of images—in order to heighten our awareness not only of cinematic discourse but also of the entire ideology of vision as a way of knowing. Yet *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is not Resnais' first study in such subversion, for the conundrum quoted above not only introduces this 1959 feature but also recapitulates his 1955 short on the German death camps of the Second World War, *Night and Fog*.

For this thirty-one-minute documentary, Resnais' editor, Henri Colpi, intercut color footage of an abandoned Auschwitz as it appears today with black-and-white stills and newsreels chronicling the history of the camps. Not surprisingly, the result is extremely unsettling. But ironically the film's emotion-charged, often gruesome images of Nazi atrocities are secondary factors in this response, for *Night and Fog* is more

concerned with our memory of the camps than with the camps as they actually existed, more concerned with the present than the past. What *most* affects us are the formal contrasts between color and black-and-white and between mobile and static framing—contrasts which reflect the overall confrontation between past and present and which unsettle precisely because they undermine the very images we expect to affect us.

A tracking shot of the Polish countryside, serene and inviting, opens the film. As the tracking slowly continues to the right, stretches of barbed wire, observation towers and other abandoned buildings enter the frame, become part of the “peaceful landscape.” “This is the way to a concentration camp,” says the narrator. “No footstep is heard but our own.” With the first newsreel footage, however, the serenity is broken, other footsteps *are* heard: the year is 1933; Nazis in full regalia march leftward across the screen, symbolically forcing back the present by countering both the tempo and direction of the preceding shots. On returning to the present, the camera follows in close-up the road to Auschwitz—a railway now overgrown with weeds. We are asked, “Go slowly along it . . . looking for what? *Traces* of the bodies that fell to the ground? Or the *footmarks* of those first arrivals gun-bullied to the camp?” [emphasis added]. Eventually we wander throughout the camp, the camera never ceasing to track, its restlessness our restlessness. We look insistently for those “traces” that will resurrect the past, but they elude us in the ambiguous present. Instead we find gas chambers that are practically indistinguishable from dormitory blocks, crematoria that look so much like picture-postcards that tourists, we are told, pose inside for individualized momentos. Even the most chilling trace of all—a concrete ceiling scored by the clawing fingers of the condemned—would be overlooked if not for Jean Cayrol’s commentary.

But if the present provides us with so little certainty, what of the archival stills and newsreels? Surely these document the past, recreate the reality of the camps. Yes, and no. With the precision of those who operated the camps, of those who reduced human beings to the level of objects, Resnais’s categorical structure catalogues everything—the classes of prisoners, the ways to exterminate them, the products made from their corpses. We see doors to freight cars being slid closed; an “anonymous” train pulling away “in the night and fog”; bullet-riddled bodies hanging from barbed wire; decapitated cadavers arranged in rows, the heads in a tub beside them; a heap of women’s hair and the cloth into which it was woven; human skin decorated with drawings; and finally a sea of tangled bodies bulldozed into open pits.

After viewing these images, we might say to ourselves, “I’ve seen everything—the photographs, the newsreels. Everything. I will never forget the twelve million dead.” But despite its power to shock, this black-and-white past is faded and scratchy, occasionally even blurred, while the present, even with its ambiguity, is always vivid. Those of us who have viewed this present firsthand might add, “I too have seen everything—the museum at Auschwitz, the gas chambers, the ovens. I too will never forget what happened there.” To us all, Cayrol answers, “How to discover what remains of the reality of these camps. . . ? no description, no shot can restore [Auschwitz’s] true dimension. . . . We should need the very mattress. . . . The blanket that was fought over. . . . Only the husk and shade remain” And so we forget—traces of the past notwithstanding. If we think otherwise, we fool ourselves, and worse: we believe remembering is easy and thus sow the seeds of our forgetfulness; we encourage self-complacency, and even a repetition of such atrocities. *Night and Fog* challenges that complacency, that moral smugness. Resnais subverts his own images not to trick us with cinematic sleights-of-hand, but rather to stir our “sluggish . . . memories,” to remind us how very difficult it is to fix a public remembrance, no matter how traumatic the experience, so that perhaps we can measure up to the task on which so much depends.

Following the critical success of *Night and Fog*, its producers, Argos/Como films, commissioned Resnais to make another short documentary for them, this one about

the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Months of work led him to an unexpected discovery—he could only remake *Night and Fog*.³ Not that the facts of the bomb weren't different enough from those of the death camps. But as we have seen, Resnais was interested in more than facts; what most engaged him was our memory of these horrors ten or more years later. However different the material—different victims, different means of mass killing—the actual subject was unchanged. So if Resnais were still to make a film about Hiroshima and yet not merely remake *Night and Fog*, he would need to work within a different genre. And the project did continue—now as a feature-length fiction film. Novelist/scenarist Marguerite Duras envisioned the new direction as one leading to a “false documentary that will probe the lesson of Hiroshima more deeply than any made-to-order documentary,”⁴ a fictionist's perspective that anticipated what Resnais had already discovered in *Night and Fog*: true documentaries cannot successfully probe the past, for the “transference of reality” that we, along with Bazin, expect to take place is illusionary. With greater complexity and elaboration, the false documentary that is *Hiroshima Mon Amour* repeats this discovery. Nowhere is the connection between the two films more apparent than in the “made-to-order documentary”—the documentary Resnais began but never completed—that serves as prologue to his fiction.

During this fourteen-minute prologue we see Hiroshima's past and present, its destruction and reconstruction. Unlike the method of crosscutting between past and present employed in *Night and Fog*, here Resnais juxtaposes the two by following the female protagonist as she tours the city seeing “everything,” every reminder of the past in this city that is one vast memorial to the past. Still, she is never part of the *mise-en-scène*; we never see her seeing. Instead, the tracking camera becomes her eye, just as it had been ours in *Night and Fog*. As she “moves” through the hospital, the museum, and the city streets, she sees—and we along with her—a great many traces from August 6, 1945.

But Resnais wastes no time in cinematically supporting the film's opening words: “You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing”—the denial of vision's ability to grasp real experience, past or present. The camera dollies down a brightly lit hospital hallway, accompanied by the woman's insistence, “The hospital in Hiroshima is real. How could I not see it?” Resnais cuts to a Japanese woman standing in one of the doorways; as she turns aside, the camera follows her into the room. Now with a series of matching shots, three hospitalized survivors, in what amounts to a single continuous action, look at the camera and turn away: the first of two women looks up from reading, then begins to turn her head away; the second woman completes this motion; and the third patient, a man, rolls onto his side, turning his back to the unwelcome voyeur. The female protagonist's first look at Hiroshima's past, despite all her presumptuous claims, is unsuccessful: these slowly dying, human traces resist her inquiring vision.

“Four times at the museum,” she sees many other traces—two-dimensional and three. Among the latter, there are the genuine—clusters of petrified bottle caps; melted ironwork; “human skin . . . hanging free . . . still writhing in its first agony,” recalling the skin from *Night and Fog*; and clumps of women's hair that had fallen out as a result of radiation exposure, again recalling an image from the earlier film—and the reconstructed—a room-sized scale model of Hiroshima in ruins as well as displays of burnt mannikins. The two-dimensional indexes can likewise be divided into the genuine—shadows “photographed” on stone; life-sized photographs; newsreels of the devastated city, of victims (the dying, the lingering, the deformed), of demonstrations, of thousands of contaminated fish dumped into pits (like the victims of the death camps)—and the reconstructed—dramatic re-enactments focusing on survivors in the immediate aftermath of the bombing, “the illusion . . . so perfect the tourists cry.”

At the re-enactments and the rest, we too may cry; we certainly cannot be unmoved. But from the first, Resnais has undermined the power of his images. The opening paradox initiates the subversion by introducing counterpoint between soundtrack and

image track. Subsequent exchanges between the two voices continue this counterpoint. To her affirmation “I saw the newsreels,” he repeats the negation, “You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.” Still she insists, “I didn’t invent it”; to which he responds, “You invented it all.” Unshakable is her conviction that, by seeing everything in Hiroshima—its past by newsreels and museum relics, its present by the suffering *hibakusha*—the tragedy of Hiroshima can be fully grasped. Again and again, the other denies that illusion, concluding, “people always notice things to suit themselves”: it is impossible to understand the tragedy of Hiroshima by vision alone. But nowhere is this statement made more forcefully than in the newsreel images of vision impaired: a beautiful young girl who, after turning toward the camera, is shown to be blind in one eye; a second blind girl with deformed hands playing a zither; and the most affecting of all, a woman’s face in close-up, her eyelids retracted with forceps to reveal her mutilated eye. Making the last even more suggestive is the continuing counterpoint between dialogue and image: as the sightless eye stares back at us, the female protagonist muses, “Just as in love, there is the illusion that it can never be forgotten, so with Hiroshima, I had the illusion that I would never forget.”

But forget she does, as do we, as does even present-day Hiroshima, the focus of the prologue’s final minutes. With shots of Peace Square, we are still reminded of the city’s past. But mostly we are reminded of humanity’s forgetfulness as we look on the banality all about. The meaning of August 6, 1945 is reduced to the smiling face of a bus-tour guide and to a souvenir stand luring us with the sign “How about a card for corresponding?”—surely an oblivion akin to tourists posing for candids inside Auschwitz’s crematoria. And finally Resnais tracks rapidly through the streets of Hiroshima, the present a nondescript blur. Hiroshima reconstructed is a city in which the traces of the past are ubiquitous, but it is also a city in which the *meaning* of that past is not.

I have yet to mention any of the shots that frame and interrupt the prologue, in part because such a discussion must inevitably introduce concerns not relevant to my thesis. We should observe, however, that these shots, along with the accompanying voice track, provide the only *narrative* link between the “true” documentary and the film’s “false” one, ostensibly the love story about the twenty-four-hour affair between the couple whose voices we hear, a French actress and a Japanese architect. As the film begins, two bodies embracing, framed in close-up from the shoulders to the waist, gradually emerge via fade-in; they appear covered with atomic ash or rain, or perhaps with the sweat of sexual intercourse, the ambiguity intentional.⁵ After successive dissolves their skin becomes smooth and lustrous, one body light, the other dark. Similar shots are crosscut throughout the prologue, the resulting confrontational pattern like that of *Night and Fog*. But here the contrasts are not between past and present or even between black-and-white and color. Instead they are between soft and hard lighting; soft and sharp focus; the perfect flesh of the lovers and the burnt or deformed bodies of the *hibakusha*; and the integration of sexual love and the disintegration of an entire city. Yet perhaps more important than contrast is similarity, for beginning with the ambiguity of the first shots, the two lovers are linked to the Hiroshima victims. Later, a clearly defined match between juxtaposed shots repeats this identification: a close-up of the woman’s hand caressing the man’s shoulder follows the close-up of a child’s deformed hand dangling uselessly.

Subsequent non-narrative links between the documentary prologue and the fictional narrative are numerous,⁶ and all pursue the same intent—to connect the woman, more specifically the woman’s past in Nevers, France, some fourteen years earlier, as the war in Europe was ending, to Hiroshima’s victims in particular and the city’s destruction in general. Her Japanese lover, whose profession is that of rebuilding, awakens her to painful memories long repressed—the death of her German lover, her public humiliation for loving an enemy of her country, her months of madness—a past disjointedly reconstructed in the present. Thus, what is on one level a clichéd love story—for

Duras, “a banal tale, one that happens thousands of times every day”⁷—develops on a deeper level as a story of personal destruction and reconstruction analogous to the public model of Hiroshima. Though for us the reconstruction of her past is visual *and* verbal, for the architect it is wholly verbal: he shares in her past only by being told it. This privileged information, much of which he has consciously directed, objectifies the Nevers experience—or so he wishes to believe. In this way, as Judith Mayne notes, the fictional narrative confronts the documentary prologue, or rather the ideology of telling confronts the ideology of seeing.⁸ Just as the prologue undermines the act of vision, so the love story undermines the act of narration: we cannot know the public tragedy of Hiroshima by a series of documentary images any more than the architect can know the personal tragedy of Nevers by a story. Both are epistemological illusions.

Resnais devotes most of his film to the second half of the analogy—the personal tragedy and the act of telling. Yet, if we accept Duras’s scenario, it is the lesson of Hiroshima that is always ultimately being probed. The fiction of Nevers and narration denied should lead us back to where we began—to the first half of the analogy, to the fact of Hiroshima and vision denied. *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, like *Night and Fog*, unsettles our complacency, our confidence in our ability to know the past and to remember it. In effect, Resnais says to us, “You have seen everything in the death camps, everything in Hiroshima; yet still you cannot truly understand, still you will not long remember.” But neither film is an argument for solipsistic indifference or despair—rather, both are challenges to prove him wrong. The dialectic between our faith in the cinematic images we see and Resnais’s subversion of those images, between seeing “everything” and concurrently seeing “nothing,” produces a synthesis by which we do indeed see *something*. That is, by questioning our basic assumptions about epistemology and memory, cinematic discourse and the ideology of vision, Resnais teaches us to understand the past more fully, to remember it more accurately.⁹

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Notes

¹ All dialogue quoted in this essay has been transcribed directly from the subtitles of the English versions of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and *Night and Fog*.

² André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in his *What Is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1974), pp. 14-15.

³ James Monaco, *Alain Resnais: The Role of Imagination* (London: Secker Warburg; New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 34.

⁴ Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 10.

⁵ Duras, pp. 8, 15.

⁶ Even a partial listing of these links would be lengthy and not relevant to the present thesis. For such analysis see Peter Cowie, *Antonioni, Bergman, Resnais* (London: Tantivy Press, 1963), pp. 135-43; Judith Mayne, “*Hiroshima Mon Amour*: Ways of Seeing, Ways of Telling,” in *The 1978 Film Studies Annual* (West Lafayette: Purdue University, 1978), pp. 49-51; Godelieve Merchen-Spaas, “Destruction and Reconstruction in *Hiroshima, mon amour*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 8 (1980), 244-50; and Martin J. Medhurst, “*Hiroshima, Mon Amour*: From Iconography to Rhetoric,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68 (1982), 345-70.

⁷ Duras, p. 9.

⁸ Mayne, pp. 52-53, 55.

⁹ By Resnais’s own account, his films are intended to teach: “If I made the films I dream of making, it would be less to destroy or demolish than to provoke the spectator to question his own assumptions. My aim is to put the spectator in such a state that a week, six months or a year afterwards, placed before a problem, he would be prevented from cheating and obliged to react freely” [quoted in Roy Armes, *The Cinema of Alain Resnais* (London: A. Zwemmer; New York: A. S. Barnes, 1968), p. 82].