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# Places of absence and loss: *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Lost in translation*

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– You have seen *nothing* in Hiroshima. *Nothing.*
– I have seen *everything*. *Everything*. I have seen the hospital. I am sure I have.
– You have not seen the hospital in Hiroshima. You have seen nothing in Hiroshima (*Hiroshima mon amour*, Alain Resnais, 1959).
– You are really having a midlife crisis aren't you?
– Really? I was afraid of that. I kept telling myself that I just wanted to be ready in case we go to war tonight (*Lost in translation,* Sofia Coppola, 2003).

There are places, strange and mysterious, marked by loss and trauma, or shining bright in their neon colours, which seem to look back at us when we watch them, and confront us with what we are missing, what we have lost, something impossible to symbolize by means of language. Japan will be such a place in the two films I have chosen to discuss, the first in a dramatic, the second in an ironic mode: *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Lost in Translation.* I would like to examine how these places make it possible for us to relive or remember events that took place in our past, or are just happening at the very moment film characters are placed in surroundings not recognizable and even impossible to comprehend, when they find themselves near the danger of encountering their most hidden desire or their most unknown fear. In other words, how some places seem to return the gaze.

Why these two films? Maybe because they are *not* about Japan, at least it is a stereotyped Japan which is presented here, like the nineteenth century "Orient" Edward Saïd described in *Orientalism.* Perhaps you might say that in *Hiroshima mon amour,* Japan is presented as a place of loss, while in *Lost in Translation*, it is a place of absence. First I would like to define those two concepts, absence and loss, in their relation to history.

Dominic LaCapra points out a striking difference between absence and loss. According to him, absence is situated on a transhistorical level, while loss exists on a historical level. Absence is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present or future), and by contrast, the historical past seems to be the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated in the present or future. However when we speak of absence, the past is perceived in terms of sheer non-being or utter annihilation, though some part of it always remains, if only as a haunting presence or revenant, while losses are specific and involve particular events. Loss is often correlated

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with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. By contrast to absence, loss is situated on a historical level and is the consequence of particular events. Some losses may be traumatic while others are not, and there are variations in the intensity or devastating impact of trauma (LaCapra 2000).

If we follow LaCapra, contemporary thinking about trauma too often turns loss into absence, absolutizing a historic process and thus eliminating the possibility for change and recovery. Seeing historical trauma as loss will create more opportunities for "working through" rather than "acting out" the past. Absence and loss both are anxiety-generating, and both are related to desire. In loss, the object of desire is specified: to recover the lost or lacking object or some substitute for it. By contrast, the object of desire is not specified in relation to absence. I hope I will be able to show how this works in both films.

*Hiroshima mon amour* tells a very ordinary, you might even say banal love story, only it takes place in a city where it was at the time nearly impossible to imagine such a love story. Like Marguerite Dumas points out, "nothing is 'given' in Hiroshima. A particular halo seems to accompany each gesture, each spoken word, to add a new meaning to their litteral sense" (Duras 1980). Because Hiroshima took place, there can be no pretending or lying: all you can do is speak about the impossibility of Hiroshima. In the film, history is discrete, almost humble, and eventually disappears, but history is indeniably the cause and the background of the love between the French woman and the Japanese man. Julia Kristeva writes that although the French woman reminds us of a character of one of Stendhal's novels, and is in that sense eternal, she also exists because of the war, the nazis, the atomic bomb (Kristeva 1987, 242). But it is through the fictional story, not about Hiroshima but taking place at its site, that its historical specificity is conveyed. Cathy Caruth writes that "the possibility of knowing history is also raised as a deeply ethical dilemma: the unremitting problem of *how not to betray the past*" (Caruth 1996, 27).

Todd McGowan also stresses the historical dimension of *Hiroshima mon amour*. Because director Alain Resnais (and of course writer Marguerite Duras) denies the absolute otherness of historical objects, the film recounts the French woman's capacity for grasping trauma as such. The Japanese man's words "You have seen nothing in Hiroshima" speak to the impossibility of Hiroshima as a historical object, the woman however says she has seen everything. By doing this, the film shows the impossibility of the historical object and at the same time the possibility of experiencing the impossibility. The woman is not experiencing Hiroshima as an ordinary object, but as an impossible object. This is what Marguerite Duras means when she writes: "All we can do is speak about the impossibility of Hiroshima. Knowledge about Hiroshima is immediately presented as an illusion".

According to McGowan, we can only access the impossible historical object insofar as we pay attention to the transition from a world of desire to a world of fantasy. As we see the images of the devastation in *Hiroshima mon amour*, the woman admits that her experience of Hiroshima is one of an illusion. She compares the illusion that she has of Hiroshima to the illusion that one has in a love relationship. In both, we relate to the otherness of the other through the lens of fantasy. On the one hand, the fantasy shields us from the traumatic real of the other, but on the other hand, in the very act of shielding us from the real, the fantasy must acknowledge its existence. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, it is the film within the film that reveals the historical event of the destruction of the city and its inhabitants, and at the same time protects us from it, because it's a film, a fantasmatic scenario.

By speaking of Hiroshima and of her dead German lover, the woman for the first time tells about the trauma of lying on his dead body, of feeling him die under her own living body. The dead and the living seem to be united in an impossible, horrible love-making. The French town where she lived during the war, Nevers, becomes Hiroshima, and Hiroshima becomes Nevers. What she gives her Japanese lover is her most intimate secret: she shows she can accept him as a substitute for the other, but their brief love story has also enabled her to make peace with the fact that she has survived the traumatic loss of the German lover.

Refering to the beginning of the film and the dying bodies of the past in their confuse relationship to the living bodies of the two lovers in the present, Cathy Caruth asks: "What is the role

of our seeing in establishing a relation between these two sets of bodies?" (Caruth 1996, 26). It is true that the film is about seeing and not seeing, about having seen and not having seen. It is however possible to approach the problem of sight in another way. Early Lacanian film theory located the gaze in the spectator and analyzed cinema in terms of his gaze, and focused itself on the particularity of the viewer himself. We used to associate the gaze with an active process: in the Lacanian view the aim of the gaze is to trigger our desire visually, and as such it is what Lacan calls *objet petit a*: the object-cause of desire.

In a more Zizekian approach, the gaze expresses fundamental emptiness, it isolates a stain of the Real, a merciless and lethal position which is in the end our own[1]. So the gaze involves the spectator in the filmic image, disrupting his ability to remain what Christian Metz called "all-perceiving". The gaze is not the spectator's external view of the filmic image, but the mode in which the spectator is accounted for within the film itself. Like Todd McGowan writes, "the gaze is nothing but our presence in what we are looking at, but we are nothing but this gaze." The gaze is a blank point –a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience- within the aesthetic structure of the film, and it is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film. Slavoj Zizek writes that when looking at a film, we see two different realities: the "common sense" reality based on facts, while at the same time our gaze is disrupted and we become aware of a different reality, the anamorphotic, formless image confused by our desires and fears (Zizek 1991, 27).

Two scenes in both films should draw our attention: the scene in which the French actress plays in the documentary about Hiroshima, and the scene where aging actor Bob Harris, brilliantly played by Bill Murray, plays in a commercial promoting Japanese whisky. At his arrival in Tokyo, Bob is immediately confronted with a giant image of himself on a billboard. Later he will see himself as a young actor on television, and then again on a billboard in the streets of Tokyo. We see him also stare at himself in mirrors, in the elevator and in his bathroom. Mirror-images here are encounters with the emptiness on which the subject's own structure is based. Playing his role as the big American star in the commercial about *Suntory*, a Japanese whisky brand[2], Bob is confronted with the fact that language fails as a means of communication: the Japanese director's long sentences are reduced to very short statements by the translator. Bob is asked for intensity, but he can only pretend, the only intensity is that of the young people who surround him. He sees himself though their eyes, he looks in the camera and straight into the viewer's eyes. We look at him, and, in contrast with Japan's exuberant vitality, his eyes express only absence and emptiness. At that very moment we experience the traumatic impact of aging, of being in the wrong place, and even more, living in the wrong time.

In *Hiroshima mon amour*, the confrontation with the war takes place in the *mise-en-scène* of the peace demonstration organized for the film. We see large photos of wounded people, who look at us and seem to address us. The man and the woman are stuck in the middle of the crowd of running Japanese actors, but together they succeed in reaching the other side of the street. Not one moment they have looked at the photos, and they don't have to do so: the photos of the victims, images of quiet despair that make the terrible event come closer to us, are presented to us, viewers, not to the two lovers.

While *Hiroshima mon amour* is about loss and the possibility of working out, *Lost in Translation* shows us someone who acts out in regression. Marvin Krims wrote a beautiful article about this condition in *King Lear*: Lear's emotional problem, his difficulties in knowing himself and his narcissistic demand to be unconditionally loved, prevent him from being able to grieve his losses due

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1 The Zizekian Real does not correspond exactly with the Lacanian Real: the Lacanian Real is what is outside language and inassimilable to symbolisation. It is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order and impossible to attain in any way. Same for Zizek, only he stresses the traumatic and excessive character of the Real, that cannot be integrated and experienced as something existing, but only as the Thing.

2 Maybe the only reference to time: Suntory sounds like century, and the car in which Bob rides around is a Toyota Century.

to aging, and instead he regresses. “This regression manifests itself in the infantile wishes that underlie his construction of the ‘love test’” (Krims 2007, 75). This is what happens to Bill Murray’s character in *Lost in Translation.* To escape his fear of aging, he falls in love with a young girl and follows her to bars and parties. There is a very intimate scene between both, when they lie in bed and talk, and Bob touches her foot. And then they finally fall asleep. There can be no love story, the “love test” has failed.

*Hiroshima* tells us about trauma and loss, *Translation* is about depression and what is called an “empty” mood. Bob Harris suffers from insomnia, loss of interest and pleasure, absence of vitality. Jetlag makes time vanish, day and night turn into one long boring sameness. *Hiroshima* is historically layered because of the flash-backs, the story takes place in the present but there is an intrinsical need to go back to the past. *Translation* has only one level, that of the present, symbolized by the vibrant, exuberant urban nightlife. Hiroshima was a place of trauma and devastation, a historical scar, Tokyo is hyperreality and the coolest place on earth. Changes in history take only place in the space between the two films, in an unmentioned past that functions as a kind of transitional time-space.

There is one very important line in *Translation*. When Charlotte’s husband tells her she should quit smoking, she answers: “I’ll stop later”. For her there is time, there is future. Bob doesn’t have to quit smoking cigars: for him, it’s too late. His future is reduced to the moment. Still, at the end of the film he seems to have realized that aging is not only a depressive absence. Living is learning to mourn and accept the loss. He begins to understand that his own youth is the object of his desire, not Charlotte, and that there might be a way of turning absence into loss. But this is of course my own interpretation.

The two scenes I chose are what Norman Holland calls *metafilms*, stories in which “the physical medium of the story becomes part of the story”, like the movie-within-the-movie in Woody Allen’s *Purple Rose of Cairo*. Norman points out that metafilms can make us tense, edgy, a little nervous, a little dizzy, in other words, we get that strange feeling Freud called the *uncanny*. For Freud, the uncanny took place with the return of repressed fantasies, that would evoke the same anxiety that led to their repression in the first place. But Norman gives another answer, which is neuropsychological and particularly striking in the case of film. I will not get into details, you can find them in Norm’s article in *Projections. The Journal for Movies and Mind.* The metafilmic effect rests on a childish belief that the story we see might be real. First the events pictured on the screen were fictional, but we believed in those events (or rather, we suspended our disbelief). But then the brain gets two inconsistent signals. The physical reality of the movie being written in the story makes us realize that our belief in the movie was mistaken. We suddenly feel a contradiction in our perception. The filmmaker’s mingling reality with unreality is what creates the anxious feeling Freud called the uncanny. Alain Resnais used this by showing the wounded people of Hiroshima in a faked documentary, Sofia Coppola plays with it when she confronts Bob Harris with his younger self in an episode of *Saturday Night Life* in 1975.

Maybe this is what Zizek calls “the encounter with the gaze”. While invested in the film, the subject is able to encounter the gaze as a disruption within spectatorship. We have to immerse ourselves in cinematic fascination and focus on the points of rupture where the gaze emerges. These are the points where film disturbs the spectator, in the same way as in dreams, when the uncanny makes its apparition. In dreams we do not approach things, things show themselves to us. The metafilm creates a filmic possibility to disrupt the gaze and organizes a traumatic encounter with the Real.

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