

# Historical Trauma in Multi-National Cinemas: Rethinking History and Trauma<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay looks at the way the conventional notion of history is disturbed when infected with trauma. The idea of history could point to more useful notions of experience, practice, language, and thought when it is thought through with trauma. First, the belatedness of trauma defies the lineal historical time scheme that shapes the temporal flow from past to present. Second, the traumatic experiences of the 20th century compel a shift from the notion of individual-centered trauma to a broad social and cultural phenomenon. Trauma shatters or strains at the limit of symbolic resources and hence puts culturally coherent history writing in jeopardy. The failure to assimilate and understand trauma reflects a radical rupture in the continuity of culture, and indicates an impoverishment and crisis whose symptom is the inability to write history. The second part of the essay argues against the impossibility of representation and suggests that new forms of history are still being and must be written through re-categorization and through evolving new forms of representation. Cultural reproduction of trauma in America and China suggests that it is in the retelling and especially in visual representation that traces of trauma can be preserved and transmitted. Finally, the film *Hiroshima mon amour* opens up the possibilities of a new representation through psychoanalytical dialogue. The film proves that it is precisely in an alternative form of talk that one can have access to the painful reality of a trauma. In the film, history, as a traumatic "patient," is placed under analysis. Through verbal articulation, something in

the way of “talking revelation” if not “talking cure,” what is buried in the unconscious can be made conscious, what was not registered as unutterable experience can be re-experienced belatedly, yielding benefits of affect, anxiety and understanding.

### KEY WORDS

History  
narrative  
representation  
dialogue  
testimony  
Incident  
Cinema

trauma  
memory  
psychoanalysis  
Hiroshima  
Tiananmen  
re-enactment



Traumatic experiences force us to reconsider the conventional notion of history. Whether commonsensical or historiographical, the idea of history, infected with trauma, could point to a diffuse but more useful understanding of historical experience and its media representation. It may even alter our understanding of the concept of history itself. Most recent studies of trauma imply that the standard notions of history and historical writing are fundamentally disturbed and challenged when one talks about “a history of trauma.” But due to the residual assumptions in the positive or textual notions of history, the idea of a trauma-infected history remains unexplored and unarticulated.<sup>2</sup>

Several strands of reflection have now emerged to suggest new ways of thinking and speaking about history plagued by trauma. It has been much noted that the belatedness of traumatic symptoms defies the lineal historical time that is presumed to shape the temporal flow from the past to the present. This psychic insight could do more than current historical and sociological critiques in challenging the “grand narrative” of progress and development. Recent discussions of trauma have shifted from a description of the overwhelming impact, scale and sheer physical devastation of the actual event to its lasting effects and later pathological re-appearances. Hence the emphasis on trauma-related cultural expressions and production (Seltzer). Trauma is seen not as a one-time, discrete happening, but as a persisting condition. Viewed as a “structure of its experience or reception” at a later date and incubating over a long stretch of time, the trauma consists in its debilitating, enduring pathologies (Caruth, *Trauma* 4). Neurologists, psychoanalysts, and humanist scholars have noted that the initial blow to the psyche is not assimilated or even felt; it breaches the psychic defense of perception and consciousness, and gets deposited in a deeper stratum of the

psyche without being “filed.” Remaining latent for a period of time the earlier imprints resurface in the “form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behavior” that make the victim sick (Caruth, *Trauma* 4). It is precisely this insistent, belated return of the image or event—a return of a missed encounter in the past (rather than the repressed, more of this later) across a time span that constitutes the atemporal nature of trauma. Although the imprints may be “historical” in their origin, the psychic symptoms defy the passage of time and appear to be transhistorical, often cutting through the whole life-history of the victim or even several generations of a group. The traumatic experience thus is not a temporal sequence but one of simultaneity. “This simultaneity is related to the fact that the traumatic experience/memory is, in a sense, timeless. It is not easily transformed into a story, placed in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end (which is characteristic for narrative memory)” (der Kolk and der Hart 177). In this sense what is historical is also latent and concurrent; history persists in the form of underhanded or subterranean pathologies and symptoms that may erupt from time to time. The symptoms, as numerous survival accounts have testified, do not fade off as time goes by. This is especially true of the various re-assertions and manifestations of the “long-gone” collective wounds. In this sense history, although encoded in narrative and discursive forms, can hardly be regarded merely as the textual and narrative mimesis of past events. It can be seen as a sporadic or chronic disfiguration of textual form, a form being torn to pieces by fissures and ruptures symptomatic of disruptive forces of history that constantly break down our psychic and symbolic structuring. A history infected with trauma may be one that foregrounds “the cracks and tears that are concealed by the coherence of the stories being told” (Alphen 37). History writing then would seem like a leaking vessel and contain its “content” precariously. To read such a history is to be able to detect or listen or bear witness to those fissures and leaks in what aspires to be a textual closure in historical narrative.

A notion of trauma-ridden history also requires a shift from the individual-centered trauma to a broad understanding of its social and cultural ramifications. Though Freud’s theory of trauma may be

opened up to historical and cultural analysis, it is primarily limited to the individual psyche and predicated on a notion of repression. The traumatic core for Freud consists in the incomplete repression and resurfacing of the libidinal impulses. Those dark, infantile, archaic impulses within the psyche deal a traumatic blow to the ego when its defense is weak. In an influential study, psychiatrists Van der Kolk and Van der Hart move away from this mainstream repression model by drawing on the pioneers of psychoanalysis, Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet, who worked at Salpêtrière over a century ago. With an eye on the shattering experience of history, they have showed that traumatic memory is not a question of self-repression or lack of it. Rather it is a failure of existing meaning schemes, the psyche's cultural equipment, to assimilate frightening experiences. The memory of these experiences, falling short of our conscious, cognitive grasp, gets deposited elsewhere in the psyche and is unavailable for "retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control" (160). Thus they move away from the notion of repression to a model of disassociation and point a way out of the individual enclosure of trauma:

Repression reflects a horizontally layered model of mind: what is repressed is pushed downward, into the unconscious. The subject no longer has access to it. Only symbolic indirect indications would point to its assumed existence. Disassociation reflects a vertically layered model of mind: when a subject does not remember a trauma, its "memory" is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness, e.g. during traumatic re-enactments. (168)

What can be pursued in this suggestive remark is not the location of trauma in the unconscious or in "an alternate stream of consciousness," nor how traumatic memory engulfs consciousness from within, but the forces external and alien to the psyche that ambush the subject from without, waylay it, and rob it of its conscious and cognitive con-

trol. This is the traumatic blow, stemming from a catastrophic history that crashes through the regulative faculty of the mind. The force is "horizontal" because it comes from without rather than from within; it comes from an external historical environment, not from an interior, subterranean stratum of the psyche.

In a similar vein Cathy Caruth and Robert J. Lifton's readings of Freud release the notion of trauma from the individual cocoon to the broader field of history. In her reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Caruth sees the text symptomatically as both a document of Jewish history in a traumatic key and a theoretical re-enactment, a thinly veiled drama, of Freud's own traumatic encounter with the Nazi persecution of the Jews in the Second World War. Focusing on the inherent latency in trauma, the period in which the impact of an overwhelming event fails to be registered by the victim, Caruth discerns a trauma-ridden history in the failure of representation to reach that latent "black hole" and in the belated return of the unregistered effects. "For history to be a history of trauma," she writes, "means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (*Unclaimed Experience* 18). If we insert this "inaccessibility" into a piece of historical writing, it becomes "gaps" in the text. For Caruth, Freud preserves history in writing precisely through those gaps (*Unclaimed Experience* 10-24).

Lifton's move from psyche to history is more explicit. Lifton was himself pushed in this direction by a history marked by the Second World War, the Holocaust, genocide, Hiroshima, and the Atomic Bomb. He distances himself from Freud while trying to learn from the latter in order to grapple with, in his words, "these horrendous issues I was struggling with, especially Hiroshima" (Lifton, "Interview" 132). What is worth learning in Freud's theory of trauma is a hidden stratum or historical dimension, which is relevant to our question of historical representation. Lifton reads Freud with full consciousness of history's brutal intrusion in the impact of Hiroshima as well as his interviews with victims and perpetrators of the many traumatic events of this

century. His interpretation considerably broadens the historical potential latent in Freud. Like Van der Kolk, Lifton identifies Freud's theory of trauma as being based on "a parameter of instinct and defense or essentially, sexuality and repression." He notes that Freud describes death anxiety as a displacement of castration anxiety, thus limiting the traumatic fear of death to a private or family drama of the Oedipus Complex. "With the central role of castration anxiety in the Oedipus Complex for Freud's opus, for psychoanalysis, then you are relegating anxiety about death to a secondary phenomenon" ("Interview" 131). For Lifton death does not mean physical death or the demise of the ego. Death means death-related experiences—"death equivalents" in his words—which have become so familiar and widespread as to mark the traumatic experience of the twentieth-century. The death experience includes feelings of disintegration, loss, grief, separation, cultural disorientation and geographical dislocation, all stemming from the individual's subjection to a life-threatening time and place. These emotions may have instinctual components, but they could be more clearly and broadly construed as the breakdown of the mental defense, the defense buttressed by cultural imagery (*Broken Connection* 45-52).

Lifton's emphasis on the imagistic or symbolic register rather than the instinctual component indicates a paradigmatic shift from the individual psyche to what he calls "the parameter of life and death" ("Interview" 130). He situates trauma in this parameter, a broadly cultural framework that functions to symbolize what appears to be unsymbolizable. By defining the blow to the psyche as a shattering of imagery, Lifton's motto "We live on images" begins to suggest that trauma is the shattering of the inherited and cherished cultural forms—historically constituted and culturally orchestrated patterns of perception and cognition, modes of feeling and communal bonding:

The insight begins with the shattering of prior forms. Because forms have to be shattered for there to be new insight. In that sense, it is a shattering of form but it is also a new dimension of experience. One of the great difficulties in all of the extreme situations I've studied is that people subject-

ed to them have no prior images through which to connect with them, or very few. What in one's life would enable one to connect with Hiroshima? Here the assumption is that, and this is the radical insight of symbolizing theory, we never receive anything nakedly, we must recreate it in our own minds, and that is what the cortex is for. In creating, in recreating experience, we need some prior imagery in order to do that work, in order to carry through that process. And there was precious little prior imagery that could enable people to take in the Hiroshima experience, the event of a weapon apparently destroying an entire city. ("Interview" 135)

Prior imagery here is another name for the symbolic matrix, the structure of meaning and value that sustains an individual's identity and assures his or her attachment to the community. It also includes the stories we tell each other about ourselves and about the world we live in. Van der Kolk and der Van Hart, following Janet, call this set of imagery narrative memory, mental constructs "which people use to make sense out of experience" (160). This symbolic matrix—the prevalent imagery and culturally viable narrative—is in fact what allows us to write history and sustain continuity from past to present. It is the resource that constitutes and certifies each person as a member of a culture. The trauma shatters or strains at the limit of this resource and hence puts culturally coherent history writing in jeopardy. The failure to assimilate and understand trauma reflects a radical rupture in the continuity of culture, and indicates an impoverishment and crisis whose one symptom is the inability to make and write its own history.

### **Making Narrative with Trauma**

A trauma-ridden history often leads to a profound questioning of historical writing and a debunking of narrative. Narrative, any narrative, is viewed with suspicion, for it tends to have the seductive power to glide over the horrendous fact and to distort historical complexity.



The distrust of narrative's allure is often associated with the disavowal of representation. Since trauma is the shattering of cultural forms and pre-existent narrative schemes, it is, the argument goes, beyond the reach of representation. One persistent problem of trauma studies is that trauma victims frequently feel that their experience is exclusively their own, unutterable, unsharable, and incommunicable. The trauma injures one's body and mind in a sharp stab so that no word or image can even begin to hint at the sting and intensity of the experience. With this insistence on privacy and ineffability, Elie Wiesel observes, "If someone else could have written my stories, I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. And this is the origin of the loneliness that can be glimpsed in each of my sentences, in each of my silences" (qtd. in Felman 14-15). Only those who have a similar experience can "understand" it. Even such an understanding is not encoded in any conventional linguistic, narrative, or imagistic form. It is more a shared remembrance of physical or mental agony.

This shared remembrance can become a powerful source for asserting a group's identity and authority in writing history. The incommunicable singularity of the trauma of a group gives it an aura of sanctity and marks the victims off as a different, unique species. The irony here is that the traumatic "subject," which seems a contradiction in terms, could lay claim to some absolute authority, to some exclusive, inviolate, unsharable space. This authority buttresses a group's unalienable identity: we are what we are because we are stamped with a certain unrepeatable, unique trauma. Past sufferings have become a badge of honor and entitle one to a moral high ground.

Attempting to represent the trauma, especially one not your own, would thus be tantamount to an act of violation and blasphemy. To assimilate the unthinkable into a scheme of narrative and meaning would often seem an act of trivialization and banalization, a beautifying of the nightmare, the taming of the wild, a forgetting of traumatic wounds. The blasphemy is most abominable when it is done with cinematic imagery. There has been an injunction against imaging trauma, a fear that melodrama, display of sentimentality or kitschy romance on the screen may debase and secularize the sacred power of

the trauma to “exalt or move to fear and trembling” (Elsaesser 148).

Without denying the singularity and the unrepresentable character of the trauma, we should recognize a danger in the overemphasis on the unrepresentable. Such emphasis will push trauma into the mystified circle of the occult, untouchable and unreachable. The concept of trauma is considerably impoverished as a tool of historical analysis by being relegated to an atomistic, ineffable individual experience on the one hand and to the mystery of fate on the other. It also becomes poorer when merely employed as fuel to enflame identity politics. No doubt narrative conventions, with their melodrama and obsolete, trite emotional patterns often tend to gloss over or even function to “forget” the unutterable pain and horror of traumatic experience. But the more urgent problem, in this age of forgetfulness, is not so much forgetting through narrative and imagery as forgetting through indifference or sheer mindlessness. As a deposit of cultural memory, the traumatic experience seems no match against the relentless erasure of a culture dominated by commodity and consumption. The mass media, with their soap operas, talk shows, and historical melodramas are erasing genuine historical memory. The culture of consumption now finds in history a new toy, a fashionable consumer item, and is intensifying the shrinking of historical consciousness by flattening past events into spectacles and thrills. On the international scene, corporate-sponsored globalization is blurring the distinctive traditions and eroding native cultural heritage. One casualty is a healthy measure of historical consciousness. Fewer and fewer young people know much about the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Rape of Nanking or the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Forgetting by indifference seems a great danger and a greater blasphemy than a serious but necessarily inadequate narrating.

In this regard, theorists of trauma seem to be privileging epistemological questions provoked by trauma at the expense of the practical question of why we need to remember historical trauma in a larger social context. They seem overhasty in dismissing representation and narrative on account of their inadequacy, their failure to fully express. Yet to come to terms with traumatic memory, and more important, to preserve traumatic memory on a cultural scale so that similar traumas

will not happen again, it is necessary that a choice be made between inadequate telling and the relegating of trauma to a mystified silence. The whole question boils down to this: Do we want unsatisfactory and inadequate representation or do we simply leave everything to oblivion?

A similar mystification comes from a reading of trauma from the viewpoint of deconstruction—one that revels in the impasse of the signifier and dwells masochistically on the ineffable. It sees trauma as a perpetual stumbling block to any form of representation. But this may also be deconstructive of valuable memory and detrimental to the historical consciousness that seeks to learn lessons from trauma. And in order to learn it is necessary to narrate and recount. To celebrate the crumbling of the signifier may show an understanding of impoverished symbolic resources, but this cognitive diagnosis seems to stop at the level of symptoms in the way an analyst savors, without offering help, the patient's hysterical acting out under the impact of the unresolved trauma. This does not do justice to the victim of traumatic outrage, nor is it of much help for a culture's reconstruction of history out of traumatic experience.

As trauma consists in the unmaking of the world, the prohibition against narrative and representation blocks the way to the re-making of the world. While it shatters the culture's symbolic resources, trauma also points to the urgent necessity of reconstructing and transforming the broken repertoire of meaning and expression. Pain, traumatic pain, as Elaine Scarry convincingly argues, is necessarily bound up with imaging. Experience of pain, unlike other conscious and perceptual acts of seeing, feeling, and hearing, is utterly without objective correlatives in the external world. It has no external objects and signs to objectify itself. Pain repeats, refers back to pain itself and nothing else. This "objectlessness," this "complete absence of referential content" (162), also renders it resistant to, even destructive of, language or any pre-existing representational form. Imaging, on the other hand, is filled with objects: "There is in imaging no activity, no "state," no experienceable condition of felt-occurrence separate from the objects" (162). Scarry rightly avers that pain and imaging constitute the two ultimate

boundaries framing the self and its extension in the object world—the subject and object continuum. While the body in pain suffers the gap between the self and self-extension, and is thus passive and helpless, it also strains to enter into relation with the “objectifying power of the imagination: through that relation, pain will be transformed from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self-modifying and, when most successful, self-eliminating one” (164).

It seems that an effective way to come to terms with trauma is to bestow a form upon this invisible, obscure state through imaging. Although the natural and cultural worlds fail to provide any fitting object for pain, yet “beyond the expansive ground of ordinarily, naturally occurring objects is the narrow extra ground of imagined objects.” The imagination is the last resort, the last hope that is always there, “on an emergency stand-by basis” to provide the capacity for self-imaging and consequently for creating new sets of objects in the world (Scarry 166). The exercise of the imagination, its “work,” indicates the essential integrity of human action and objects acted on or imagined. The shattering of this integrity is manifest in pain and in alienated labor, where the body is separated from objects bereft of human import or intention. In the utter abyss of trauma, the imagination strains to re-endow the void with images that “correspond” to the inner, objectless, invisible state. The imagination’s work is the name

given to the phenomena of pain and the imagination as they begin to move from being a self-contained loop within the body to becoming the equivalent loop now projected into the external world. It is through this movement out into the world that the extreme privacy of the occurrence (both pain and imagination are invisible to anyone outside the boundaries of the person’s body) begins to be sharable, that sentience becomes social and thus acquires its distinctly human form. (170)

The pained imagination here works like a reversed version of the Kantian sublime. Through a leap of faith, the Kantian sublime cele-

brates the triumph of the faculty of reason or morality presiding over the formlessness of sensory threat and excess, yet the faculty still remains in a masochistic pleasure-in-pain, cut off from images. Instead of elevating the transcendental reason over the sensory, Scarry urges the stripped-down reason to work through and imagine non-existent images in order to find an "imaginary solution," so that consciousness will find a home in a newly created, dense sea of images, symbols and artifacts.

Scarry's argument suggests that trauma is not something that representation falls short of, not the absolute undoing of the symbolic. On the contrary, trauma is constitutive of the symbolic, in that it constitutes the driving force that gives rise to new forms of symbolic expression. Thus to what extent a representation is "fitting" to trauma is an historical, ethical, and aesthetic question rather than a sheer theoretical quandary. It is in trauma-related representations that trauma is lifted out of its invisibility and silence and becomes a public remembrance. Cultural reproductions regarding trauma in America and China suggest that it is in the retelling, and especially in visual representation, that traces of trauma can be preserved and transmitted, however unsatisfactory or even "improper" that representation may be. Thomas Elsaesser notes that the films about the Vietnam War, though falling short of "history" *per se*, are instrumental in giving "a shape, an identity, and a texture" that make a history of the Vietnam War possible. The trauma-ridden legend about Vietnam has established its own reality, however fanciful, alongside the more "truthful" or less dramatic account (146). Similarly in the case of China, the revolutionary cinema in the fifties and sixties offered the traumatic plotlines of the sufferings and oppressions of the Chinese before the founding of the People's Republic. The revolutionary-historical film was chiefly responsible for fleshing out the historical experience of modern China. The film's images and scenarios, however ideological they may be, nurtured collective memory and "hardened" into the "history" of the Chinese Revolution. Although frequently in a heroic or triumphantist mode aimed at purging history of bloodstains, the ideological narrative could not completely write off the undercurrent of traumatic experiences. The films dealing with the

War of Resistance against the Japanese invasion or the Opium War are good illustrations. These works have produced and transmitted more than any other medium the traumatic experience of foreign aggression and the misery of the Chinese. Sponsored by Communist ideology, the trauma was invoked to cultivate hatred and stir up patriotic passion. Yet to a mind less indoctrinated and more inclined to read against the grain, the films can offer an occasion to see how traumatic traces of history seep or break through the triumphant, heroic narrative.

Narrative is important even if the traumatic experience is fundamentally a breakdown in narrative memory and narrative sense-making. The documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* stands out in the narrative representation of an event whose horrific reality is either unspeakable or spoken about so much that it becomes trite. This documentary offers a day-to-day documentation of the student movement in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989, but also underlies the event with a far-reaching cultural history. In making this film, directors Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon, who know Chinese language and culture, sought the advice of a distinguished team of Chinese scholars in order to bring out the historical and narrative implications of the Tiananmen demonstration. The film reconfigures the themes of trauma, narrative, and history in ways that challenge the anti-narrative, anti-linguistic stance. Despite the fact that the American media coverage of the bloody Tiananmen event took up more time than all the coverage of China in the previous 10 years in the US, the student demonstration was presented largely as an exciting drama that brought refreshing news of Chinese students' struggle for America's dear old democracy. The real protagonists of the drama were often the anchormen and anchorwomen. Standing on Tiananmen Square, they would be center stage, interviewing student protesters. Not knowing the Chinese language or not bothering to interpret what the students were saying, they would often arbitrarily switch the camera to the more dramatic, theatrical, action-packed scenes. Rarely was an interviewed speaker on the Square allowed to finish his or her statements. The swiftness of the action, the discrete and fragmentary quality of the coverage, were meant to create a dramatic spectacle and to serve up the thrills that

might draw jaded American viewers at dinner time.

Now, we are used to the close link between trauma and allegedly fragmented, postmodernist representation. Yet the disjointed, superficial coverage of the event does more to glide over its tragic implications and tensions than to suggest any genuine understanding of its historical meaning. The fragments are simply a matter of style and surface, blithely unencumbered with a frame of meaning, devoid of the cherished stories in Chinese culture. The fragments do not even know what they are fragments of: freely floating above and beyond history and narrative, there is no hint of the traumatic breakdown of meaning, of the shattering of the fondest utopian hopes and unrealized dreams of Chinese history, no scars, no wounds. They fly in the face of the audience as spectacles, a perpetual present without depth.

*The Gate of Heavenly Peace* has the potential to shock precisely because it incorporates historical storytelling and the “forgotten” data of Chinese history into its narration. The film weaves images from the past and the present in a narrative continuity, however scarred or broken the continuum may appear to be. It overlaps the images of the ongoing student protest with footage taken from the image bank of modern Chinese history spanning an entire period from 1919 to the spring of 1989. Most uncannily striking are the photos of the student demonstration on Tiananmen Square during the May Fourth movement, the clips from the progressive films of the left-wing filmmakers in the urban centers in the thirties and forties, the scenes from documentaries made in the era of Mao, episodes from the films glorifying the Chinese revolution, and the melodies deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. These are not just for the sheer pleasure of viewing but they also bring modern Chinese history alive in all its pathos, hopes, setbacks, and traumas; in all its living intensity and complexity. Only by being inserted into this chain, a broken chain of narrative and trauma, is *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* able to project compelling tragic, epic, comic, and farcical dimensions unheard of in the numerous documentaries and books addressing June Fourth, let alone all the media coverage of the incident. If the real event of June Fourth is not traumatic to everybody concerned, the film seems to re-enact its trauma. It brings out the trau-

matic implications of the student demonstration precisely because it gives historical depth and a narrative framework, however broken, to a two-month event presented largely as another thrill-packed media event to audiences around the world; precisely because it employs narrative to hark back to the fondest dreams and aspirations of collective memory, links up May Fourth with June Fourth, underlines the continuity and frequent shattering of those deep dreams and aspirations of the students in the Tiananmen incident.

### **History under Analysis: *Hiroshima, mon amour***

*The Gate of Heavenly Peace* compels us to rethink the question whether trauma can or cannot be represented. Perhaps it is ill-advised to ask whether it is impossible or possible to represent the reality of trauma. The question is rather, how are we to have access to trauma and by what means? What is the range of possible options available for representing trauma and how do they compare with one another in serving aesthetic, ethical and political purposes? Like it or not, representation keeps spawning whenever and wherever there is trauma. Trauma disables the means of representation but also aggravates the need for representation. Since the trauma disfigures the existing repertoire of symbolic forms, representing it in the very ruins of meaning-structures becomes a process of restoring the repertoire or imagining new forms of representation and new categories of experience. The more modest goal, in this time of skepticism about representational capacity, seems to be making do with the broken pieces of prior representation. And making do with broken fragments of meaning radically transforms the project of representation into one of interpretation.

To interpret trauma is to have access to it through speech and image, an activity that is nevertheless *ad hoc* and contingent. Interpretation does not seek an original, pre-established meaning, but makes a meaning happen. The interpreter is fully aware that he is simply making do with verbal or visual means for making sense of a past event. This is also an act of listening through and beyond words—a psycho-analytical proceeding that thrives on the haphazard, chancy event of



speech, dialogue, and exchange. Allain Resnais and Marguerite Duras's film *Hiroshima, mon amour* explores this interpretative eventfulness of speech through dialogue. The film proves that it is precisely in an alternative form of talk, in the urgent attempt to recount and discuss the trauma that one can have access to its painful reality. The film suggests how history, like a traumatic "patient," can be placed under analysis. Through verbal articulation, something in the way of "talking revelation" if not "talking cure," what is buried in the unconscious can be made conscious, what was not registered as experience can be re-experienced belatedly, yielding the full benefits of affect and anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of *Hiroshima, mon amour* have pointed out how the film addresses the danger of assimilating trauma into a generalized narrative—that of World Peace, of the end of the War, the Liberation, or in the French woman's case, into a "three penny" romantic story tellable to the third party and so on. These narratives dissolve traumatic memory into some "grand history" or romantic tale, and consequently violate the singularity of the bodily experience of the victim. Michael Roth emphasizes the film's meditation on inevitable forgetting through narrative (201-13). Cathy Caruth demonstrates the impossibility of seeing and hence understanding the trauma (*Unclaimed Experience* 25-56). These views draw attention to the difficulty of representing trauma, but should not blind us to a simple yet striking fact in the film: the encounter between a man and woman and their serious attempts to understand each other through evoking and giving voice to the past.

The banal sexual encounter in *Hiroshima* against a backdrop of personal and collective trauma may trivialize the horrendous traumatic experience. Yet the film is a far cry from the usual romantic banality precisely because of the site and the traumatic life-history shared by the Japanese man and French woman. The film incorporates radical psychoanalytical insights, and in unearthing the woman's past the Japanese man (as well as the filmmakers) seem(s) to be conversant with an interpretive method premised on psychoanalysis. The film resembles an analysis because it works as a search for a hidden past shrouded in denial. It shows that the traumatic memory is accessible, gets re-enacted, or takes place only through articulated images and recounted

events in the present, through twists and turns of dialogue. The film depicts not just sexual intercourse but, more importantly, a verbal intercourse involving a pair of traumatized interlocutors, an intercourse of questions, innuendoes, testimony, replies, recalls, asides, monologues, voiced re-enactment, exchange—a whole gamut of speech events.

The thrust of the verbal intercourse is a quest for memory, for the truth of traumatic experience. The search begins with a brief flashback which the French woman undergoes upon seeing the hand of her Japanese lover. A classical instance of a traumatic symptom, this flash of the past is triggered by an element bearing a close resemblance to a certain aspect of the original traumatic situation, in this case the hand of the dead German soldier. Another opening comes around as soon as the man continues to pursue the topic of Nevers, the woman's hometown and the site of trauma. Their conversation moves in a twilight zone of half truth and evasion. The man wonders about the truthfulness of the woman's words:

Lui: Quand tu parles, je me demande si tu mens ou si tu dis la vérité.

Elle: Je mens. Et je dis la vérité. Mais à toi je n'ai pas de raisons de mentir. Pourquoi?

He: When you talk, I wonder whether you lie or tell the truth.

She: I lie. And I tell the truth. But I don't have any reason to lie to you. Why? <sup>4</sup>

It is apparent that this talk of half-truth and half-lie corresponds to an interest in double mental activity on the part of the Japanese. The sleeping Japanese man's trembling hand not only resembles that of the woman's German lover, but also suggests an unconscious, nocturnal mental activity. The man's reply to the woman's question as to what he dreams when his hand moves in sleep marks his understanding of the difference between conscious mind and unconscious dream: "C'est quand on rêve, peut-être, sans le savoir" ("Maybe it's when you dream

without knowing it" (45; 29). Similarly, Nevers marks the woman's split mental activity, divided between daylight consciousness and traumatic memory submerged in her dream:

Elle: Nevers, tu vois, c'est la ville du monde, et même c'est la chose du monde à laquelle, la nuit, je rêve le plus. En même temps que c'est la chose du monde à laquelle je pense le moins. (58)

She: You see, Nevers is the city of the world, and even the thing in the world, I dream about most often at night. And at the same time it's the thing I think about the least. (37)

Nevers, the nocturnal site which the woman revisits in dream, against her own will, is the critical point of departure for this verbal, analytical discourse in its quest for the past. It is again right after the sexual episode in the man's house that the conversation about Nevers resumes. The man chooses Nevers and knows that the place is the enigmatic core of and key to the woman's trauma: "A cause de Nevers, je peux seulement commencer à te connaître. Et, entre les milliers et les milliers de choses de ta vie, je choisis Nevers" ("Because of Nevers, I can only begin to know you, and among the many thousands of things in your life, I am choosing Nevers" (80; 51).

Indeed, during their conversations, especially in the cafe, the Japanese man assumes a compelling psychoanalytical presence; he exerts the pressure of an analyst on the woman. The woman, victim of a hidden traumatic life-event and the film's allegorical allusion to the representation of the trauma of Hiroshima, is placed under analysis.

The man proves quite skillful in listening to the story of the trauma and in keeping the conversation alive. Whenever the conversation fades off he will come up with a new thread, a new sounding, a fresh probe, insistently fishing for minute details and experiential immediacy in the woman's traumatic memory, not yet defined and available for conscious recounting. At one point in the cafe the woman seems exhausted from trying to remember; the man promptly holds the glass for

her to drink from and tries not to let the conjured atmosphere fade:

Elle: Après, je ne sais plus rien. Je ne sais plus rien . . . *Lui, pour l'encourager, l'inspirer.*

Lui: Ce sont des caves très anciennes, très humides, les caves de Nevers . . . tu disais . . . (93)

She: Afterward, I don't remember any more. I don't know any more . . . .

He [trying to encourage her]: These cellars are very old, and very damp, these Nevers cellars . . . you were saying . . . (59)

The man repeats the details the woman has been talking about and persistently pursues these and other circumstances in the woman's memory. In his observation of the traumatic patient Irène, Pierre Janet noted that "when one element of traumatic experience is evoked, all other elements follow automatically" (der Kolk and der Hart 163). When Irène, the crucial patient for Janet, is near a bed that throws her back to the situation of her mother's death, it triggers an exact enactment of the death scene. The Japanese man's promptings seem to follow a similar triggering cue. He tries to check out and reconfirm every minute detail of the woman's experience in the cellar: do you scream? what do you scream? are you afraid? afraid of what? you spit in your mother's face? for how long? etc. This mode of questioning recalls Claude Lanzmann's interviews with Holocaust survivors in *Shoah*. The questions teem with numerous details that are apparently irrelevant and insignificant for understanding a past incident. But it is precisely the automatic triggering within the victim and the conjuring up of the actual experience that come close to fleshing out the horrifying immediacy of the trauma. These details create an aura in which an initially unregistered trauma can be "repeated" and re-experienced to some extent.

The Japanese man also asks broad questions regarding the significance of Hiroshima, of Peace, of the Liberation, to the French, how the French reacted in Paris to the bombing and so on. These general

questions contrast sharply with minutely detailed ones. His probing switches back and forth between these two poles and maintains an unresolved tension between two ways of approaching the past. By evoking the unspeakable, intimate experience of the cellar or death scene within a generalized conceptual framework, the film demonstrates how the stark literality of the woman's trauma is conceptually unthinkable and ethically unredeemable. It eludes the grasp of conscious memory. The film works through gaps between a generalized, established framework and the ungraspable particulars.

The Japanese man also uses transference to provoke the woman into remembering and hence telling her traumatic experience. He assumes the position of the dead German soldier and does it so well that the woman hardly distinguishes between the present man and her dead lover. The reverse is also true. The man seems able to feel and think together with the woman. When the woman says that on her birthday her mother comes to the cellar and is crying, he magically knows what ensues by asking "Tu craches au visage de ta mère?" (92) ("You spit in your mother's face?") (58). The script indicates, "Comme s'ils savaient ensemble ces choses" (92). ("As if they were aware of these things together") (59). The script says at another point: "Ils se regardent à peine quand elle parle. Ils regardent Nevers. Ils sont, tout deux, un peu comme des possédés de Nevers" (89). ("They scarcely look at each other as she talks. They look at Nevers. Both of them seem as if possessed by Nevers") (55). She uses "nous" and "tu" in her recounting of her involvement with the German soldier, thus completely substituting the Japanese for the German. Yet when she "comes to herself" and has to summarize the incident in a generalized narrative, she is able to assume some distance and uses the normal "il" and "lui" to refer to the soldier in her address to the Japanese.

Although some portions of her account obviously suggest a lineal and causal pattern, most of the French woman's narration does not shape up to a narrative line. This underscores the interpretive, tentative nature of this quest for the past, as in a psychoanalytical search. This atemporal, non-causal movement simultaneously informs and disrupts the conversation. As an analytical probing, the conversation is repeti-

tive and circular in its temporal structure. Through the man's insistent questioning the conversation moves around Nevers and all the related, adjacent details in a deepening circle. The woman's tragic love story, from the first rendezvous with the German soldier to the night she leaves for Paris, can easily be pieced together after viewing the film or by reading the synopsis of the script. But a synoptic overview is precisely what falls short of the trauma itself. The unveiling of the trauma is contingent on the unpredictable eventfulness of speech in the very process of telling. The conversation addresses or attempts to address the traumatic incident of Nevers at least 4 times, each from a different angle and with emphasis on a different aspect. This confirms Lacan's observation about the traumatic real: "The real is that which always comes back to the same place" (42). Roughly the first part of this circular movement attempts to check out every conceivable detail about the town, its river, the cellar, the bodily pain, a disjointed jumble of fragments. The second part repeats what happened to the woman and her family and what she experienced and how she felt after the incident. The third part delves more intensely into the aftermath of the incident and the woman's ordeal; the final part is a general overview, a narrative summary. The circling conversation is accompanied by the quick and frequent intercutting between the present conversation in the cafe and the flashes of remembered scenes in Nevers. These intercuts are often epliptic, creating a sense of disjointedness and fragmentation. Yet it is in this disjointed attempt to tell that the woman reveals at once the trauma's incomprehensibility and its tellable, though hidden, outline. Through the fragments or cracks in the telling, the audience can also sense the truth of the trauma, half revealed, half concealed, the partial unveiling of its enigma.

After the conversation the woman blames herself and feels guilty about telling the "sacred" story to a "stranger," thus trivializing it to a "histoire de quatre sous" ("three-penny romance") (118). She is surprised to find that her impossible love is after all tellable and this signals our inevitable forgetting. She is right: telling stories and writing history too often are not ways of remembering trauma, but forms of

forgetting it. But the ambiguous ending of the film suggests the one-sidedness of her point. If telling forgetting, she would leave behind the now openly-expressed trauma and get on with her normal life, free of the burden of the past. Yet she is undecided as to whether to go back to Paris or stay with the Japanese. Now the Japanese man has become the sole and most intimate witness to and sharer of her traumatic secret. He is now the crucial link to her past, for his name is "Hiroshima" and hers "Nevers." Whatever the discrepancy between the two traumatic experiences under the two place names, the man and woman share a profound spiritual and emotional kinship on the basis of trauma.

This kinship hinges on communication, on an alternative form of telling. This is a telling that borders on re-enactment, a psychoanalytical practice that searches for the past. Shoshana Felman notes that in his experience that corresponded to that of his patient Irma, Freud discovered the revolutionary method of the psychoanalytical dialogue. This dialogue recognizes "an interchangeability between doctor and patient" (here Freud's own arthritic shoulder pain echoes that of Irma). In this form of talk the doctor acts as a careful listener, bears witness to a testimony and then generates his own testimony. Yet "the doctor's testimony does not substitute itself for the patient's testimony, but resonates with it, because, as Freud discovers, it takes two to witness the unconscious" (*Education and Crisis* 23-4). Dori Laub's studies on the testimony by Holocaust survivors also show the effectiveness of certain kinds of speech in bringing forth the trauma (Felman and Lau 62). For her the knowledge and transmission of the trauma do not exist prior to speech and language, but take place within or through them. This situation is dramatized in the film by the conversations between the two characters. In her retelling prompted by the Japanese, which is in many ways a moment-by-moment re-living of the trauma, a lived re-enactment of her madness and suffering, the French woman is able to make her past transmissible, to an audience and even to herself.

*Hiroshima, mon amour* reflects on the questions of forgetting and remembering, of trauma and its interpretation. It not only shows how telling covers up and forgets, but more importantly how a different kind of telling brings the forgotten to light, makes the trauma happen

once again at a cognitive level. This form of telling bears some resemblance to the psychoanalytical dialogue I have been describing. Telling is also a remembering, and it remembers by reliving and re-enacting, a mixture of bodily movement and a re-tooling of language that is unconsciously testimonial. This vision is embodied in Marguerite Duras's directions remarks, which may serve as a guide to read the film's peculiar flow of images and language:

Apprendre la durée exacte du temps. Savoir comment le temps, parfois, se précipite puis se lente retombée inutile et qu'il faut néanmoins endurer, c'est aussi ça, sans doute, apprendre l'intelligence [*haché, répétitions, bafouillage*].  
(110)

Learn about the exact duration of time. Note how time sometimes speeds up then falls into a dragging pace, useless, yet it is necessary to endure it. No doubt it is here that one learns about intelligence [chopped, repetitions, mumbling].  
(my translation)

The italicized words are in the original text. They denote a possible form of representation struggling to find its own intelligence, and a possible way of listening. Rather than remaining stuck in the impossibility of telling or worse, trapped in the unbearable burden of the past, maybe it is time to envision the possibility of a new language, a new representation, however chopped and mumbling that may be.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A small portion of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the MLA in San Francisco, December 30, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this question see Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 3-12.

<sup>3</sup> Dominick LaCapra notes, drawing on Eric Santner's comments on the child's *fort/da* game in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that the child's ritualistic and symbolic effort at mastering his distress



from his mother's absence involves recuperating "the *Angstbereitschaft* or readiness to feel anxiety absent during the initial shock or loss." See LaCapra 214.

<sup>4</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* 54. For the English translation see *Hiroshima mon amour*, tr. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove, 1961) 35. References to both editions will be given with page numbers in the text.

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