

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Hiroshima, Mon Amour 1959

Alain Resnais, 1922-2014

STORY

We are all familiar with the philosophical issue of knowing another person's pain; a tricky query around which Wittgenstein wound much of his argumentation about the very possibility of personal knowledge. In the present film the stakes around knowing are steeply raised, by juxtaposing not only two individuals, but, through those individuals—a French woman and a Japanese man—the global sufferings of two cultures at two of the greatest tragedies self-imposed by a twentieth century humanity in love with despair; the sufferings of a Europe destroying itself, and a Japan invoking the full destructive powers of an industrialized America. *Hiroshima mon amour* takes the difficulty of knowing another's suffering, through a Japanese man and a French woman, whose affair—of two days' duration—only tortures them with the horror of the sense of their being locked into their own experiences; he into the horror of a still to this day devastating bomb, she into the humiliation of shame, for having indulged a love affair with a German soldier, during the occupation of France in her home city, Nevers.

Setting. The setting is Hiroshima, to which a French actress had traveled, in order to work on a shoot for a movie about peace. Her appearance is heralded by a series of shots of bodies alternately caressing one another's bare and succulent sex flesh, and then giving way, in alternate writhings, to gray, blistered, ash covered corpses, a grim intro to the love affair starting quickly to bud between the two protagonists of the film. In this setting the French woman, she, recounts what she has already, in a few hours, seen of Hiroshima; the museums, the horrifying videos, the formerly human debris scattered through the museum. To which the Japanese man, the architect who is he, here, responds that she has seen nothing of Hiroshima. He thereby heralds the stand off by which, as we are soon to learn, in a long café discussion, she will respond by excavating areas of pain, in her own youthful development as it intersects the Nazi occupation of France, in which he manifestly has no way to participate. Two culture disasters, two individual exposures to global suffering, and in between them sandwiched, an intense love affair.

Dreads. The brevity of the time allotted in Hiroshima, in which love can flourish, is almost nothing but painful—despite lovers' radiant smiles and bed scenes, which irrigate the pain of the film, and make room for what joy sex still seems to offer. He dreads her departure, for he fears he will never see her again. He has seen a world wasted around him, and cannot bear a repetition of such loss. She dreads insecurity, in a world which has become supremely insecure, and in which she has suffered the terror of lost identity. She is obligated to return to Paris, and has a mission to accomplish; he is a married man—yes, right!—and has a job to do. Staying with one another is unthinkable, especially because of the enormous historical experiences that are unique to each of them—although of course those experiences, of apocalypse, might be said to be the unique common factor between these two lovers.

THEMES

Romance. At the heart of the present tale, of course, is a romance, short by definition, intense because short and fiery, and with every promise of loss and pain. Such are the conditions surrounding the meeting of the two lovers in Hiroshima.

Instability. It happens that each of the two lovers is deeply sensitized to the pain promised by this relationship. She has seen shame and humiliation crown the great previous love of her life. He has experienced the total destruction of his country by war—and in fact by the most ruthless of destructions—and can barely find a place of stability inside himself, from which to negotiate even a stable love affair.

Deformation. From their unique perspectives, the two lovers have both been introduced to the pairing of beauty and deformity—which at after-sites like Pompei or Hiroshima inevitably proliferates. She has seen her body shorn, humiliated for her love for the enemy. He has lived the horror of a cultural victimization, in which the human body has been turned into a horror gallery of twisted forms.

Timelessness. The filming technique and the narrative energy of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, coincide to make their moments of meeting stupendously powerful for the two brief lovers. Not only is their love occurring in a place where the destruction of all love has in the past made love seem almost an impossibility, but global time, the time beyond time, seems to have swallowed up the intimacies of the two lovers, who in the end fade away from one another as though they were simply representatives of the tragedies that engulfed their two countries.

CHARACTERS

She. She, nameless, is on a two day photo shoot in Japan, to complete a film about peace, and as we first see her she is in the tourist phase of her experience, museum visiting, video watching, exposing herself to the abundant testimonies of sufferers from the atomic attack which made a scabrous disaster out of a large industrial city. In the course of her visit, and photo shoot, she meets an attractive Japanese architect, with whom she falls in love. Their intense but tortured love for one another crowds the two days that her visit has given them together.

He. He is a good looking, French speaking Japanese architect, who falls in love with a French movie actress, during her photo shoot in Hiroshima. For him the disaster of Hiroshima is the past he is embedded in, and he begins to rethink that past as his lover experiences it freshly. What he discovers, inside himself, is a great fear of loss, the life-impermanence which destruction has underlined. Stifled by that impermanence anxiety, he dreads losing his new love, and several times begs her to make it possible for them to meet again. She is more realistic, turning down his need, which comes from a collective historical sense of damage and cannot be assuaged.

The German, like the 'she' and the 'he' who are lovers, is in fact little more than a representative of an historical setting. For 'her' he is a first and forbidden love, for whom her attraction is sexual. His crumpled, dead body is her last view of him, though she will pay dearly for 'selling out to the enemy.'

Mother. 'Her' mother is humiliated when it is learned that her daughter has been having an affair with a German soldier who is part of the Nazi occupying army in France. Out of humiliation, and to keep her daughter out of sight, mother confines her daughter to the cold basement of their family home, allowing her out into the backyard, but only at night. The daughter's head is shaven—the standard punishment for 'Nazi sympathizers'—and as soon as her hair grows back she is permitted to move to Paris, where her life can be absorbed into the anonymous life of the city.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SHE

Character. 'She' is a deeply wounded French woman, whose earlier disgrace, as the lover of a Nazi soldier who was part of the Occupation, led to her humiliation and virtual exile from her home city, Nevers. Seeking escape from this social branding, she becomes a film actress; we see her first in that role, as she visits Hiroshima, to make a film about peace. It is there that she meets a Japanese man who falls quickly for her, begging her to stay with him; it is also there that she discovers that the degradation of Hiroshima deprives her of the freedom to love.

Parallels. Becky Sharp (*Vanity Fair*); Hester Prynne (*The Scarlet Letter*); Jane Eyre (*Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*); Anna Karenina: all these women step dangerously out of line, for the accepted mores of their time, and like 'her' pay the penalty in one or another kind of ostracism.

Illustrative moments

Informed. 'She' is startled by the horror of the displays at Hiroshima, though at first she inevitably views them simply as 'displays,' and has a natural difficulty penetrating toward the realities of the bombed city.

Enamored. 'She' falls for a handsome Japanese architect, who assures her that she has seen nothing of Hiroshima.

Reminded. 'Her' pain, in confronting the reality of Hiroshima, grows more intense as it links her back into the pain of her own youthful humiliation in France.

Flooded. As 'she' walks the streets of Hiroshima, she is flooded with the power of her own past, and the sense of global suffering, present and future.

Discussion questions

How does Resnais present the unwillingness of 'her' to remain longer with 'him'? Is 'she' afraid of her own past, or of 'her' weakness? Is 'she' afraid that Hiroshima will 'swallow' her up with its power?

'She' is on mission, in Hiroshima, to work on creating a documentary film about peace. Is Resnais on board with the idea of a 'documentary' about such horror as Hiroshima? Or has he been able to address 'Hiroshima' only by presenting it in an art form?