

## **Screenwriting strategies in Marguerite Duras's script for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1960)**

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### **Abstract**

The published 'scénario et dialogues' (Duras 1960) of the film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) feature precise technical specifications of sound and image and more novelistic passages, both of which create an emotional resonance that has been left to the director to translate into images. This article explores Marguerite Duras's text as a particular example of how the written component of the screen idea (Macdonald 2004a) might function on the page and as part of a dialogue with the director. It also examines the way that the script's concern with problematizing and drawing attention to the process of representation makes it a palpable and controlling presence in the resulting film.

### **Keywords**

screenwriting

Marguerite Duras

*Hiroshima, Mon Amour*

script

memory

narrative

## Introduction

*Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) was a collaboration between the writer Marguerite Duras, as script writer, and Alan Resnais, as director. A co-production between France and Japan, the original aim of the film was to address the subject of the nuclear bomb and the tragedy of Hiroshima. Duras and Resnais approached this from an unusual angle, centring the narrative on a fictional present day love affair between a Frenchwoman and a Japanese man, set in Hiroshima, rather than undertaking a documentary examination of the facts. Subsequent critical analysis of the film has most often focused on the way that, by taking this approach, the film problematizes memory, history and indeed representation itself. An early analysis by Pingaud, reprinted from an original paper given in 1960 (Pingaud [1960] 2002), is typical in this respect. Pingaud states that the central character of the film is in fact time, rather than the human beings who live through it, and that the film presents memory paradoxically as a process of forgetting (*l'oubli*), a state which is portrayed in the film as 'the hopeless, wretched condition of life itself' ([1960] 2002: 72).<sup>1</sup> Pingaud points out that both the bombing of Hiroshima and the other central narrative of the film, which concerns a young Frenchwoman's love affair with a German soldier and its aftermath, are presented as 'images d'oubli' ([1960] 2002: 70). Here he underlines the fact that these events are not so much memories for the characters as gaps in their memory. The film repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the bombing of Hiroshima, at which neither of the characters was present, can only be experienced by them second-hand: through the physical remnants of buildings and other artefacts that survived the blast, through the documentary footage of survivors, and through

monuments and reconstructions. Conversely, the Frenchwoman's direct experience during World War II is buried so deep in her memory that, at the beginning of the film, she cannot properly access or articulate it. Rather it interrupts the film narrative as an unexplained visual flashback and through an aural motif; the name of the town 'Nevers' where she lived, which is repeated and lingered on as a word many times by the characters before its narrative significance is revealed.

More recently Gronhovd and VanderWolk write that in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* the cinematic form lends itself to the portrayal of memory as 'an agent of disjunction' (1992: 125), which can open up ontological investigation, but cannot answer epistemological questions, because 'there exists in *Hiroshima* no ontological grounding from which epistemological questions can take shape' (1992: 121).

What is being underlined in these readings is the fact that the film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, in its insistence on the inseparability of memory from forgetting, sets out in a certain respect to represent the unrepresentable. This interpretation echoes the words of Duras in her synopsis for the film, in which she states that it is 'impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima'<sup>2</sup> (Duras 1966: 10).<sup>3</sup> Her script for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* then takes on the paradoxical project of saying the unsayable.

Pingaud ([1960] 2002: 74) also highlights the way that the Frenchwoman's story unfolds in the film in a form that is similar to that of a psychoanalytical cure. Her visit to Hiroshima acts as a catalyst for involuntary memories from her past in France. These start to interrupt and disrupt the present day narrative, until her Japanese lover takes the role of the psychoanalyst and helps her to finally tell in full the story of her love affair

with a German soldier in occupied France. This aspect has also been picked up by more recent theorists, who have expanded more fully on the film as an example of trauma narrative. Caruth (whose understanding of trauma resonates with Pingaud's analysis of memory/forgetting within the film) writes that 'the enigmatic language of untold stories – of experiences not yet completely grasped – that resonates, throughout the film' is in fact 'a new mode of seeing and of listening – a seeing and a listening from the site of trauma' (Caruth 1996: 56).

My own research has been undertaken in the light of these existing readings of the film, which I take as a starting point for my own work. This article examines the script and associated documents written by Duras, presenting a close analysis of the way that the written text develops the themes and produces the effects commented on above.<sup>4</sup>

### **The production context and published documents**

My examination of the written text in relation to the completed film work also raises some questions about the nature of the collaboration between Duras as writer and Resnais as director and it will probably be helpful at this point to establish the context of this collaboration, of which there were three main stages. The first stage, completed in the spring of 1958, before Resnais went to Japan to shoot the scenes set in Tokyo, resulted in the writing of an initial scenario as well as character profiles and other supporting documents. The second stage consisted of a concentrated period, in July and August of 1958, in which Duras and Resnais worked in parallel: Duras writing scenes for the Tokyo shoot and sending them to Resnais for him to commit to celluloid a short while later. According to Adler ([1998] 2000: 221), this intense process was a two-way exchange,

which also encompassed dialogue rewrites. The third stage was completed after the main shoot in Japan was finished, but prior to the shooting of the scenes set in Nevers, France in December 1958. Duras wrote additional notes relating to these scenes, which were collected in the published version of the script as a series of appendices to the main script. According to Duras (1960: 107) Resnais asked her to provide this material not as a script but in the form of ‘commentaries’, as if she was responding to a viewing of scenes that had already been filmed.

In addition to the main *script* and the *appendices*, the published edition of the ‘scénario et dialogues’ for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* also includes a *synopsis*, with which the volume begins. Before going on to a more detailed analysis, I will first give an overview of the characteristic features of each of these documents.

### **The synopsis**

The synopsis both summarizes the film’s narrative and themes and specifies in some detail how the film should be interpreted. Having stated the impossibility of speaking of the bombing of Hiroshima, it goes on to identify one of the film’s major aims as being to ‘to have done with the description of horror by horror’<sup>5</sup> (Duras 1966: 10). Duras puts forward the proposition that, instead of simply attempting to represent the horror of Hiroshima head on, it would be much more powerful to tell a love story in which the characters’ stories become so entangled with the story of Hiroshima that it would be impossible to distinguish one from the other. Through this process, the experience of Hiroshima will in a sense be relived, rather than simply represented. Adler seems to provide some background on this, when she states that the departure point for Resnais

and Duras, in developing the story for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, was to ask 'Have our lives been changed by the horror of the dropping of the bomb?' (Adler [1998] 2000: 219). Throughout the synopsis, Duras explicitly makes equivalent the horror experienced by the Frenchwoman, branded a collaborator in post-occupation France, and the horror of Hiroshima. She ends the synopsis by stating that the lovers exist for each other only through the names of the places that they come from – Nevers, France and Hiroshima. Her final comment is that 'C'est, comme si le désastre d'une femme tondu à NEVERS et le désastre de HIROSHIMA se répondaient EXACTEMENT. Elle lui dira: "Hiroshima, c'est ton nom"' (Duras 1960: 10). (This is not translated literally in the English translation by Richard Seaver, but interpreted as follows, 'It is as though, through them, all of Hiroshima was in love with all of Nevers.'<sup>6</sup> She says to him: "Hiroshima, that's your name'") (Duras 1966: 15).

### **The script**

Detailed explication of the intending meaning or effect of the film also features in the script itself. *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* was the first film script that Duras wrote and, as Borgomano (1985) has written, it represents perhaps her unfamiliarity with and suspicion of the form. Borgomano's view is that Duras attempts, through the use of detailed descriptions and stage directions, to anchor control of the film in the written text: 'it is as though the scary, all-devouring monster [i.e the cinema] is kept at arm's length and deprived of its powers, which are given instead to the text...' (1985: 39).<sup>7</sup> Thus, for the opening sequence of the film, Duras writes a very detailed description, in which she

specifies the opening image to be that of the ‘infamous “mushroom” of BIKINI’ (Duras 1960: 15),<sup>8</sup> followed by a second image of two torsos in an embrace, framed so as to cut the bodies off at the neck and hips and ‘as if drenched with ashes, rain, dew or sweat (whichever is preferred)’ (Duras 1966: 17). Duras then goes on to specify that the main thing is that this image should ‘produce a violent, conflicting feeling of freshness and desire’ (1966: 17).

If Duras was seeking here to anchor control of the film in the written text, as Borgomano suggests, then the attempt was arguably not successful, as the specific image of the mushroom cloud was omitted from the film itself. But in fact her directions also contain a degree of ambiguity and openness to interpretation. It is not clear whether the phrase ‘whichever is preferred’ (‘comme on veut’) refers to the interpretation that the audience might have, or to the directorial interpretation that Resnais might make. Resnais in fact appears to have preferred to give himself, and the audience, all the choices on offer, rather than settle for one. In the film itself he cuts together four different identically framed shots, one after the other, which feature in turn ash, rain, dew and sweat, in the order listed by Duras.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible moreover to interpret the development of the screen idea from page to screen otherwise than as a struggle for control between writer and director. In her introduction to the published script, Duras comments that the script was the product of almost daily discussions with Resnais.<sup>10</sup> This must have affected the precision with which she describes and gives directions for certain scenes in the script, since they were the culmination of these discussions. It seems likely that what Duras is offering in these passages is a further articulation on the page of ideas that had already taken shape in

discussion. These ideas, taken one step further in their articulation on the page, were further developed by Resnais in the shooting and editing of the final screen work.

Duras's style of writing within the main script and associated documents must thus equally be a result of the fact that this is not a speculative script, obliged to leave plenty of room for an, as yet, unknown director to occupy. Rather, it constitutes a very specific and individual collaboration and dialogue with the film's director Alan Resnais.

### **The appendices**

The particular nature of the close collaboration between writer and director is suggested not only by the level of detail and prescription, but also by the stylistic aspect of the work. In the appendices in particular, Duras provides passages of text that variously suggest or prescribe an emotional resonance, for which it is left entirely to the director to find a visual expression. In the synopsis and script these passages tend towards a rather bald prescription of effects, as with the opening statement about the importance of provoking desire in the viewer. However in the appendices, written for the final shoot in Nevers, the style often becomes novelistic, and suggestive rather than prescriptive. Thus the appendices begin with the following passage on the subject of the death of the German soldier:

Il sont tous les deux, à égalité en proie à cet événement: sa mort à lui.

Il n'y a aucune colère ni chez l'un ni chez l'autre. Il n'y a que le regret mortel de leur amour.

Même douleur. Même sang. Mêmes larmes.



L'absurdité de la guerre, mise à nue, plane sur leurs corps indistincts.

On pourrait la croire morte tellement elle se meurt de sa mort à lui.

(Duras 1960: 108)

Seaver's translation renders this passage as follows:

Both of them, equally, are possessed by this event: his death.

Neither of them is angry. They are only inconsolably sorry about their love.

The same pain. Same blood. Same tears.

The absurdity of war, laid bare, hovers over their blurred bodies.

One might believe her dead, so completely has his death drained all life from her.

(Duras 1966: 83)

The translation is not able to render the full effect of Duras's original text. It loses the rhythms, cadences and alliterations of the original lines and the particular emphasis created by the reinforcement of the possessive in 'sa mort à lui', for which there is no obvious English equivalent. However it does make clear the level of abstraction and description of inner emotions that Duras brings to the passage, for which there is no obvious visual translation.

The three parts of the 'scénario et dialogues': the synopsis, the script and the appendices, thus provide three different examples of how the written component of what Macdonald has termed the screen idea (Macdonald 2004a) might function both on the page and as part of a dialogue with the director. While the three elements of the published text would seem to relate to the three different stages in Duras's and Resnais's

collaboration outlined above, they cannot be precisely equated without a far more extensive examination of the original sources. Duras states in the introduction to the script, for example, that she has kept in it 'much of what was left out of the film'<sup>11</sup>(Duras 1960: 11). So the script is not a transcript of the film, it is very much an original work by Duras, as exemplified by her stage directions. At the same time, it has evidently undergone further revision prior to publication.

A reading of the three documents does however appear to offer some clues on the nature of the collaboration between writer and director on *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and can perhaps raise some more general questions about the relationship between writer and director in the development of the screen idea, as I will now go on to explore.

### **The film and the script**

In *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, in which he sets out to elucidate and give a higher profile to the script as an element of the screenwork, Kevin Boon suggests that one of the reasons for the relative lack of profile that a script has, compared to the completed film, is that the film, in visually making present what in the script must be supplied by the reader's imagination, overshadows and seems to make the original script redundant (2008: 29). Furthermore, Boon goes on to point out, the high value placed on the material immediacy and presence of the image by influential critics and practitioners such as Truffaut (1954) and Bazin (1957, 1967) has led, in part, to a corresponding devaluing of the script's contribution to cinematic discourse (2008: 31).

What is striking in the film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, however, as introduced in the discussion above, is the extent to which the image refuses to offer a viewing experience

of plenitude and immediacy. The same lack, the same gap between representation and meaning that, as Boon points out, must be filled in by the reader's interpretation of the pages of the script, is, in this case, maintained in the celluloid frames of the film. As Willis explains (1987: 35), this is clearly apparent in the opening sequence, where the viewer is presented with the disorienting shot of two torsos locked in an embrace. The depicted activity is ambiguous – the bodies might either be in the throes of death or of lovemaking. Willis comments that the desire (specified by Duras in the script) that the image provokes, is in fact the desire to see, to 'obtain mastery of the image through its identification of a representable object' (1987: 35). However, the framing and staging of the image frustrates this desire at the same time as it provokes it.

Furthermore, the accompanying soundtrack seems to specifically deny the possibility of any such mastery. The opening speech of the film, which plays out over the above mentioned image, is delivered, as Duras specifies in the script, by 'a man's voice, flat and calm, as if reciting'<sup>12</sup> (Duras 1966: 17), who announces 'You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing'<sup>13</sup> (1966: 17). An off-screen conversation then continues, as a woman's voice ('Elle/She') enters into a dialogue with the man's ('Lui/He'), in which she reports on various places and artefacts she has seen which relate to the atom bomb at Hiroshima, while the man's voice continues to deny that she has seen anything. As the conversation continues, documentary and dramatic reconstruction footage of scenes of Hiroshima are intercut with the opening image.

As Duras specifies in the script, this dialogue is recited as a kind of duet by the actors, rather than spoken as a conversation. It instigates a trancelike, incantatory mood. It also offers some practical clues as to how to interpret the opening image, suggesting to

the reader of the script and viewer of the film that the image of the torsos must somehow relate to what happened at Hiroshima. As the opening sequence continues, it is equally through the off-screen dialogue that a sense of the story begins to unfold. The woman continues to insist that she has seen everything at Hiroshima: the exhibits documenting the bomb in the museum; the news footage of the injured; and the devastated town. Meanwhile the man's voice equally forcefully insists that she has seen nothing and knows nothing of Hiroshima. This conversation is overtly scripted, in the sense that it is not naturalistic language, but operates through the cadences and rhythms of poetry. The woman's first line echoes the structure and rhythm of the man's but substitutes 'rien' (nothing) with 'tout' (everything) in a combination of repetition and opposition that is characteristic of much of this opening section of dialogue:

HE: You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing...

SHE: I saw *everything*. *Everything*<sup>14</sup>

(Duras 1966: 17, original emphasis)

However, even as the woman insists that she has seen everything, she seems also to concur with the man that what she has seen cannot possibly represent what really happened. She describes how the photographs and the reconstructions at the museum are there 'for want of anything else',<sup>15</sup> and states that her conviction that she will never forget what she has seen at Hiroshima is an illusion (Duras 1960: 18).

The use of dialogue in this opening section and throughout the script suggests that, although it is 'impossible to talk about Hiroshima', paradoxically 'the impossibility of speech generates an obsessional effort to speak...' (Willis 1987: 35). The characters address their subjects (of the horror of the atom bomb at Hiroshima, and later of the woman's experience of first love and loss in the French town of Nevers) again and again in a circular way. The rhythms of repetition and redundancy in the dialogue dramatize the simultaneous necessity, urgency and impossibility of narrating these experiences, of telling these stories. Furthermore, 'Elle's' narration in voiceover and its contradiction by 'Lui' puts the emphasis on imagination and interpretation as crucial elements in the acts of looking, knowing and remembering. The role of testimony in creating history (which in French is the same word as it is for story, 'histoire') is established as a central concern of the script.

### **Duras's written text: dialogue, image and narrative structure**

The importance given to the dialogue, and its performative and poetic qualities, thus establishes it from the outset as a structuring and material presence in the film. This has the effect of explicitly highlighting rather than hiding the existence of the script, since dialogue is the element of the screenplay that is the uncontested domain of the writer. Dialogue is also a privileged element of Duras's novels, and according to Adler ([1998] 2000) it was in fact an initial dialogue written by Duras that convinced Resnais she was the right person to undertake the script for his film. Some of the most memorable aspects of the film are the particular qualities of the actor's voices as they speak the lines, and the rhythmic patterns of repetition and opposition within the dialogue, through which some

of the film's central themes are developed. As mentioned above, these effects are not created purely by the actors' performance but are embedded in the script, which also gives precise instructions as to how the lines should be spoken. The place names 'Hiroshima' and 'Nevers' take on a significance in the script through their constant repetition, and through the lingering emphasis that is put on them by 'Elle' and 'Lui' who – the script goes on to reveal – are two lovers; a Frenchwoman and a Japanese man, who have just met in Hiroshima. Having taken a shower with her lover, 'Elle' says to him 'To-meet-in-Hiroshima. It doesn't happen every day'<sup>16</sup> (Duras 1966: 32). The syllables 'to-meet-in-Hiroshima' appear to form a newly coined word, signifying a unique experience. Duras specifies in the script that the words are spoken 'slowly, as though savouring the words'<sup>17</sup> (1966: 32). Similarly, when 'Lui' repeats the name of the town Nevers, where 'Elle' grew up, he lingers over the word. Afterwards she tells him that 'In Nevers I was younger than I've ever been'<sup>18</sup> (1966: 36) and he echoes her words, 'Young-in-Ne-vers': again dwelling on the rhythm and intonation, so that it is the sound and not the meaning of the words that is emphasized. Thus Duras introduces a level of materiality into the dialogue, which rivals that of the image. It takes on many of the characteristics of music and starts to signify at a level that is sensory, rather than semantic.

However, despite the importance of the dialogue to the themes, tone and style of the film, it is not only through dialogue that Duras's script dramatizes its subject. Duras also employs other tools available to the screenwriter, such as narrative structure, action and description. The opening section of the script, which functions as a kind of overture or prologue introducing the central themes and figures of the film, is as specific about the

images as it is about the dialogue, orchestrating a very precise juxtaposition of the two. For example, an ironic counterpoint is set up between a paraphrasing of Hersey's (1946) journalistic account of wildflowers springing up in the ashes of Hiroshima, spoken by 'Elle', and images of children injured in the blast, with which it is juxtaposed (Duras 1960: 21). Then, when 'Elle' talks about how she had the illusion that she would never forget Hiroshima, just as in love one has the illusion that one can never forget, Duras specifies that the accompanying image will be that of an eye being removed by surgical tongs (1960: 22). The image of the physical removal of the organ of sight thus frames, with some violence, the dialogue's evocation of love as an image of blindness.

The internal oppositions that Duras creates within both image and dialogue and the repeated counterpoint she engineers between the two, leave the reader in no doubt that representation itself is being called into question. It is clear that the specified fragments of documentary and dramatic reconstruction that Duras refers to are not meant to represent straightforwardly what happened at Hiroshima. In fact they are there precisely to enact the impossibility of making present the reality of the experience. According to Pingaud, documentary is the most fragile form of memory, because it functions as a substitute for direct, first person experience, showing us 'places that we can see, but which we have not seen. It is a derivative kind of vision...' <sup>19</sup> (Pingaud [1960] 2002: 71).

This opening sequence of the script thus employs a careful juxtaposition of voiceover dialogue and description of images, in order to problematize representation and the power of the documentary image to document or represent reality in any direct, unmediated or complete way. It also underlines the intense investment of the central characters in this problem of memory and representation, both through the stylistic

devices it employs and through an explicit statement of the theme, as when 'Elle' says 'Like you, I too have tried with all my might not to forget. Like you, I forgot'<sup>20</sup> (Duras 1966: 23). The wider question of history as a collective rather than an individual concern is also introduced when Elle says, of the events that have taken place at Hiroshima, 'Listen to me. I know something else. It will begin all over again'<sup>21</sup> (Duras 1966: 24). This suggests that, despite the monuments and the peace films, the lessons of Hiroshima too will ultimately be forgotten, and so repeated.

As well as providing a powerful and original example of the way that a particular tone and mood can be established through the juxtaposition of dialogue and image and through a particular approach to the dialogue, this opening sequence of the script also provides quite detailed exposition concerning the bombing of Hiroshima and its aftermath. Duras integrates into the voiceover precise data on the number of dead and injured, on the temperature reached by the blast and information about the effects of the radioactive fallout. However the stylistic effects discussed above – the incantatory nature of the dialogue, and the fragmentary structure in which the events are not recounted in order and in which image functions in counterpoint with dialogue rather than in parallel – work to obscure the extent of the information imparted. The reader has a sense of a narrative that doesn't quite make sense, that has gaps and cannot fully be grasped. Thus Duras manages to impart background information that needs to be known while simultaneously establishing a mood of not knowing: this produces the sense of the impossibility of speaking of Hiroshima that she states in the synopsis.

After the opening sequence, the visual treatment moves to a more conventional *mise-en-scène* in which action and dialogue are integrated within the bodies of the two



main characters as part of a dramatized scene. There is not the same carefully contrived counterpoint between word and image that characterizes the opening sequence.

However, Duras uses other strategies to disrupt the coherence and logic of the visual narrative. Oppositions and paradoxes continue to operate at the level of the dialogue; for example when 'Elle' says of herself that she lies and she tells the truth (Duras 1960: 41), or that Nevers 'is the city in the world... I dream about most often at night. And at the same time it's the thing I think about the least.'<sup>22</sup> (Duras 1966: 36). Meanwhile, at the level of the image, Duras starts to introduce the disruptive presence of flashbacks. The first and most notorious of these is when the Frenchwoman is looking at the hands of the Japanese man asleep on the bed and suddenly sees in his place a different body, 'the body of a young man, lying in the same position but in a posture of death'<sup>23</sup> (1966: 30). This sudden, as yet unexplained, interruption of the woman's early life in Nevers is a foretaste of how the story of Nevers will later disturb and briefly invade the present day Hiroshima narrative.

Until this point in the script is reached, when the story of Nevers will take over the narrative, the love story between the Frenchwoman and the Japanese man is scripted by Duras in such a way as to subject it to continuous interruptions and barriers. After the first scene in the hotel bedroom, a scene follows in which they have to shout at each other over noisy traffic outside the hotel. Following this, when he tracks her down to the set of the documentary film in which she plays the part of a nurse, their conversation is interrupted repeatedly by crew and cast who push past them as they participate in a peace parade that is being shot as part of the documentary film. Thus, as the lovers are physically interrupted by the action, their story is disrupted by the intrusion of another

narrative – that of the documentary that is being filmed: a *mise en abyme*<sup>24</sup> which further undermines the film's central narrative.

Further confusion and obscuring techniques are introduced later on in the script, through a destabilising of subject positions. When the Frenchwoman finally recounts the story of Nevers to the Japanese man, he starts to speak to her from the subject position of her dead German lover. Then later, back in her hotel room, 'Elle' first talks to herself, referring to herself in the third person, saying 'in Nevers she had a German love when she was young'<sup>25</sup> (Duras 1966: 72), then addresses her own reflection in the mirror as if she is speaking to her former lover. Thus, through action and dialogue the experiences of 'Elle' and 'Lui' are continually linked, compared and contrasted; but the role that each plays in the other's story and the role that each story has in the other's experience keeps changing. The relations between them are close but never stable.

These same shifting relations characterize the overall narrative structure of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, which works simultaneously towards a final linking of the Frenchwoman and the Japanese man through their mutual traumatic experiences of the war, and of their final separation as the Frenchwoman returns to France. It is also revealed that the bombing of Hiroshima, which propelled the Japanese man into trauma, occurred just at the moment that the Frenchwoman left the trauma of Nevers behind. Furthermore, on a national level, Hiroshima marked the beginning of a story of suffering and horror for the Japanese, just as it marked an end to it for the French. This paradoxical resolution at the level of plot is consistent with the oppositions and contrapuntal relationships that structure the development of both character and theme.

***Hiroshima, Mon Amour* as hysterical narrative**

As Caruth (1996) and Willis (1987) point out, the structure of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* functions in a similar way to the structures of trauma and of hysteria. Victims of trauma, whether the survivors of the atom bomb at Hiroshima or the Frenchwoman in the film who sees her lover die in her arms, find themselves unable to move on from the traumatic experience, partly because they are unable to comprehend it. The actual moment of the bombing of Hiroshima was an event that would be impossible for anyone to experience directly and in full. Eyewitness accounts testify to being blinded, to coming to consciousness some time later. Similarly the Frenchwoman relates how, despite the fact that she remained locked in an embrace with her lover until and after he had died of a gun-shot wound, she was unable to identify the exact moment at which he passed from life into death. This inability to pinpoint the exact moment at which the experience took place – along with the enormity, and the impossibility of actually surviving, of living past the horror of such an event – traps the traumatized subject in a cycle of repetition as he or she seeks to finally access and make sense of what remains essentially a missed experience.

As previously noted, repetition is a central structuring principle of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. Furthermore, as Willis points out, the film structures the experience of trauma through a hysterical aesthetic, which Willis defines as ‘a disturbance of narration... a failure of translation from image and fantasy to discourse’ (1987: 35). The structure of hysteria operates in a similar way to that of trauma, in that it represents a failure to bring into consciousness, to access one’s own experience, which remains at the level of the unconscious. The hysteric thus enacts through bodily symptoms what he or

she is unable to narrate through language. Indeed hysterical symptoms can be expressions of traumatic experience.

The development of feminist theory and criticism in the 1970s saw a development of the concept of hysteria as a specifically female discourse. An influential overview of this strand of feminist thought is given by Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* (1987). Showalter pinpoints the way that feminist readings of Freud's case studies of female hysterics defined their behaviour as 'signifying through the body... the protest that social conditions made unspeakable...' (Showalter 1987: 157). Showalter also points out the way that this discourse was adopted by some feminists, such as H  l  ne Cixous, as a particular female aesthetic that could be employed as a creative tool, 'a kind of female language that opposes the rigid structures of male discourse and thought' (Showalter 1987: 160). Subsequent readings of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, such as that of Willis (1987), have drawn on this idea of a hysterical aesthetic in their analysis of the film. Although Duras's script predates this development in feminist theory and could not be seen as intentionally adopting the kind of female discourse it identifies, Duras's creative strategies for saying the unsayable position her script in similar territory. So too does the orchestration of the telling of the story of Nevers into a kind of psychoanalytical talking cure facilitated by the Japanese man, which results in a climactic moment in which the Frenchwoman appears to lose control of herself and her Japanese lover/analyst slaps her back into consciousness and rationality.

The hysterical aesthetic can be seen at work in the script in the way that the story of Hiroshima and the story of the Frenchwoman's love affair with the German soldier are related in fragments, through contradictory juxtapositions, which fail to cohere into a

single comprehensible unity. Through both dialogue and image, the script circles repeatedly around what happened at Nevers in the same way as it does with the events at Hiroshima; it highlights their importance, while at the same time suggesting that what actually happened cannot be spoken or represented directly.

As Gronhovd and VanderWolk (1992: 135) and Caruth (1996: 52) have pointed out, the script suggests in fact that true remembering may only be possible at the level of the body – through the hysterical symptom or the incorporation of the lost object into the self. The involuntary memory of the flashback, the woman's assertion that she could not tell the difference between her dying lover's body and her own, and the shifts in subject positions that occur within the triangle of 'Elle' 'Lui' and the German lover all enact this type of physical memory. So too does the material quality of the dialogue; the sensory repetition of names, and perhaps most strikingly, the apparent collapse of identity at the end of the film where 'Elle' asserts that Hiroshima is indeed his name and 'Lui' replies that hers is Nevers. The very physical presence that characterizes the dialogue becomes in the end just as much a signifier of absence. The characters, who seem to seek in the material qualities of the words 'Hiroshima' and 'Nevers' a meaning and a reality that could make these place names somehow embody their experience, appear in this final scene to be replaced themselves by the words that hold them in thrall. The repetitive structures of the narrative suggest just as forcefully that this kind of physical, unarticulated memory traps the subject in an endless cycle of repetition, as they continue to try to access and finally live the missed event.

The cure for trauma and hysteria that is offered by Freudian psychoanalysis is that of the talking cure, of narrative. The psychoanalyst helps the hysterical or traumatized

patient to access their issues through language, and to tell the story of what happened to them, establishing a logical chain of cause and effect. Once the experience is brought into consciousness in this way, it loses its emotional investment and the symptoms disappear. However, in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* this would-be cure – the creation of a logical narrative – is also problematized, precisely because of the loss of emotional investment that it entails. The official version of the story of Hiroshima is presented from the outset as a narrative to be questioned and dismantled, while the Frenchwoman experiences her ‘cure’ as a betrayal of her lover, and as an experience of loss. Addressing her lover through her own reflection in the mirror she laments that he was not quite dead, until she told his story:

You were not yet quite dead.

I told our story.

I was unfaithful to you tonight with this stranger.

I told our story.

It was, you see, a story that could be told.<sup>26</sup>

(Duras 1966: 72)

The dialogue, such a powerful carrier of meaning throughout the film and so central to its tone and feel, here calls into question its own validity as testimony. It is the telling of the story, rather than the new romantic liaison, that emerges here as the betrayal, as if telling his story is what has finally killed him. The ability to articulate her memory in words paradoxically means that the woman is beginning to be able to forget her love.

In the script of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, dialogue, image, action and narrative structure thus all work to elaborate the central concern that once the trauma of memory is ‘cured’, and is articulated in language or image, it is in some profound way lost or betrayed. As soon as the memory becomes part of ‘the sight and understanding of a larger history’ (Caruth 1996: 31) the reality of the lived experience is denied – whether represented by a textual narrative, a visual recording, or an object. In each case the real, which cannot be directly represented, is replaced with a screen (Willis 1987) that can only stand in for it. Thus remembering is always a kind of forgetting. This is the central paradox around which all the other paradoxical and oppositional relations in the script are structured.

#### **Duras’s written text: tone and style**

Besides dialogue, image and narrative structure, description and stage directions are other crucial elements of the script, employed by Duras to give a sense on the page of what the tone and style of the film should be on screen.

According to Adler, Resnais was particularly interested in Duras as a writer because he ‘saw Duras as an author who had tone’ (Adler [1998] 2000: 219) and this is certainly a notable feature of her script. Duras makes precise use of adverbs and adjectives to suggest a visual or dramatic treatment. Immediately after the opening image of the film, the action moves to a hospital, in which (Duras specifies) the woman who speaks on the soundtrack will not appear on screen. Only the hospital, with its corridors, its stairs and its patients will be shown, ‘dans le dédain suprême de la caméra’ (Duras 1960: 17). (‘the camera coldly objective’ according to Seaver’s translation) (Duras 1966:

18). Both in the use of the word 'dédain' ('disdain') and in her grouping together of architectural features and human subjects in an undifferentiated list, Duras's text makes clear the extent to which the image is intended to have the effect of objectifying and distancing what it shows. Later, at the end of the opening section of the script, Duras specifies that, having remained off screen up until that moment, the woman's face should appear 'très brutalement' in the frame. In French, the word 'brutalement' has the meaning of both 'suddenly' and 'brutally' and Duras exploits this latter connotation by countering it with its opposite later on in the sentence, where she describes the woman as 'tender'; 'très brutalement, le visage de la femme apparaît très tendre, tendu vers le visage de l'homme' (Duras 1960: 27). (Seaver's translation gives this as 'with exaggerated suddenness the woman's face appears, filled with tenderness, turned towards the man's') (Duras 1966: 25). In these ways, as in every aspect of the script, Duras employs the use of opposition and paradox to elicit a complex and conflicted interpretation from the reader.

Duras's stage directions also frequently specify the effect that an image should produce without giving an indication of how this might be achieved visually, as when she states that the opening image should provoke mixed emotions including desire. This is an approach that is particularly apparent in the appendices which, written at Resnais's request as 'commentaries', are much more novelistic in style and tone. They take much further the approach that Duras also takes in the main script of suggesting an emotional resonance for a scene, rather than a precise visual treatment. One such example is when Duras writes 'late one afternoon a German soldier crosses a square somewhere in the provinces of France. Even war is boring'<sup>27</sup> (Duras 1966 : 84). It is notable that the sense



of an apparent everydayness, striking in its very banality (even war has become just part of the daily routine), that is communicated by the narrative voice of Duras's text, is also conveyed visually by the scene that Resnais shoots. This more novelistic narrative voice marks Duras's text out most obviously from mainstream screenplay conventions. It is perhaps this aspect (and the way that the final screenwork interprets it) that reflects most clearly the particular context of close and intense collaboration in which the script was written and the film shot and edited.

### **The Screen Idea- the collaboration between Duras and Resnais**

*Hiroshima, Mon Amour* was a creative departure for both Duras and Resnais. Duras was well known primarily as a novelist, and this was her first film script, while Resnais's career up until then had been as a documentary maker. This might in part explain the extent and depth of their collaboration, in which the relative inexperience of each might perhaps have made both particularly open to the skills and knowledge brought by the other to the development of the screen idea.

Resnais's directorial interpretation of the tone of Duras's writing is evident in scenes such as the early hospital sequence, mentioned above, when Duras's evocation of 'le dédain suprême de la caméra' (Duras 1960: 17) finds a visual equivalent in the tracking shots through the hospital corridors, which create visually the sense of haughty detachment that Duras's words suggest. Furthermore, during the Tokyo shoot, Resnais apparently requested audio recordings of Duras reading the dialogue, so that he could reproduce, in the visual sequences and with the actors, the same rhythms produced by Duras's voice (Adler [1998] 2000: 219).

However, when Duras specifies in the script that the opening image must provoke desire, or when, in the appendices, she highlights the banality of war, or states that the garden from which the German soldier was shot was as good for the purpose as any other garden and was chosen entirely randomly, more of a leap of imagination would seem to be required by the director if he is to attempt to realize this on screen. Indeed the garden that Resnais chooses for this point in the story is in fact quite distinctive, featuring an ornate, wrought iron viewing-platform, shot from below. Contrary to the specification in the script, this image in the film is not unremarkable and ordinary but striking, even before its significance in the story is revealed.

Since Duras's voice as a writer was such an important aspect for Resnais during the main shoot, it is interesting to note how his approach seems to have developed for the second shoot in France. For this final stage in the collaboration, Resnais appears to have modified and developed his way of working and to have gone further in his use of Duras's text as a starting point, as a source of ideas and motifs and as a back story, rather than as a script in any conventional sense.

The relationship between Duras's text and the scenes of Nevers that exist in the film is thus more complex than that which exists between the script and the rest of the film. This complexity is partly because the story of Nevers actually exists in three different written versions; the scenes that are included in the original script, Duras's later 'commentaries' on each individual scene, and finally a monologue (also in the appendices) which is written in the voice of the Frenchwoman. Here the woman recounts her story in chronological order (the only time the story is told chronologically). None of these three versions perfectly coincide. Each includes scenes and information that are

absent from the others. The story is different each time in its telling. Resnais's filmed version then supplies a fourth version, which takes from each of the other three and adds further elements, while leaving much out. Sometimes he films a scene that reproduces exactly what Duras describes, as when in the main script she describes the Frenchwoman in her bedroom, after the death of her lover, lying on her bed, 'one leg raised, filled with desire'<sup>28</sup> (Duras 1966: 58). Sometimes he finds a visual equivalent for a tone or a perspective that Duras suggests verbally, as with the 'everyday' scene of the German soldier. Sometimes he takes a motif – such as the young Frenchwoman's Sunday bicycle trips, which Duras describes in the monologue in the appendices – and turns it into an extended visual sequence. This sequence brings out the closeness of the countryside, which Duras specifies elsewhere in the commentaries, when describing the town of Nevers, 'the wheat is at its gates. The forest is at its windows. At night owls come into the gardens, and you have to struggle to keep from being afraid'<sup>29</sup> (Duras 1966: 86). The sequence also seems to express the 'utter happiness'<sup>30</sup> that Duras ascribes in her commentaries to the encounters between the Frenchwoman and her German lover.

The story of Nevers, which lies at the heart of the film and which constitutes the revelation towards which the trajectory of the plot leads, is thus given both greater depth and greater ambiguity through its repeated rewriting by Duras and its visual re-imagination through Resnais's direction; this represents, it would seem, an extensive and intensive process of collaboration.

Such a relationship between written and cinematic text suggests a particular kind of interpretative work on the part of the director. In the same way that, when adapting a literary work, a screenwriter needs to think carefully about how to adapt the particular

quality given to a novel or short story by its narrative voice, part of Resnais's task as a director was to find visual equivalents for Duras's particular literary tone.

The combined elements of synopsis, script and appendices for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* therefore embody different approaches to the development of the screen idea through the writer's written text and the director's realization of the screen work. In certain sections Duras's text furnishes a very exact description of what image will appear on screen, what dialogue and even what music will be on the soundtrack. Yet in other sections her text invites extensive translation and adaptation by the director, rather than facilitating a straightforward transferral from page to screen. Duras's approach to the script thus provides an interesting example of the extent to which the screenwriter's ability to use words to create a world of thematic depth and emotional resonance is as important to the film as her ability to write dialogue, create convincing characters or provide a story structure. It also provides an interesting case study in the way that a writer develops the screen idea and opens up a dialogue with the director (and potentially other collaborators).

### **The Screen Idea: a question of collaboration?**

This examination of the written text for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and its relationship to the completed screenwork, thus offers some clues as to the nature of the collaboration between Duras and Resnais. More research into the particular production context in which the film was produced might perhaps provide insights into their particular collaboration, further to those already suggested in the published text. The discussion also raises some questions as to the nature of the collaboration between writer, director

and other potential collaborators that could productively be researched in relation to screenwriting in general.

One question raised concerns the screenwriter's role in the creation of tone and style and the techniques he or she might use. Just as dialogue is the aspect of any script that remains the most noticeable in the completed film, the style and tone of the script is the one that becomes the most invisible. Style and tone are indeed crucial elements of the director's work in a film, and readings of films tend to focus on the style and tone of the screenwork rather than the screenplay. However, style and tone are still vital elements in any script that needs to convince and inspire co-collaborators. Further research could be undertaken to explore different approaches taken to style and tone within film scripts and other documents relating to the screen idea.

As Ian Macdonald (2007) and Kevin Boon (2008) have pointed out, the extent to which these elements are manifested in scripts, and the form that they take, vary according to production and geographical context and time period. According to Macdonald for example, in the British film industry up until the 1930s, a script would typically take the form of a 'comprehensive document' that specified shots and instructed actors (Macdonald 2007: 115); in contrast, says Boon, the American 'spec script' has, from the 1970s onwards, developed increasingly literary features. He points out that contemporary spec scripts tend to suggest, rather than explicitly state shots and other technical directions, which are seen as the domain of the director (Boon 2008: 17). They focus instead on a fluent and engaging telling of the story.

In Boon's opinion, these developments relate partly to the development of the form and writers' increasing ability 'to shape visual imagery for readers' (2008: 17).

This latter point is debatable, but contemporary scripts in the US and UK certainly reflect the contemporary production context in which a spec script will be read by many people: such as script readers, financiers, and other influential agents. These readers are not film technicians and might respond more positively to the kind of literary features cited by Boon, than to a technical document.

At the same time, other features that might equally be termed ‘literary’, such as the kind of innovations in form that Duras, an established novelist but first-time screenwriter, effectively invented for herself, would be rare in the kind of Hollywood spec script described by Boon. Rare too, though not unheard of, would be the attempt to deal with a large-scale political issue. How much then are content and form inseparable as a package? Are mainstream industry screenplay conventions primarily suited to standard film genres? Do attempts to engage in different kinds of storytelling necessitate different formal approaches in screenwriting, as might often be the case with the novel or the stage play? To what extent also do these questions turn on the screenwriter’s habitual status as co-author of the screen idea, rather than single author, as with a novelist or a playwright?

The question of who is the intended reader (whether actual or implied) of the screenplay, also becomes a significant question. A screenplay (or other screen idea documents) has a relationship with its readership, and this can refer to a range of people, or indeed be more individually addressed. In each case the assumptions and expectations brought by the reader to the text may vary substantially.

Considerations of the macro-production context of industry structures and cultural conventions also lead to a consideration of the micro-production context. The combined

documents written for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* provide an interesting example of how the ‘materiality’ of the script can provide richness and depth as source material for a director, beyond the obvious structural and more immediately translatable elements of dialogue, plot, character and theme. But could such an approach work without the kind of close collaboration between writer and director that appears to have taken place between Duras and Resnais?

Such questions perhaps provide some starting points for further research into the range of contexts in which the screenwriter and the screenplay contribute to the development of the screen idea.

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**Comment [r1]:** Please note the original article does NOT use capitals for Mon and Amour and puts the first three words in italic and the title itself not in italic, as reproduced here...

Truffaut, François (1954), 'Une certaine tendance du cinema français', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 31 (January 1954), pp.15–29.

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**Comment [r2]:** No volume no. only month and year

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Rosamund Davies has a background of professional practice in the film and television industries. As script and story editor for Film London, she oversaw the development and production of over fifty short feature films. Her specialist area of practice is screen narrative and, as senior lecturer in media writing and creative industries, she lectures in screenwriting and visual narrative at the University of Greenwich. Rosamund's research interests include screenwriting practices and methods and cross art-form practice in the context of media convergence. Her recent visual media work explores the intersection between narrative and archive as cultural forms. Rosamund has published in academic journals and worked with independent production companies, writers and producers.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> My translation. All translations from the French, other than of the script for *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, are my own. The original French is ‘la condition désespérée, désolante, de la vie même’.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I refer both to the original French script by Duras (1960), and to the 1966 translation by Richard Seaver. When a quote from the script is given in English it is taken from Seaver’s translation, unless otherwise indicated. Any original French text (from Duras or other quoted French sources) is given in the footnotes, unless my comments refer directly to the original French, in which case French and English translation are quoted together within the article.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Impossible de parler de HIROSHIMA. Tout ce qu’on peut faire c’est de parler de l’impossibilité de parler de HIROSHIMA’ (Duras 1960: 2).

<sup>4</sup> The published text for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (Duras, 1960) is subtitled ‘scénario et dialogues’. This is in line with the standard credit accorded to the writer on French films, for which the translation in English would most typically be ‘screenplay’, as indeed would be the translation for ‘scénario’ alone. This absence of perfectly matching terms in French and English is further complicated by the fact that Duras’ script does not conform to the standard industry formats of the American and UK film industries of the period. Given these various slippages between terms, I have opted to use the word ‘script’ (which has a looser application than ‘screenplay’) to refer to the main script that is included alongside ‘synopsis’ and ‘appendices’ in the published volume.

<sup>5</sup> ‘en finir avec la description de l’horreur par l’horreur’ (Duras 1960: 3).

<sup>6</sup> Here Seaver is picking up on Duras’ stated intention that the love affair between the Frenchwoman and the Japanese becomes indistinguishable from the story of Hiroshima. A slightly more literal translation of the original French might be ‘it is as if the atrocity of a woman’s head being shorn in Nevers and the atrocity of Hiroshima were EXACTLY

the same'. However, this would not give the connotations of dialogue and interaction that are suggested by the French verb 'se répondre', which can mean both 'to answer each other' and 'to match' or 'harmonize'.

<sup>7</sup> 'le monstre dévorateur fait peur, il est comme tenu à distance et dépossédé de ses pouvoirs au profit du texte...'

<sup>8</sup> My translation. This opening line is omitted from the 1966 translation. Here Duras refers to the iconic photograph of the mushroom cloud produced by the 1954 atom bomb test that was carried out by the American military on Bikini Island in the Pacific Ocean. The image is clearly meant to stand for the earlier bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima.

<sup>9</sup> Later on in the film, as Duras notes in the text, Resnais creates a similar plurality of interpretations when he responds to a choice of alternative lines of dialogue offered by Duras by including all of them, one after the other (Duras 1960: 64).

<sup>10</sup> Also mentioned by Duras as a participant in these discussions is Gerard Jarlot, who is credited as literary advisor on the film. Jarlot, who was Duras' lover during this period, was subsequently co-writer with Duras on the script for *Une Aussi Longue Absence/A Long Absence* (1966 [1961]) and the film adaptation of *Moderato Cantabile/Seven Days...Seven Nights* (1960).

<sup>11</sup> My translation. This passage was left out of the 1966 English translation: 'un certain nombre de choses abandonnées du film'.

<sup>12</sup> 'une voix d'homme, mate et calme, récitative' (Duras 1960: 16).

<sup>13</sup> 'tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien.' (Duras 1960:16).

<sup>14</sup> 'Lui: Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien... Elle: J'ai tout vu. Tout' (Duras 1960: 16).

<sup>15</sup> My translation: 'faute d'autre chose'. Seaver has 'for want of something else' (Duras 1966: 18).

<sup>16</sup> 'Se-connaître-à-Hiroshima. C'est pas tous les jours' (Duras 1960: 36).

<sup>17</sup> 'lentement, avec une sorte de "délectation des mots"' (Duras 1960: 36).

<sup>18</sup> 'c'est à Nevers que j'ai été la plus jeune de toute ma vie' (Duras 1960: 42).

<sup>19</sup> 'les lieux tels que nous pourrions les voir, mais tels que nous ne les avons pas vus.

C'est en quelque sorte une vision dérivée...'

<sup>20</sup> 'comme toi, moi aussi j'ai essayé de lutter de toutes mes forces contre l'oubli. Comme toi j'ai oublié' (Duras 1960: 24).

<sup>21</sup> 'écoute-moi. Je sais encore. Ça recommencera.' (Duras 1960: 25).

<sup>22</sup> 'C'est la ville 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' (Duras 1960: 43).

<sup>23</sup> 'il apparaît brutalement à la place du Japonais, le corps d'un jeune homme, dans la même pose, mais mortuaire' (Duras 1960: 33-34).

<sup>24</sup> This term, from literary theory, refers to the practice of putting a frame within a frame, i.e. an image within an image, a story within a story etc.

<sup>25</sup> 'Elle a eu à Nevers un amour de jeunesse allemand' (Duras 1960: 90).

<sup>26</sup> 'Tu n'étais pas tout à fait mort./J'ai raconté notre histoire./Je t'ai trompé ce soir avec cet inconnu./ J'ai raconté notre histoire./ Elle était, vois-tu racontable/ ... Regarde moi comme je t'oublie' (Duras 1960: 90).

<sup>27</sup> 'quelque part en France, vers la fin de l'après-midi, un certain jour, un soldat allemand traverse une place de province. Même la guerre est quotidienne' (Duras 1960: 109).

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'quotidien/nne' commonly means 'daily': as in 'daily life'. Seaver translates it here, as 'boring', but it could equally be 'everyday', 'routine' etc.

<sup>28</sup> 'la jambe relevée, dans le désir' (Duras 1960: 73).

<sup>29</sup> 'Le blé est à ses portes. La forêt est à ses fenêtres. La nuit, des chouettes en arrivent jusque dans les jardins' (Duras 1960: 112).

<sup>30</sup> My translation: 'irrepressible bonheur' (Duras 1960: 109).