

Hiroshima Mon Amour, directed by Alain Resnais, 1959, black/white, French w/English subtitles, 90 minutes. Film critics credit this film both as a pioneer in the use of a nonlinear time construction and as an important predecessor of the French “New Wave” film movement of the 1960’s. The setting is in Hiroshima where a French company is filming a documentary. The plot involves a love story between a French actress (Emmanuella Riva) and a Hiroshima native (Eiji Okada). Significantly, no names are used for these two characters in the film, until the final scene. Our interest in this film is the portrayal of these characters as examples of Kierkegaardian knights of infinite resignation and faith.

1. **His story.** After a close up of the lovers’ embrace (first fictionalized under a kind of ashen fall out, then realistically portrayed), there is a 15 minute long documentary montage of 1959 Hiroshima with scenes of the town and museum with photos of the suffering. There is actual film footage of the aftermath (from 1945), as well as scenes from a later dramatization. During this documentary, a dialogue begins between the two main characters. He constantly denies that she saw anything in Hiroshima, while she recounts what she saw. She claims that she knows Hiroshima and weeps over it; he denies that she knows Hiroshima or has any reason to cry over it. Up to this point, their difference can be understood as the simple difference between how a foreign tourist knows a city versus how a native knows his/her own city. A bit later, she claims that she tried not to forget, but she did forget; so, she longs for a memory beyond consolation, a memory of shadow and stones. She asks rhetorically, “Why deny the necessity of remembering?” She replies because it will begin again, and she recounts the casualty figures from Hiroshima. The conventional way of understanding this is that the use of an atomic bomb at Hiroshima is a lesson not to be forgotten, so that we can work to prevent this kind of tragedy from ever happening again, but sadly the world does seem to have forgotten – as nuclear arms and actual testing have proliferated.

So far, nothing seems challenging in a Kierkegaardian kind of way, and everything can be conventionally understood. But then, rather oddly, she claims to be endowed with a memory and to know what it is to forget, and then even more strikingly, he denies that she has a **memory** and also that she knows **what it is to forget**. This is a sign that something else is going on in this dialogue! Recall that memory and forgetting are keys to understanding Kierkegaard’s knight of infinite resignation and faith.

One other striking contrast in this dialogue is that amidst recounting the horrors of the bomb aftermath, it is noted that many insects and flowers returned to live and bloom beautifully, as if nothing had happened. Try to relate this contrast to the Kierkegaardian difference between the fullness of being of animals or beings with only first order mental states and the “unfulfilled” nature of beings with second order mental states (this is the level where memory occurs). The purpose of this contrast could be stated as a “lesson” of how to survive a Kierkegaardian disaster of the loss of meaning in one’s life. Insects and flowers survive it in one sense by going on as before and maybe even better afterwards. But obviously, there is no lesson here for us. This film interestingly portrays two people who have undergone life transforming experiences which have shaped their identities and have formed the meanings of their lives. The question for us is how these two characters match Kierkegaard’s descriptions of the knight of faith and the knight of infinite resignation.

2. **Her story.** In the hotel, we get to know both characters. We learn that he lost his family in Hiroshima, while he was in the war (we can now see that the documentary scenes that began the film could well have been the story of his lost family). At a certain point, the pleasant mood of the hotel room is

interrupted by a *jarring flashback*: his hand reminds her of another (we later find out that it is her German soldier lover who was murdered in Nevers) and she seems badly shaken by this. Even more amazingly, after he awakens, she talks pleasantly about his hand and how it moves when he sleeps – as if the flashback and her being shaken never happened. Her story continues to come out as the couple meets at her movie set, his home, and the Tea Room. This last scene contains the dramatic centerpiece of the film. She recounts the murder of her German lover in the middle of town just hours before they were to leave to go to Bavaria, the public revelation of her love story which results in the townspeople cutting off of her hair as punishment, her subsequent “madness” and being put in her family’s cellar, and her “recovery” and how her family secretly sends her off to Paris

3. **The Next Step.** He wishes to continue their love affair, but she does not. In several scenes, he asks here to see him again, and she refuses (mostly). This back and forth continues through the mildly comical train depot scene and the inane Casablanca Bar scene. In the final scene, back in the hotel, they part. She cries that she is beginning to forget him already and they tenderly call each other by the names “Hiroshima” and “Nevers.”

Questions:

1. In the early hotel scene, she is very honest about their relationship and her immediate past, but he wonders if she is lying or telling the truth. She says both and she is right! But it is not until later that we appreciate how this is so. Please explain.
2. Do their different occupations reflect their different attitudes to the past? Is it fair to say that as an actress, she reenacts the past in the present; as an architect and politician, he tries to create a new present in light of the past. Does the fact that he continues to live happily in Hiroshima and she wishes to never return to Nevers tell us about how they have differently remembered or forgotten their respective life transforming experiences? Do you think this is related to another difference between them: although both are happily married and also are presently participating in their brief romance without guilt, only he wishes to continue their love story?
3. At one point, she returns to the hotel and she tells herself that she once again is faced with an impossible love again 14 years after the German and she feels that she has now cheated on the German with the Japanese. Why doesn’t she feel that she has cheated on her present husband with the Japanese? Why doesn’t he feel similarly?
4. How do these characters fit the following descriptions: (a) “she preserves her love just as young as it was in its first moment, never lets it go from her, precisely because she makes the movements infinitely ... this movement which in its pain reconciles one with existence ... there is peace and rest and comfort in sorrow” (pp. 48-49), and (b) “he is the only happy one, the heir apparent to the finite ... to get the princess, to live with her joyfully and happily day in and out ... thus to live joyfully and happily in every instant by virtue of the absurd ... this is marvelous. He who does it is great, the only great man.” (53)

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The Art Discipline requests that no food or beverage be brought into HFA 6, only bottled water.

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