



***Hiroshima Mon Amour* :**  
Representational Slippage

*Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) blurs the distinction between character and place. The “scénario” by Marguerite Duras “est construit autour du jeu de deux signifiants, deux noms de lieux, seuls noms propres du text: Hiroshima/Nevers.”<sup>1</sup> The film, directed by Alain Resnais, works from the other direction, attempting to return control to the characters. Through subjective camera work and the visualization of thoughts, the nameless characters try to reassert their identities into the positions held by place names. The result is a charged bond between person and place. As the characters search for identities, they assume the ones at hand, uncovering historical and unconscious depths imparted by Hiroshima and Nevers. Likewise, the characters serve as subjective mediators between the film audience and the impersonal places of Nevers, France, and Hiroshima, Japan. In the process, both characters and locales become more than just faces and place names while maintaining a reflexive bond beyond the distinction of either.

The importance of place in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is established in the opening frames. “Si Nevers n’est qu’un nom propre—signifiant qui ne renvoie qu’à la géographie—Hiroshima entre dans le texte chargé par l’Histoire, saturé d’un symbolisme puissant.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Nevers does not become apparently influential until later in the film; yet, from the opening lines, the name Hiroshima is evoked with reverent solemnity. “You saw nothing at Hiroshima. Nothing.”<sup>3</sup> These words, spoken by “Lui” (“him,” a Japanese architect, played by Eiji Okada), are the first utterances in the film. They are a response to an unheard, off-screen statement by “Elle” (“her,” a French actress, played by Emmanuelle Riva) yet carry the weight of assumption as presented in their scripted isolation. Following this is a series of photographs and newsreels conjured by the observations of the woman and the

negation of those observations by the man. Through a process of replacement, Lui lays “real” images of Hiroshima over the representational ones suggested by the woman. Hiroshima exerts its presence visually through this discourse between reality and representation. Ironically, Lui goads Elle, through negation, into speaking of newsreels shot in the atomic bomb’s aftermath. The images conjured here coincide with Lui’s view of Hiroshima, raising a united image of the disaster above the characters’ conflicting words.

Once this unified Hiroshima is thus visualized, the scenario moves to Nevers, Elle’s hometown in central France. The source of conflict in the evocation of Nevers is not between representation and reality, which is settled visually for Hiroshima in the film’s first scene. It is between reality and the desire to forget the real. Nevers, therefore, is constructed alongside the character of Elle with the visualization of her memories. “In Nevers, I was the youngest that I have ever been.”<sup>4</sup> Spoken by Elle at the beginning of the fictionalized sequence, this phrase connotes birth, a beginning. Other phrases, like “I grew up in Nevers; I learned to read in Nevers,”<sup>5</sup> personify the town with impressions of objective influence, while Nevers itself maintains a rudimentary control that is more difficult to reconstruct. In both cases, we observe characters who exist by way of the immediate globalized reference to one place (Hiroshima) or by serving the personalized memories of another (Nevers). The primary stress placed on the identification of Hiroshima and Nevers, and the secondary existence of the characters in relation to these places, creates a nonconventional atmosphere for *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

Duras has, at her disposal, an opportunity to experiment with characters who are real yet undefined. Consequently, Elle and Lui are imbued with the capacity for multiple identities. This

is most clear in the confession/analysis scene at the Casablanca bar. As Elle reconstructs Nevers through a reassembling of painful thoughts, she projects onto Lui the identity of her wartime German lover. He accepts this therapeutic role. Elle, at points, also sees Lui as her mother, with two shots cut together that show Elle in the arms of both her mother and Lui. The man also assumes this cathartic role, and goes so far as to slap Elle in the face when she becomes hysterical in her therapeutic reverie, reiterating the film's visualizations of the mother restraining Elle during the girl's ordeal of being punished as a German sympathizer by her local French community. After her confession to Lui, Elle returns to her hotel where she assumes her German lover's identity. She speaks to him while looking at her reflection in a mirror, then assumes a third party's identity—perhaps the Japanese man—who speaks to both her and her lover. All of these psychological shifts and the fluid transitions between identities display a special narrative freedom. Duras's characters are free to change as long as they are motivated by the places and histories of Hiroshima and Nevers.

If Duras's script for *Hiroshima Mon Amour* allows places to overwhelm her characters, Resnais's camera work clearly subjectifies Nevers and Hiroshima through the eyes of Elle and Lui. In the opening sequence, we are given two views of Hiroshima. Elle sees only the pristine war museum and hospital, where she is portraying a nurse in a film—merely symbolic representations of the atomic bomb disaster. The only images suggested by Lui are newsreels of the aftermath, which display the graphic destruction of Hiroshima. Both views are historically incomplete and reveal subjective perspectives of the city. These images are all we see, as well; consequently, representation of Hiroshima is restricted. Nevers is equally illusionistic; it, too, assumes a symbolic identity through subjective reconstruction. The memories of Elle initiate the onscreen visualization of the French town. Like the Loire River, these images wrap Nevers around the pain of her lost love and brutal public chastisement. The ultimate subjectification of the two locales is achieved through the cinematic styles with which Resnais presents them. Lui's Hiroshima is shown in documentary footage, displaying a mode by which the Japanese may clinically distance themselves from the bomb's impact. Nevers, however, is swathed in shadow, evoking Elle's unconscious refusal to as yet cross the distance separating reason and madness. These visual styles also shape our perception of Elle and Lui as characters. He, like Hiroshima, is clearly presented with nothing to uncover. Elle, however, is complex, layered, and must be uncovered carefully.

"The possibility that person might become undifferentiated from place constitutes the radical slippage of representation" in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.<sup>6</sup> This slippage attacks the conventional narrative strategy of using settings as impotent atmospheres in which identifiable characters act and react. By the end of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, we cannot separate Elle from our

perceptions of Nevers, nor Lui from the images of Hiroshima. Fused together, the characters exist as products of their environments, which in turn exist as subjective cinematic constructions presented by the characters. The film's closing lines of dialogue elucidate this interdependence. Elle names Lui "Hiroshima," and Lui calls Elle "Nevers—en France." Through the profound mediator of suffering, both characters are led toward a shared place of mutual understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Madeleine Borgomano, *L'Écriture Filmique de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1985), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Borgomano, *L'Écriture Filmique de Marguerite Duras*, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, screenplay (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), 36.