

The Materiality of History and the Shifting Shapes of Memory in John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*

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Abstract:

The essay argues that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima cannot be told without taking into account and recognising the diverse entanglements of matter that were (and still are) involved in this historic event. In order to analyse the multiple meanings connected to the bombing, the essay draws on Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman's theory of "material ecocriticism", which deals with the way in which various material forms interact with the human or social dimension, constantly producing configurations of meanings and discourses. Consequently, the essay points out that memory of Hiroshima is a prime example for the interplay of material-discursive relations, which do not allow for the coherent storytelling of this past event, but for an ever-changing fragmentation and (re)negotiation of meaning. This latter aspect is extensively dealt with in the analysis of John Hersey's 1946 newspaper article "Hiroshima" and Alain Resnais's 1959 film "Hiroshima Mon Amour", based on a screenplay by Marguerite Duras. The analysis examines to what extent these diverse medial representations constitute "historical matter" themselves, which help(ed) to shape the cultural memory of the nuclear attack, and how they manage, through documentary/narrative/filmic measures, to reflect on the material entanglements of the bombing of Hiroshima. History and memory are thereby not only seen as merely cognitive undertakings, but as dynamic material processes that entail various ethical implications.

Keywords: Material ecocriticism, memory, trauma, Hiroshima

Resumen

Este texto argumenta que el bombardeo atómico de Hiroshima no se puede contar sin antes haber reconocido los diversos enredos materiales que estuvieron (y aún están) involucrados en este acontecimiento histórico. El texto se basa en la teoría de la "ecocrítica material" de Serenella Iovino y Serpil Opperman con el fin de analizar los múltiples significados vinculados al bombardeo. Esta teoría trata la manera en que diversas formas de lo material interactúan con la dimensión social y humana, las cuales producen constantemente configuraciones de significados y discursos. En consecuencia, el texto indica que la memoria de Hiroshima es un ejemplo importante en cuanto a la interacción entre lo material y discurso. Esto conlleva que la narración de este acontecimiento pasado no sea coherente. Sin embargo, este significado siempre se podrá fragmentar y negociar nuevamente. Este último aspecto se argumenta profundamente en el análisis de John Hersey en su artículo periodístico de 1946 "Hiroshima" y en una película de Alain Resnais de 1959 "Hiroshima Mon Amour", basada en un guión de Marguerite Duras. El análisis examina hasta qué punto estas diversas representaciones del medio constituyen por sí mismas un "material histórico", el cual ayudó a crear la memoria cultural del ataque nuclear, y, cómo a través de documentales/narración/medidas fílmicas se han podido reflejar los enredos materiales del bombardeo de Hiroshima. Por lo tanto, la historia y la memoria no son solamente vistas como un mero ejercicio cognitivo, sino como un proceso material dinámico lo cual conlleva varias implicaciones éticas.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica material, memoria, trauma, Hiroshima

Introduction – Thinking and writing about Hiroshima¹

Thinking and writing about Hiroshima (and Nagasaki), where atomic bombs were dropped on August 6 (and 9), 1945, means thinking and writing about materiality.² The history of the atomic bomb, of how it was constructed, of the political strategies that led to its dropping, of its horrendous effects and the on-going debates about whether it was a just cause or a crime against humanity, cannot be told without taking into account and recognising the diverse entanglements of matter that were (and still are) involved in this historic event. In this context, the term “matter” is not only used to convey the fact that the atomic bomb is a weapon made out of small units of matter,³ but that the various discourses which it has incited, are a matter in their own right, constantly interacting in a play of signifiers and signs which make up the various connotations of what Hiroshima means. Consequently, one of the main arguments of this essay is that the memory of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima is not solely a symbolic, cultural construct determined by political interests or propaganda, but a “living process” (Mortimer-Sandilands 273), in which multiple aspects or agents—natural forces, scientific knowledge, (toxic) bodies, memorials, media—play a vital role. In this sense, this essay follows an interdisciplinary agenda in that it fuses (material) ecocritical theory with memory studies. Accordingly, “memory” is not conceptualized as a fleeting mental process, but as a complex material practice itself.

In order to analyse and uncover these various entanglements of matter, this essay will focus on a perspective that Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann have termed “material ecocriticism,” which “takes material realities, entities and practices and interprets them in their intrinsically and socially evolving discursivity” (Iovino). From this perspective, “matter is theorized as an actively formative and productive agent that shapes discursive practices” (Iovino/Oppermann 467). It refers to both its material forms—the (human) bodies, landscapes, (organic and inorganic) substances and their (more-than-human) agencies—on the one hand to the way they “intra-act” (Barad 33) in complex (sign) relations on the other.⁴ Thereby material ecocriticism is concerned with

¹ The writing of this essay would have been unthinkable without the encouragement and support by Serenella Iovino, who shared her theoretical explorations in conversations and in classes during her stay at the University of Augsburg (Fall 2010-Summer 2012). I am also grateful to the editors and reviewers.

² This paper will only deal with the bombing of Hiroshima, which has provoked far more scientific and aesthetic reactions, since it was the first nuclear attack in human history; a fact that should not, however, be used to reduce the importance of the bombing of Nagasaki. In their historical meanings and material entanglements both Hiroshima and Nagasaki have to be seen together.

³ Nuclear weapons are made up of units of matter – fissile materials like enriched uranium or plutonium – which release, in a nuclear reaction, vast quantities of energy. For more information on the construction and the effects of nuclear weapons, see, for instance, the website of the Federation of American Scientists: <http://www.fas.org/nuke/intro/nuke/index.html> (04.03.2012).

⁴ In Karen Barad’s complex theory of “agential realism” the term “intra-action” is used to render “matter” not just as a product of discursive or cultural practices, but as a dynamic agent which extends across space and time, constituting not one separate entity, but rather producing “entangled agencies” that “emerge through “intra-action” (Barad 33). Drawing on this idea, “material ecocriticism” posits that “discursive

the question of how material forms are incorporated into the human and social dimension, how they are given meaning and how they can be said to possess an agency of their own which can either escape (human) sense-making or which can become integral to the production of discursive configurations.⁵ This essay argues that the memory of Hiroshima is part of this “dense network’ of material-discursive relations in which our lives and the life of the environment” (Iovino) are connected and that its multiple meanings are a prime example for the (material and discursive) agency of matter which does not allow for the coherent storytelling of a past event, but for an ever-changing fragmentation and (re)negotiation of meaning.

Therefore, thinking and writing about Hiroshima is in itself an act enmeshed in materiality. Historians tackling the issue today, more than sixty years after it took place, necessarily have to take into account the many scientific papers written about the event, alongside the even more numerous newspaper articles, if they want to get an impression, maybe even to understand what happened there. They will also watch the documentaries made about it and look at the pictures taken in the aftermath of the nuclear blast—pictures of collapsed buildings, of endless fields of debris, of a “human shadow burned into stone” that can still be seen on “the surface of stone steps” that “turned white after being exposed to the intense heat, leaving a black mark of a person who was sitting there”⁶ —a material relic of the power of the explosion which is now preserved at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. It is through these media as well as material traces of the bombing that the material side of history (and memory), its “warehouse” (Mortimer-Sandilands 274), is made up. And it is in this interplay of (collective/cultural) “symbolic reflection” and (individual) “sensual perception” that history and memory become “embodied practices” in an “inextricable connection between physicality and reflection” (270-271).⁷

In the following, two of the main “warehouses of memory” of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima will be dealt with: John Hersey’s newspaper article “Hiroshima” (1946) and Alain Resnais’s film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), based on a screenplay by Marguerite Duras. I will examine how far these diverse medial representations constitute “historical matter” themselves which help(ed) to shape the cultural memory of the nuclear attack. Moreover, I will analyse in which ways they manage, through documentary/narrative/filmic measures, to reflect on the material entanglements of the bombing of Hiroshima. A reflection that, as will be shown, uncovers the many (human

practices” are “co-extensive with material processes in the many ways the world ‘articulates’ itself” (Iovino/Oppermann 454). On Barad see also Iovino/Oppermann 466-467.

⁵ As Iovino sums up the aim of the “new materialisms” in the course of “the material turn”: It “is the search for new conceptual models apt to theorize the connections between matter and agency on the one side, and the intertwining of bodies, natures, and meanings on the other side” (Iovino/Oppermann 450). Consequently, “matter” is itself perceived as a “text” to be read and interpreted, “as a site of narrativity, a storied matter” (451).

⁶ Those are the subtitles of photos taken in the aftermath of the bombing by a local inhabitant, Yuichiro Sasaki, which can be seen online on the Hiroshima Peace Site: http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/virtual/VirtualMuseum_e/exhibit_e/exh1002_e/exh100202_e.html (04.03.2012).

⁷ As Mortimer-Sandilands further explains, the “act of remembering” therefore “involves a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces”, but which is “always already social, technological and physical in that the conditions of the relationship between brain and object cannot help but be located in a complex range of conditions” (274).

and non-human) agencies of that historical catastrophe—how they affected “bodily natures” (Alaimo) and discourses alike, turning history and memory into “vibrant matters” (Bennett) with numerous ethical implications.

The discursive threads and the materiality of history in John Hersey's *Hiroshima*

“There, in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books” (Hersey 31). Thus ends the first chapter of John Hersey's article “Hiroshima,” published in *The New Yorker* on August 31, 1946, twelve months after an atomic bomb had been dropped on the Japanese city, killing over 60000 people, severely injuring hundreds of thousands⁸ and wiping out an entire urban site, leaving debris, dust, and death behind. It was the first comprehensive reportage written about what had happened on that fateful day, describing the impact of the bomb, its immediate effects on the city and its people, and its aftermath, how the affected and injured tried to rebuild their lives (or what was left of). Although Hersey faced resolute opposition by the American military government stationed in Japan, which had reduced the amount of news issued about the effects of the atomic attacks to a bare minimum, he nevertheless managed to interview six survivors of the bombing, drafting what now stands as one of the most important accounts of post-war journalism and what has come to be an historical source of great value.

It is valuable, since, considering the importance of the event, which was soon viewed as a decisive moment of the Second World War, even as a “turning point” of world history, we (still) know relatively little about it. Of course, there are countless documentaries portraying how the Manhattan project, which led to the construction of the bomb, was implemented, how Robert Oppenheimer, its mastermind, commented on the first nuclear explosion—with empty eyes and choking voice—⁹ how “Enola Gay”, the aircraft that was to drop the bomb (“Little Boy”), was loaded with its deadly freight. We can witness the impact of the blast, a bright, flash of light, then smoke and a mushroom cloud—the images that were filmed or taken from American aircraft, documenting the bombing are not only historical document themselves, but almost aesthetic portrayals of the power of human science, of what happens when the elements of the Earth are turned into a weapon, sublime visions of death. Yet, we do not know, maybe can or will never know, what happened on the ground, when the bomb hit and an entire settlement was wiped off the Earth. How it was that the faces of buildings were blown off steel frames that melted within the blink of an eye, how it was that human beings dissolved into thin air, their frames being projected—as if from a giant photographic flash—onto stones. It is this “material” side of the Hiroshima bombing that has rarely been tackled in public

⁸ The number of the victims (surviving victims are referred to as *hibakusha*) is, until this day, disputed, since many people died from long-term effects. The city of Hiroshima names 140000 victims that died up to December 1945 (Coulmas 18).

⁹ Oppenheimer famously quoted a line from the ancient Hindu scripture Bhagavad Gita: “Now I have become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

and scientific discourses; only its traces, debris, and ruins have been present in films and photographs taken by American military personnel during the occupation of Japan.

Yet, these images were soon used as propaganda, proving that a nation had acquired a master weapon—and was willing to use it—turning the USA into the superpower of the twentieth century. In the peace conferences that followed, the bomb was an argument to bargain with and became a decisive agent during the Cold War, constituting an integral part of political and historical discourse. As Florian Coulmas has shown, the decision to drop the bomb was not a military one—Japan had already lost the war, but was undecided and unwilling to commit to peace—,but a political one, taken in the face of an already conflict-ridden relationship with Russia (cf. Coulmas 13-19). It was the strongest possible statement that could be made, an overwhelming display of power, which boosted the American negotiating position when it came to question of how the world should be ordered after the war had ended victoriously. Coulmas has further analyzed how, after the bombing, Western or, more precisely, US media coverage and historiography had legitimized the use of these forceful measures as a way of ending the war quickly, without further bloodshed. In the discursive threads knitted by government officials and historians a weapon of mass destruction was thus turned into a device for saving lives—a view that, although it has been challenged from various sides, still persists in the collective memory of the USA even today (cf. Bernstein 38-40; Coulmas 37-53 and 101-110). And a view that is, maybe surprisingly, not challenged by Japan, where Hiroshima still plays a somewhat ambiguous role in the cultural memory (cf. Coulmas 110-117). Although it is the central ingredient within pacifist discourse and is recognized as a place of collective trauma, it has not prevented Japan from embracing atomic energy—an aspect which may have to do with the fact that the news about the effects of the bombing had been censored by the US military government in the aftermath of the war and that the suffering of the survivors of Hiroshima (and of Nagasaki) had not been recognized in their multiple and complex facets for a long time (cf. Braw).

It was in these discursive threads that the “human being” Hersey talks about in his article “was crushed” for a second time—by history books, magazine articles, government statements—for, although the history of the atomic bomb and its (political) impact has been written numerous times, accounts telling of the human tragedies involved, the loss of life, the horrible injuries and traumatization, have often been underrepresented and have either been treated as collateral damage or as a way of illustrating the (horrible) effects of the atomic bomb. It is in this context that John Hersey’s text gains its historical importance, since it was the first text that really bore witness to what had actually happened in Hiroshima, in “the thick of things” (Pickering 8), by interviewing eye witnesses and by telling how they had survived, how they had to live with being survivors. It was only by integrating their stories of the narrative of the bomb into the public discourse that the political one, which legitimized its use as a just cause and celebrated it as a triumph of natural science, was counterbalanced and the human (and material) aspect of the Hiroshima bombing was put into focus. What it did then, was to reset the perspective of how the bombing was viewed—the recipient of his

text does not watch from a distance or from above, godlike,— but gets involved in the stories of people who were part of the horrendous spectacle that unfolded around them. His account detaches the bombing from the political discourse and infuses it with a narrative that shows what effects it had on the biosphere—on humans and nonhuman natures alike—uncovering a materiality that had been absent from scientific and political debate.

The quotation from Hersey's *Hiroshima* above already shows the multiple entanglements of matter that become a main theme of his article. The “human being” in question is Toshiko Sasaki, one of the main eyewitnesses whose memories he records in his text. She worked in a tin factory, located only a mile from the epicentre of where the bomb exploded. When its blast wave hit the building, she was working in her bureau. It was then that the bookshelves collapsed and she got buried under a pile of books, where she was later found and treated medically. This scene does not only illustrate the power of the nuclear blast, but implicitly points to the agency of matter in that the books that “crush” on her cannot only be read as matter under which a “human being” gets trapped, but point to the knowledge and practices which have led to the construction of the bomb in the first place. The texts stored in books are in this sense a matter themselves,¹⁰ storage and production devices of the discursive threads mentioned above, related to various aspects of “discursive practices and the material parameters of the world through which meanings are enacted” (Iovino/Oppermann 469). This “first moment of the atomic age” is therefore a watershed: human technology has reached a new, albeit perverted, pinnacle, while the categories and barriers that have thus far ordered it have lost their previous footing, giving way to new arrangements, where human beings are in danger of being destroyed by their own creations.

In minute detail, Hersey goes on to describe the chaos and horror that set in after these initial moments of the nuclear blast. All of his eyewitnesses had been relatively close to the epicentre. In stark images and clear sentences and by drawing on their accounts, Hersey's report tells about how Hiroshima burned, how the heat of the blast of the bomb melted steel frames and the earthquake that followed its detonation made walls crumble and buildings collapse. It is as if he presented his recipients with a documentary account of the apocalypse—although the descriptions are graphic, they never exploit or sensationalize what they portray. To the contrary, it is as if his report were zooming in on the tragedy that unfolded in Hiroshima. Not only does it re-enact what happened through the voice of its survivors, but it gives them a shape, focusing on what the explosion did to humans and the environment alike. If the faces of buildings, if their frames and shapes, could be this badly deformed, so could the organisms living in them. Hiroshima becomes, in Hersey's account, one big, suffering body. In numerous scenes, Hersey's text presents its readers with badly injured humans whose frames, shapes and bodies, too, had been affected in the worst possible way by the blast of the bomb. In one scene, Mr. Tanimoto, a Methodist minister, who is searching for his wife and kid encounters a group of victims who flee from the fire:

¹⁰ As Serpil Oppermann puts it: “knowledge practices are material processes” (465).

He was the only person making his way into the city; he met hundreds and hundreds who were fleeing, and every one of them seemed to be hurt in some way. The eyebrows of some were burned off and skin hung from their faces and hands. Others, because of pain, held their arms up as if carrying something in both hands. Some were vomiting as they walked. Many were naked or in shreds of clothing. On some undressed bodies, the burns had made patterns—of undershirt straps and suspenders and, on the skin of some women (since white repelled the heat from the bomb and dark clothes absorbed it and conducted it to the skin), the shapes of flowers they had had on their kimonos. (Hersey 46)

The fact that the nuclear explosion had burnt the clothes off humans, that it even had scorched shapes into their skin, does not only lay bare the vulnerability of the human body, but also the all-consuming force of the weapon. The image of flowery shapes burnt into skin echoes the image of a human frame projected into stone and makes the material-altering power of the bomb all too clear. This was not a military device for damaging the industry of an opponent or for reducing its manpower, but for eradicating its existence—that of both man and environment alike.

Yet, Hersey's account of the events does not stop here—neither in a temporal nor bodily sense. The second part of his article reports in detail the weeks and months after the bombing which brought another material agency of the bomb to light, one that had thus far been invisible: radiation. Hersey writes:

The first stage had been all over before the doctors even knew they were dealing with a new sickness; it was the direct reaction to the bombardment of the body, at the moment when the bomb went off, by neutrons, beta particles, and gamma rays. (...) The doctors realized in retrospect that even though most of these dead had also suffered from burns and blast effects, they had absorbed enough radiation to kill them. The rays simply destroyed body cells—caused their nuclei to degenerate and broke their walls. The second stage set in ten or fifteen days after the bombing. Its first symptom was falling hair. Diarrhoea and fever, which in some cases went as high as 106 °F (=41,1°C), came next. (...) The third stage was the reaction that came when the body struggled to compensate for its ills—when, for instance, the white [blood cell] count not only returned to normal but increased to much higher than normal levels. (Hersey 102-103)

The thousands of injured that suffered from these symptoms made clear that the atomic bomb was characterized by an all too “vibrant materiality,” a “vitality” that acted “as quasi agent or force with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of its own” (Bennett viii). It is here that Hersey's account zooms in once again: from the debris of the city to the outside flesh of human beings to their inner workings, to their own molecules and cells that, too, had been affected by the blast of the bomb—a fact that had not been openly discussed, but rather kept secret until the publication of his article.

The “vibrant matter” of the bomb had thus not only been a force that showed itself in a few seconds of annihilation, but a long-term life-altering effect. Many injured died after weeks of suffering from their inner injuries, which were caused by their having been exposed to the radiation of the bomb, while “the reproductive processes were affected for a time; men became sterile, women had miscarriages, menstruation stopped.” “as if,” as Hersey comments, “nature were protecting man from his own ingenuity” (Hersey 104). The bomb had, therefore, not only brought about death, but had also had an effect on biological and bodily forms of reproduction, maiming life (-

giving) energies. Hersey confronts this effect of the bomb on the human organism with that which it had on flora and fauna. He writes:

Over everything—up through the wreckage of the city, in gutters, along the riverbanks, tangled among tiles and tin roofing, climbing on charred tree trunk—was a blanket of fresh, vivid, lush, optimistic green; the verdancy rose even from the foundations of ruined houses. Weeds already hid the ashes, and wild flowers were in bloom among the city's bones. The bomb had not only left the underground organs of the plants intact; it had stimulated them. (Hersey 93-94)

While the radiation had mutilated the organic matter of human beings, it had stimulated the inner workings of plants which grow out from under—again invoking the image of a body—the “city's bones”, its ruins and covering the ashes. As Miss Sasaki, who accompanied Hersey into the city months after the bombing, comments on this scene: “it actually seemed as if a load of sickle-senna seed had been dropped along with the bomb” (94). Although the radiation of the bomb thus had quite diverse effects on humans and plants, it nevertheless became obvious that it changed, corrupted and contaminated everything it had touched upon. Radioactive fallout is in this sense one of those “posthuman players” or substances that Lovino (“Toxic epiphanies”) talks about, an agency that is not only contained in the environment, but also in every substance or organism which is located or moving in it. It permeates outside layers, shapes, ceaselessly transferring in and between bodies.

It is in this context that John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, which is a historical document in the first place, can also be read as a narrative of material ecocriticism. It was the first written account that truly showed the world what gruesome effects an atomic attack could have on urban sites, humans and the Earth alike. It did so by focusing on the “material” results of the bombing, not only by describing the debris it had left, but also by showing the effects of radiation, thereby reflecting on the far-reaching consequences the “human action” of dropping the bomb “along with the intra-actions of manmade substances,” its radioactive contents, had on the “material world,” “intra-acting with natural creatures, forces and ecological systems as well as with the bodies of humans” (Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal” 259). On a meta-level, Hersey's report offers therefore a reflection on what Stacy Alaimo has termed “trans-corporeality,” which “explores the interconnections, interchanges and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures,” where “the human is always intermeshed with the more than human world” and where it is “ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2). In a time when the atomic bomb and the attack on Hiroshima were overlaid with political and military arguments and discourses, Hersey's report was one of the first voices which uncovered what was at stake, that human scientific knowledge had produced a weapon whose power, once it was set loose, could not be controlled. Hersey made clear that the bomb did not only bring about death and destruction, but had—in its radioactivity—an agency that could have unforeseeable effects on the environment. Moreover, his account showed that man was not the only active, dynamic force moving in and shaping this environment, but that it, too, was open and vulnerable—also with regard to its own cultural constructs and technologies.

Hersey's *Hiroshima* thereby reflected on the fact that "matter is endowed with agency" and became in its textual representation, at the same time, a testament to the fact that "between matter and discourse there is a substantial reciprocity, co-implication" (Iovino/Oppermann 453), constituting—both in what it talks about (its contents) and how it talks about them (its discursive force) – a prime example for Serpil Oppermann's claim "discourse is always co-extensive with the material world," that the cultural representations of human and non-human corporeal agencies are integral parts of the material world within which they "intra-act" (Iovino/Oppermann 467). This is a powerful insight with various ethical implications—especially with regard to the question what a historical document like Hersey's *Hiroshima* means to us in the present. For it is only when we recognize that it is not just another historical source, recording a past moment in time, but a "vibrant matter" itself, uncovering the materiality of the bombing of Hiroshima, that we can tackle the question it poses to us: "The crux of the matter is whether total war in its present form is justifiable, even when it serves a just purpose. Does it not have material and spiritual evil as its consequences which far exceed whatever good might result? When will our moralists give us an answer to this question?" (Hersey 118).

(Trans-)Corporeality and the shifting shapes of memory in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*

While the first part of this essay has dealt with a journalistic article documenting the terrible effects of the bomb on humans and the environment, the following part will be concerned with a fictional film, shot almost fifteen years after the nuclear attack: Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. What now stands as a milestone of modernist cinema and is regarded as an early masterpiece of the French Nouvelle Vague, had, upon its release, met with mixed reactions in Japan (Hayashi 205-206), where the US military government had prevented a meaningful coming to terms with the catastrophe and where artistic or aesthetic creations dealing with it had been relatively rare.¹¹ Initially, Alain Resnais had been invited to shoot a documentary about the bombing of Hiroshima (Roth 93), but he turned down the offer, embarking on a different project that included French writer Marguerite Duras, who had written a screenplay for what would, in the end, become *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

Resnais and Duras were both interested in how far obtaining a true knowledge of history was possible in the face of the unstable fabrics of collective and individual memory. Accordingly, they chose an approach that questioned, even negated the usefulness of the documentary and that focused on fictional (re-)creation (Kolesch 145-146; Noack 135-136; Willis 33-34). History is, in their film, not so much a closed-off static realm, made up of the facts and the traces of past events, but becomes an open-ended dynamic discourse, where past and present, bodies and places constantly interact. As will be argued, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* can be seen as a meditation on the representation of a historical catastrophe as well as its (own) materiality, whereby the

¹¹ It also provoked some controversy in France, since it also dealt with, as we are about to see, darker episodes of its own post-war history (Armstrong 276).

mental and physical aspects of memory are intertwined in a constant “dance of agency” (Pickering 3) in which (trans-)corporeality, the open-endedly becoming of and interacting between minds, bodies, environments and places plays a vital role.

This becomes apparent in the much celebrated first fifteen minutes of the film—a stream of consciousness-like sequence of images, partly made up of documentary footage that shows Hiroshima in the aftermath of the bombing, partly composed of scenes shot by Resnais in the late 1950s, whereby the voice-over narration is both an interior monologue of a woman and a dialogue with a man who reminds her that—although she says otherwise—“tu as rien vu a Hiroshima” (“You saw nothing in Hiroshima”). From the beginning, the film lays “emphasis on subjective states, narrative open-endedness, and self-conscious visuals” that render, as Armstrong puts it, “the play of public history and private memory in resonant and visionary ways during which the woman tries to come to terms with her past and the nature of memory herself” (Armstrong 271-272). The ability “to see” things, the “gaze” becomes a central theme of the film (Kolesch 148-153; Willis 35 and 39), while the “images” themselves are called into question with regard to whether they are capable of representing historical experience and knowledge. The documentary footage is thus interweaved with obscure, unclear images of shapes, things, movements which give ample scope for association and draw the recipient into the film, who has to constantly question the meaning of what he/she is seeing.

For instance, the opening credits of the film have, as a background image, “what appears to be the aerial shot of some ghastly scar, a traumatic rhizome” (Armstrong 277; Noack 136), which seems to be mineralized, while its true size and proportions can only be guessed at. The same shot reappears only a few minutes later, this time in the foreground, during the woman’s talk of Hiroshima, when she says that, after the bombing, plants started to grow out of the radioactive sand of the city. It is only through her narrativization and comment that the image is put into perspective and the disparate scenes of the film are related to one another. The motif of the “rhizome” has often been used to describe the structure of the film (Ammour-Mayeur 271-272), how it interconnects seemingly unrelated story lines, places, bodies, and how it transcends their respective meaning by their constant interchange and fusion. Therefore, the project is not so much to present the recipient with a certain image or impression of the historical catastrophe of Hiroshima, but to uncover its hidden fabrics and multiple connotations; *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is not so much a film which aspires *to be seen*, but rather sets out *to make (the recipient) see*.

The film begins with a close-up of hands and arms touching, of an embrace of two naked bodies which are entwined and which “seem to melt together” (Armstrong 279), since it is hard to tell who is who—we only see the movements of the bodies, but they remain without identity. In the beginning, they are covered with ashes and dirt—much like Hiroshima was after the bombing. Then, the dust starts to shimmer, to glow as if the bodies were made out of gold—or as if someone had applied a toxic, radioactive emulsion to their torsos. Finally, their skins are cleared of this layer—the bodies which are still entangled in a tight, tender embrace are perspiring, covered in water as if their

sweat had washed away the dusty layer. This is a scene of the process of coming-to-life—of the humans, but also of history, of memory. For it is then that a male voice starts to speak, although it negates everything the recipient is about to see: “You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.” Then, a woman replies, her hands curled around the back of the man: “I saw everything. Everything. The hospital, for instance. The hospital in Hiroshima is real.” It is then that the scene switches from the embracing bodies to a hospital building, where the camera zooms into a corridor, where women are standing in doorways to rooms in which they are treated. But the man only repeats his previous statement that she “saw no hospital. You saw nothing in Hiroshima.” This time, the camera zooms into the corridor again, which is now empty, before the scene switches back to the entwined bodies. Thus, the film sets in motion a complex process of the constant interplay of the past and the present, the factual and the imaginary, while questioning, on a meta-layer, whether the history of Hiroshima can be represented on film (De Courville 116-117). This epistemological problem is played out through the presentation of what Andrew Pickering has referred to as “mangling,”¹² not just between the bodies and their respective agencies, but between the bodies and their environment, the buildings and memorials of Hiroshima, how they are perceived by their on-lookers and visitors, and what kind of effect this has on how the nuclear catastrophe is remembered. It is in this sense that the beginning of the film can be said to be a reflection on the “material entanglements between bodies and the environment” (Iovino/Oppermann 466), on transcorporeality.

This is especially true for the subsequent scene, a “visit” to the Hiroshima Atomic Museum and its exhibition of objects and material traces that give an impression of the immense power of the blast of the bomb. The woman comments on the scene in an off-voice:

Photographs, reconstructions. What else was there? Four times at the museum in Hiroshima, I looked at those people. I, too, looked thoughtfully—at that burnt iron, that tortured iron, iron turned vulnerable as flesh. I saw the bouquet of bottle caps: who would have suspected that? Human skin floating, surviving, still in the bloom of its agony. Stones, molten and exploded. Anonymous hair which had fallen off the heads of women while they slept. (n.p.)

The comparison of “iron” with “flesh,” the parallelism between “skin” and “stone” (and flowers) translate the images into language and bring about a connection between these “traces,” which have a different quality than the “photographs and reconstructions,” since they give, in their deformation—in and through their own materiality—true testament to the enormous power of the bomb. Again, the atomic bomb is equated with an all-consuming force which permeates, alters, mutilates everything it touches upon. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that this alone does not tell the whole story, that it does not reconstitute historical experience.

The same is true for the “reconstructions” and the “films” made about that tragedy which are invoked in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*—the scaled down models of the destroyed city as well as the sceneries of movies, where hundreds of actors are

¹² Cf. on his “mangle realism” (Iovino/Oppermann 455-456).

assembled in tattered clothes and bloody rags. As the woman self-consciously remarks with regard to her own feelings: "It's quite simple, the illusion is so perfect that the tourists cry. What else can a tourist do, really, but cry?" At numerous times, the film implies that there is barely anything left of the "old Hiroshima." Only a few ruins are still standing as quiet reminders of what the city once looked like, while the second part of the movie presents the viewer with the "new Hiroshima," a vibrant city, full of lights and hotels. It has turned into a tourist attraction which thousands of people visit every year. Accordingly, there are numerous memorials and museums that conserve some traces of the destruction, that tell about the terrible fate of Hiroshima, just like the guided bus tours through the city and its atomic gift shops. While the movie thus portrays the aesthetic and commercial aspects of the memory culture, it goes on to explore its cognitive side as well—namely the historical facts that have been recorded of Hiroshima, in history books and in newsreels: "The second day," the woman continues, "History tells, I'm not making it up, on the second day, certain species of animals rose again from the depths of the earth and from the ashes." It is then that documentary footage is incorporated into the film—we now see Hiroshima as it was after the bombing: a wasteland, where no stone was left standing. The scenes alternate between wide shot images of debris and almost microscopic images of the dust-covered ground and the earth.

Whereas word and image coincide in this segment of the film, they are violently juxtaposed in its next sequence. The woman goes on to tell about the aftermath of the bombing, about what she has seen or read in the news: "(...) on the fifteenth day, too, when Hiroshima was blanketed with flowers. There were cornflowers and gladiolas everywhere, and morning glories, and day lilies that rose again from the ashes with an extraordinary vigour, quite unheard of for flowers until then. I didn't make anything up." The words of the woman are not confirmed by the images of the film. We see horrible mutilations of children and babies whose flesh has been scorched and whose limbs have been disfigured. Much like Hersey's report about Hiroshima, Resnais's film also presents its recipients with the almost contradictory impact the bomb had on the environment:¹³ while people have been affected in the worst possible way, the flora seems to have been stimulated. Yet, the film does not stop here, of course. Quite the contrary, it makes clear that this apparent "vitality" of nature was a mere illusion as well, that it, too, had been poisoned by the bomb: "People are afraid of the rain. The rain of ashes on the waters of the Pacific. The waters of the Pacific kill. Fishermen of the Pacific are dead. People are afraid of the food. The food of an entire city is thrown away. The food of entire cities is buried." The radioactive "movement across bodies" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2) has taken hold of human beings and the biosphere alike that both suffer from its toxic agency. These are images of toxic bodies that move in the realms of a toxic environment, humans that breathe and move in radioactive air, that are drenched in rain produced by fallout, that eat food which has been permeated and poisoned by atomic waste.

¹³ As Duras herself has explained, "this sentence is taken almost verbatim from John Hersey's remarkable report on Hiroshima. All I did was to apply it to the martyred children" (19).

It is this materiality of the tragedy of Hiroshima that is at the centre of Resnais's film, which is concerned with bringing about and enabling a meaningful remembrance of the terrible effects of the nuclear attack. Yet, its self-conscious task is not, as the comments and negations of the male voice make clear, to create a "realist" reproduction of the historical experience of catastrophe, since this would entail, at the same time, the illusion that this event can be integrated in narrative. This problem is, as Roth makes clear, "at the heart of trauma's relation to historical representation. Insofar as that representation is tied to narrative, the very quality that makes an experience traumatic (that we cannot take it in through the mental schemes available to us) is lost in the telling" (Roth 99). That is why Duras and Resnais want to keep Hiroshima beyond reach for the recipient who has to struggle to make sense of the narrative and the often disparate story-elements, the constant switching back-and-forth between scenes, characters, and places.

Moreover, they deal extensively with (the necessity of) oblivion and the process of forgetting in order to come to terms with the past. As they make clear in these opening scenes, the material side of memory—the memorials, museums, and traces of the bombing—are not only there in order to conserve the past, but also to make sense of it and to enable mourning. The latter aspects already include forgetting, as the woman self-reflectively observes with regard to the many monuments in Hiroshima: "Like you, I longed for a memory beyond consolation, a memory of shadows and stone. Each day, I resisted with all my might against the horror of no longer understanding the reason for remembering. Like you, I did forget." Therefore, the materiality of history and of memory have a dialectical quality in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*: they are the origin of remembrance and its suspension at the same time.

In this context, the individual story of the woman plays a vital role which is contrasted with the collective history of Hiroshima.¹⁴ After the reflection on the interplay between memory and oblivion, the filmic essay, which constitutes the beginning of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, ends and we finally see the faces of the woman and the man, who have spent a night of love in the Hotel New Hiroshima. As we learn, the woman is a French actress who has come to Hiroshima in order to star in a "film about peace" and who will return to France and her family on the next day. The man is a Japanese architect, who is also married and who has lost his relatives in the bombing of the city, while he was fighting in the war. Whereas their dialogue had already hinted at the fact that the woman, too, knows about loss and "the horror of remembering," this is also shown visually, in a famous match cut: the woman watches her Japanese lover sleep on the bed with the palm of his hand upturned, when the scene suddenly switches to a dead German soldier who is lying on a road in a similar position. Thus, the visual perception of the body triggers a memory of a past moment, which can enter the present at any time through the senses as well as the unconscious.

For the next hour, the film traces these paths of memory as the woman constantly wanders through the streets of the rebuilt Hiroshima, while the Japanese man follows

¹⁴ Resnais and Duras have both been repeatedly criticised for juxtaposing the history of Hiroshima with a fictional "microscopic story of an individual trauma" (Noack 134-135).

her, determined not to let her go and desperate to learn what it is that torments and haunts her. Eventually, they end up in a little street café, where she reveals her own trauma. He learns that she grew up in a small town in France called Nevers,¹⁵ where, during the occupation of France by German troops, she fell in love with a soldier from Bavaria. They used to see in each other in deserted places in the countryside around Nevers, until he was killed in an ambush on the day of the liberation, while he was waiting for her. When she found him, she threw herself on him and stayed there “lying on top of him.” The woman tells the Japanese man: “The moment of his death actually escaped me, because at that moment and even afterwards—yes, I can say even afterwards—I couldn’t find the slightest difference between his dead body and my own. His body and mine seemed to me to be one and the same.” This scene echoes the beginning of the film, of the two naked bodies melting together—it is, too, a scene of the coming back of memory, of a memory inscribed in the body, of a memory working through the body. Accordingly, the woman loses control of her own body while telling her story as she starts shaking and the Japanese man repeatedly has to give her something to drink, since she is unable to hold her own glass, to find her own mouth anymore. Memory, like the body, has therefore “its own forces” (Alaimo, “Transcorporeal” 250) and “is never static because its interactions with other bodies always alter it” (255) often giving way to “unpredictable and unwanted actions” (238).

Because of her love for the dead German soldier, the French woman was punished by the community of the town. She was publicly shorn, becoming one the “femmes tondues,” who had to, after the war, carry the burden of all French collaboration. As Andrew Asibong puts it, “The French nation cannot accept any kind of reflective, collective responsibility for the Occupation, and instead locates the radical non-health that must be blamed for the disaster within the guilty bodies of a handful of women” who are, in “a process of quasi-racialization and dehumanisation,” “placed in a space of exception outside the law and life itself” (Asibong 101). Consequently, her own family could not live with the “disgrace” and pretended that she was dead, locking her in the cellar. As she tells the Japanese man, she spent “an eternity” in there, scratching her hands bloody on the walls which she smears in her face and mouth in order “to remember,” for, as she explains, “I loved blood since I had tasted yours.” These scenes, whose images constantly jump from the café in the present and the cellar in the past, show the “profound importance of the body on the constitution of mind” (Abram 105) and of memory, not only because its images are stored inside of it, but because the body helps to relate (historic) experiences and acts out our own being in the world—both in the present and in the past. The body is therefore a site of memory itself.¹⁶

¹⁵ On the multiple meanings and associations that are connected to the word “Nevers” (De Courville 120; Ammour-Mayeur 271).

¹⁶ Much like its outside layer, the skin, as Jay Prosser makes clear: “We become aware of skin as a visible surface through memory. If someone touching our skin brings us immediately into the present, the look of our skin—both to others and to ourselves—brings to its surface a remembered past. It is a phenomenological function of skin to record. Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories” (Prosser 67).

This can also be seen in the fact that both the man and the woman come to be equated with places themselves. When they finally say goodbye at the end of the film, she says to him: "Hiroshima. That's your name," and he answers, "Yes, that's my name. And your name is Nevers. Nevers in France." This despatialization of place and its embodiment in human beings is a central metaphor for the inaccessibility and elusiveness of historical experience and an expression of the need to integrate it into meaningful containers. The act of remembering is therefore only enabled by giving memory a shape—be it in narrative, stone, or film. It is a constant, open-ended generative process with multiple meanings, which involves a constant interplay of signs and perceptions in which the human body and mind cannot be separated, neither from the (memory) culture nor the environment and the more-than-human world in which they are situated. Memory is an integral part of these material worlds, a realm, where they meet and mangle in ways that often escape representation—and perception. As the woman puts it, when she is asked by the Japanese man why she wanted to see everything in Hiroshima: "I have my own idea about it. For example, looking closely at things is something that has to be learned." By letting us share in this learning process of looking at things, at history and memory and their respective agencies, its human and non-human aspects, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* becomes an important cinematic, as well as historic, experience itself, and a deeply ethical undertaking.

Conclusion

This essay examined very different representations of the tragedy of Hiroshima. One was a non-fictional newspaper article that infused the political, social, and scientific debates surrounding the bombing with a human dimension by giving a voice to its survivors. The other was a fictional film, shot almost fifteen years after the nuclear attack, at a time when the city had, to a large extent, been rebuilt, dealing with the problem of how it could be remembered, of how memory could be, if at all, represented. Both the article and the film have come to be central ingredients of the cultural memory of the bombing of Hiroshima. They have, in their textual and visual representations, sought to render the tragedy in meaningful ways, whereby they uncovered its horrendous effects on humans and the environment alike. They have also, in their respective ways, made clear that the history and memory of Hiroshima have a material dimension that cannot be reduced to political or historiographical discourse. Instead, they have, on a meta-layer, underlined how the discursive practices of scientific knowledge, of building memorials and conserving material traces of the bombing interact with individual human memory and non-human material agency, especially the radioactivity of the bomb. The "body" —of humans, buildings and plants—has, in this context, become a space in which these discursive and material matters meet and mangle in often unpredictable and contradictory ways, constituting a site of memory itself.

Consequently, history and memory cannot only be seen as merely cognitive undertakings, but as dynamic material processes that entail various ethical implications.

Accordingly, both Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* can be seen as "essential instruments of action and knowledge" by their "re-framing and re-creating of an event in its material-discursive patterns," thereby "providing a necessary reconfiguration of meanings" (Iovino, "Toxic epiphanies") and exercising a "material function" on the cultural memory. Thus, both can be seen as "agents of memory," since they do not only conserve an important historical event, but also help us understand why remembering Hiroshima is still important for us. As Hersey puts it: "What has kept the world safe from the bomb since 1945 has not been deterrence, in the sense of fear of specific weapons, so much as it's been memory. The memory of what happened at Hiroshima."¹⁷ That is why it is crucial to make matter *matter* in historical discourse.

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¹⁷ In 1985, 40 years after the bombing, Hersey visited Hiroshima again and wrote an article entitled "Hiroshima: The Aftermath", which was included in subsequent re-publications of *Hiroshima* as a fifth chapter. See: <http://www.american-buddha.com/lit.hiroshima.5.htm> (04.03.2012).

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