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# 7

## *Hiroshima, mon amour,* Trauma, and the Sublime

ANDREW SLADE

The sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation.

— Edmund Burke

Trauma ruptures the world of our daily experiences. It is an intrusion that threatens the body and psyche and affects us in symptomatic ways. That *something happened* is certain, what *that* is, however, resists comprehension and understanding. The impetus of much contemporary trauma research in the humanities derives from the coincidence of survivors' insistence on the truth of their experiences and life in a global culture that multiplies traumatic circumstances. These circumstances pose a radical threat to the fecundity of human life, to be sure, and also to the very possibility of brute survival. My aim in this essay is to find a way in which experiences of terror may acquire forms that will facilitate the necessary thinking through of their significance to our present and future.

I will argue that the aesthetic of the sublime, as an aesthetics embedded in the experience of terror and relief from terror, is one way in which the collapse of the symbolic world, which gives meaning and significance to human lives, may begin again to gain some critical hold over catastrophic events of death. I am not concerned here with private forms of traumatic experience like rape, incest, or other forms of primarily domestic terror. While the analysis of the sublime is not to diminish the importance of these events, it also allows me to

maintain a distinction between varieties of traumatic experiences. To discuss trauma in all of its possible forms of terror indiscriminately seems an irresponsible undertaking and runs the risk of misunderstanding the complex differences among experiences. For this reason, I am adopting the psycho-historical approach to trauma that Robert Jay Lifton has articulated over the last thirty or more years. This approach lets us see individual experiences in the context of broader historical events without taking either their personal or public value as primary.

In the first part of the essay I articulate what I see as the critical points of Lifton's thought about death events and their import for human life and survival. In the second part I discuss my understanding of the sublime and its intersection with traumatic experiences. Finally, I show how figurations of sublime affect in the scenario of *Hiroshima, mon amour* by Marguerite Duras become a way of presenting the terror of the event all the while maintaining a commitment to life and survival.

Sublime figurations like those we find in Duras's texts and scenario do not merely repeat the terrors of trauma, but are a means of gaining some critical hold on the circumstances and events that have shaped much of twentieth century life. The aesthetic of the sublime is thus a means to achieve the working through of traumatic events that Dominick LaCapra argues is central to thinking about trauma. Working through is a psychical process that seeks to gain a critical hold on the disparate images of traumatic experiences, and thus is the privileged mode of thought about trauma as it moves beyond the symptomatic repetition of images and offers the subject some critical purchase on the events that haunt him or her.<sup>1</sup>

### *Trauma and Survival*

E. Ann Kaplan succinctly summarizes the contemporary understanding of trauma:

The structure of trauma is precisely that of repeated rupture of safety and comfort by terror from some past incomprehensible event. The event possesses one without one having known it

cognitively. The event was not processed through language or mechanisms of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of the catastrophic death event a symbolic world needs to be refashioned. The symptomatic repetitions of the event menace the effort to render it significant yet the drive for order pushes us to find a way to ascribe some significance to those events and circumstances. From the ruins, something new will come about, something else will happen. The existence of ruins testifies to the persistence of being, that *something* remains. The task is to learn to think the significance of survival among the ruins.

Perhaps the best we can do is to proceed along this line with caution, vigilance. For the fact that people survive brings us into intimate contact with events that may never have even touched us. Robert Jay Lifton has worked on the question of human survival in a world where humans consistently work to ensure their own demise. This work has led him to interrogate the psychological structures of survival, which he has cast in a model of death and the continuity of life. While there is death, life continues. This simple observation begins and ends Lifton's questioning of the *how* of continuity. Lifton never dissociates the means and methods of human survival from the material conditions of history; his studies link him to the catastrophes of the modern world, Auschwitz and Dachau, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Vietnam War, the nuclear arms race. His theoretical, clinical, and political engagements with this world and the threats it has posed and continues to pose to human survival render his writings particularly relevant to the present discussion of psychological traumas and the consequent efforts to give a figure and form to the history that produced them. I hope to retain from Lifton's thought the critical engagement with the real of history that characterizes his writing about, and understanding of, human survival.

Lifton articulates a definition of survival that includes the personal, private and the public dimensions of trauma in terms of knowledge. Our survival is linked to whatever knowledge we may have gained from the circumstances of our lives. Survivors seem marked with special forms of knowledge to which the rest of us do not have access:

But whatever it is the survivor knows, that knowledge is bound up with the dialectic between life and death, with dying and being reborn. In my Hiroshima study I defined the survivor as one who has come into contact with death in some bodily or psychic fashion and has himself remained alive. I spoke of a survivor ethos, thrust into special prominence by the holocausts of the twentieth century, imposing upon all of us a series of immersions into death which mark our existence. I would go further now and say that we are survivors not only of holocausts which have already occurred but of those we imagine or anticipate as well.<sup>3</sup>

According to Lifton, the survivor dwells in the circumstances inaugurated by the catastrophic event and is bound to his or her status in a relation of death and rebirth. Furthermore, these circumstances and the survivor within them elaborate an ethos in which death touches all of us. Jean-François Lyotard puts the situation elegantly: "The word survivor implies that a being who is dead or should have died is *still* living" [Le mot survivant implique qu'une entité qui est morte ou devrait l'être est *encore* en vie].<sup>4</sup> The survivor has witnessed some event of death. From the particularity of survivors, Lifton elaborates a generalized feeling of survival: a survivor ethos pervades the century and touches all of us. Not only the victims of catastrophic events and circumstances, but all of us suffer these events in ways that we may not even know or understand. The degree of this suffering, its manifestations, and the manner of its alleviation vary widely. But variation does not erase the effects of these events. Because of the history in whose shadows we dwell, our lives have been marked by undeniable and indelible death. The history we cannot deny or escape immerses us in death, and survival becomes a fact of existence. Traumatic events, events of death, lie at the core of this existence.

This particular critical imagination demands to be thought through in its own right. According to Dominick LaCapra, we must engage the events of the past as part of the critical project of working through the effects of those same events. Repetitive behaviors or compulsive acting out are the general form of the symptoms that possess traumatized persons. Following Laplanche and Pontalis,<sup>5</sup> LaCapra finds the place of the psychical and historical work of trauma

in the containment of repetition. Here the historian opts for a Freudian stance toward the traumatic past in which working through becomes the privileged psychological process that contains the repetitions of traumatic symptoms and offers "a measure of critical purchase on problems and responsible control in action which would permit desirable change."<sup>6</sup> This intellectual work cannot lay the past to rest, but opens a field in which the future may be so organized as to liberate humans from the traps of repetition. Contrary to the position I will develop below, LaCapra finds in the sublime a fixation on the repetitions of subjects acting out their traumatic past. For him the turn to the sublime does not coincide with the process of working through, but illustrates its impossibility. To make this argument, he follows Slavoj Žižek's articulation of the sublime from *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. According to LaCapra,

The sublime object of ideology itself emerges as the Lacanian Real — an unsymbolizable limit or unrepresentable kernel of experience. Indeed, in Žižek the sublime seems to involve fixation on a radically ambivalent transvaluation of trauma as the universal hole in Being or the abstractly negative marker of castration.<sup>7</sup>

LaCapra understands the sublime primarily from Žižek's idiosyncratic presentation, and I find myself much in agreement with LaCapra. However, it is far too hasty to align the sublime with a fixation on trauma. While Žižek's text does point in that direction, I am not at all convinced that this is the only way in which to understand the sublime today. Traumatic experiences cast us in the role of survivor and the sublime is one, perhaps the privileged means of presentation in aesthetics that gives form to that survival.

If survival is the existential condition of modern life, its psychological condition is what Lifton calls "psychic numbing." In the death immersion characterized by modern traumatic circumstances and experiences, the psyche unleashes crucial defense mechanisms that overlap greatly around the issue of feeling and not feeling.<sup>8</sup> Numbing aims at a zero degree of stimulation, a subjective closing off against terror and death that makes the possibility of continuity in the future existentially possible. Numbing is thus a defensive stance taken against a world in which violence threatens annihilation of the self.

This disconnection is accomplished in two ways: first, by the blocking of images or of feelings associated with certain images,<sup>9</sup> and secondly by a diffusion of images. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart<sup>10</sup> have shown that in Pierre Janet's case history of Irène a certain context of images would instigate a total re-enactment of her traumatic experiences — the scene of her mother's death. They follow Janet's division of memory into ordinary and traumatic memory. Ordinary memory constructs past events according to the logic of narrative in which one event connects to others in a whole, integral story. Traumatic memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity.<sup>11</sup> These traumatic memories are the effect of a psychical dissociation from the traumatic event. The models of dissociation (Janet) and blocking of images and feelings (Lifton) demonstrate the psychical distance involved in the response to traumatic events and their power to disconnect us from the significance and meaning of our personal histories. These processes occur in relation primarily to a past event, to something that has happened already and that cannot be integrated into common, narrative memory.

A second path that numbing may take, according to Lifton, refers us to events that have yet to happen to us; he characterizes this path by absence of images, the lack of prior experience in relation to an event.<sup>12</sup> This second way indicates a numbing with regard to a future, unforeseeable, and unimaginable event. Lifton's examples include global, nuclear holocaust and apocalyptic violence perpetrated by the likes of the Aum Shinrikyo cult which released toxic sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1997.<sup>13</sup> This form of numbing has its origins in the knowledge of past catastrophic events and the impossibility of imagining such events happening *before* they happen. It is thereby an effort to defend the psyche from future terrors.

Numbing defends the psyche from events of death, but only at a price: "When numbing occurs, the symbolizing process — the flow and re-creation of images and forms — is interrupted. And in its extreme varieties, numbing itself becomes a symbolic death."<sup>14</sup> This symbolic death occurs as the result of a defense against death. Hence, the threat of (real) death is enough (sometimes) to effect a (symbolic) death. To better understand and nuance this position, Lifton

differentiates three general levels of numbing. These are 1) "the numbing of massive death immersion" 2) "the numbing of enhancement" and 3) "the numbing of everyday life." The first sort of numbing, that of the immersion in death takes the form of a "radical dissociation of the mind from its own earlier modes of response — from constellations of pain and pleasure, love and loss, and general capacity for fellow feeling built up over a human lifetime" (104). Clearly, this form of numbing shares much with van der Kolk and van der Hart's discussion of "dissociation" as Janet understands the term in relation to the case of Irène. Immersion in the death event and witnessing others die may be enough to jamb meaning-making forms of inscription in memory. Normal mental processes "shut down," and the dissociation of numbing takes over.

The second level of numbing, the numbing of enhancement is a different kind of psychic process. This form of numbing allows one to continue to perform the specialized tasks of one's life. Lifton points to the "selective, professional numbing of the surgeon, who cannot afford to feel the consequences of failure" (105). A good surgeon must be able to disconnect him or herself from the pain of failure if he or she will continue to be a good surgeon. Artists and intellectuals may, "block out a great number of influences in order to enhance" their work, painting, music, writing. This kind of numbing functions in the service of any number of human achievements and amounts to an acute focus of attention in a narrow range of feelings and images. It, nonetheless, disconnects us from those activities and experiences outside the range of our specializations.

The numbing of everyday life is the most difficult and problematic of these levels of numbing. Between blocking of painful images of the past and the absence of images for the future, Lifton proposes this dimension of numbing in what appears to be a contradictory fashion. In the numbing of everyday life he says, "the ordinary brain functions of keeping out stimuli becomes strained by the image overload characteristic of our time" (105). Neither dissociation from images nor lack of images, this level of numbing points to a fundamental principal in all of Lifton's writing; that is, death and life, trauma and survival, cannot be simply counterposed. This level of numbing challenges us to understand the link between the pain of massive death immersion and the disconnection that characterizes



the difference between the proliferation of images and the place they occupy in the symbolic order. For Lifton, images are necessary and important vehicles for meaning in human life. In an interview with Cathy Caruth he says, "Images and meaning are inseparable."<sup>15</sup> But the images that bear meaning cannot float unconnected without extending and exacerbating psychological numbing. The myriad of images produced in the holocausts of this century require a symbolic context, an interpretive function, if the numbing of everyday life will be, if not overcome, limited. Giving a meaning to these images, however limited that meaning is and in spite of the fact that it is not necessarily redemptive and certainly not totally adequate to the loss, opens a route to a possible fecundity in the future. The reflection on death and the continuity of life serves as the ground of hope for the future. "We are reflecting on ourselves and our situation in the service of greater awareness. And in that awareness, even just its beginning, lies our hope."<sup>16</sup>

To write about or to film traumatic circumstances requires that one approach the core of the event and try to relate it to other significant events that may be able to withstand its power. The effort to tell the story of the event bears witness to the desire to re-establish a significant world. The task of imagining the events and giving them significant form belongs to the artist. "The artist is the prophet of forms. And when forms are in radical disarray, the artist suggests patterns of reordering, even if, in the process, seeming to contribute to their further disarray."<sup>17</sup> The art of survival entails not the representation of traumatic death, but the presentation of an order, however minimal, that gives form to the images of death. The rift between traumatic death events and the continuity of life appears to be so great that nothing can contain their power. It is true that the terror of Hiroshima or of the gas chambers troubles the limits of representation. Yet, forms need to be sought and tried in order to discover means that will secure critical hold on the events. This undertaking abides as a crucial and unending task.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Sublime, Then and Now*

The aesthetics of the sublime may provide one way to gain such

critical hold and of furthering the task of understanding. Undoubtedly, the word "sublime" conjures images of the lonely traveler in awe of monumental nature, or of the power of violent storms whose maelstrom threatens the solitary witness. Indeed, the sublime seems to be inextricable from Romanticism of various forms in which the individual is transported by torrents of emotion evoked by the presentation of some terrible, terrifying, monumental, grandiose, dangerous object. Even Lyotard, whose writing has reinvigorated the philosophical thinking of this family of affects, has situated the sublime firmly in line with a Romantic lexicon. In *The Inhuman* Lyotard comments, "Obviously the word is from a romantic vocabulary."<sup>19</sup> Eighteenth century thought catalogues sublime images, and we find among the instigators of sublime affect, all manner of beasts, monumental and destructive nature. While thinking about nature in its terrifying aspects may have been sufficient to provoke sublime feelings in the eighteenth century, it seems that progress in terror's technology renders this perspective anachronistic to our time. Hence, we must break with those elements of the eighteenth century that no longer hold true. The point is not to reject the category of the sublime, but to reconstruct its philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic import to our age.

In order to illustrate my differences with this romantic understanding of the sublime, I turn now to a passage from Burke's essay to illustrate how I understand the project of linking the aesthetics of the sublime with the thought of historical trauma. For Lifton trauma points to a loss of meaningful forms to present human significance; in the sublime, what is at stake is the inability of the mind to form the presentations of the world in a comprehensible fashion. In section VII of *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Burke gives a generalized definition of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion of which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>20</sup>

Terror is the central element of the sublime, but "terror" does not receive a specific lexical meaning — so long as pain is present, terror happens. For Burke, pain and pleasure are axiomatic; they are "simple ideas, incapable of definition" (30). Between pleasure and pain, pain is the more powerful of the two: "I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the side of pleasure"; terror is the limit case of pain in so far as "the mind is capable of feeling" it (36). Terror demarcates a limit interior to pain, beyond which the mind would be incapable of feeling anything at all. Beyond terror and pain resides death:

But as pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain; because there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death: nay, what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is, that it is considered an emissary of the king of terrors. (36)

At the limit, pain announces the way to death, the king of terror. We can endure a certain amount of pain at a certain degree of intensity<sup>21</sup> and from a certain distance, but not death. For terror to spill over into delight, the relief from terror that offers the pleasures of the sublime, it must not come too close, must not threaten us too intimately. If terror breaches this limit, it becomes anesthetic: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible."<sup>22</sup> Beyond this limit, there is only death. At the core of the thought of the sublime, the thought of the death event abides. But we survive beyond this death event and this may orient our thought simultaneously to a future flourishing without forgetting (entirely) the death equivalent that marks the past. The survival of terror opens us to the field of pleasure known to Burke as delight, although in the modern transformations of terror, it has become difficult to think of pleasure even long after the event has happened, as a legitimate feeling. For the working through of traumatic histories, it becomes necessary to learn to confront our pleasures in the present with the pain of the past.

The link between trauma and the sublime falls apart here, some might object. Indeed, for Burke, the boundary between pain and its relief cannot be breached. Traumatic experiences and death

equivalents never delight us, in spite of the fact that they cease — that is, some people survive. I do not dispute this; the event as trauma, its terror, is not where I situate an aesthetic of the sublime. Instead, the aesthetics of the sublime serves as a support for the existential fact of survival. The sublime is an imaginative field, a family of affects (Lyotard) that is linked to a family of figures that serve in the work of the working through of traumatic events and circumstances. Historical trauma has produced and continues to produce an immense body of literary and cultural objects that give form to these events via linguistic or plastic presentation. These presentations seek an idiom to articulate the impossible, the unrepresentable. My claim is that we can find this idiom in a reconstructed aesthetics of the sublime that emphasizes less the elements of the grand, the noble, the human, and instead focuses on terror and its limit, death: an aesthetics that renders the inhuman in the human. The aesthetics of the sublime in this understanding originates in the event of death and configures the fact of survival. The presentation of sublime images constitutes the formative, symbolic work of that survival. In the crisis of forms that trauma inaugurates, the aesthetics of the sublime becomes the most appropriate means to reconfigure historical losses. Texts such as *Hiroshima, mon amour* do not provoke in us a “positive pleasure” but the complicated feeling of delight, it is the feeling of pleasure in pain — a pleasure that suffers. For Burke, delight is the positive feeling that comes from the removal or suspension of terror; removal of privation causes the positive feeling of delight. “The affection is undoubtedly positive; but the cause may be, as in this case it certainly is, a sort of *Privation*.”<sup>23</sup> Delight constitutes the field of feeling, which will allow us to learn to think with pain.

As in trauma, what is at stake in the sublime is a terror of endings.<sup>24</sup> Trauma is the approach of death or its equivalents to a subject; historical events of a public or private scope foreclose the subject’s future and scar him or her permanently. In trauma, we remain, and rightly so, concerned with the terror of death. In the sublime we begin to consider the pleasures of life in survival. In the tradition inaugurated by Edmund Burke, the sublime arrives as a threat held at bay, never consummated, suspended. The terrifying object or event touches us, but never intimately; if it comes too close, it will be “simply terrible.” The traumatic event is merely terrible,

painful; it is intimacy with death. The experience of death and pain through “death equivalents” are not, in themselves, primarily aesthetic, but become the material conditions for the search for forms of presentation that the working through of history and experience requires. The aesthetic of the sublime attempts to find a way to present the events of terror and death that preserves their terror without reproducing it. A reproduction of trauma offers no way of gaining critical hold on the event, what psychoanalytical theories of trauma, like LaCapra’s, understand as “acting out.” Sublime presentation through plastic or verbal images preserves the terror of presentation together with a promise of continuity. Thus Lyotard stated:

The arts, whatever their materials, pressed forward by the aesthetics of the sublime in search of intense effects, can and must give up the imitation of models that are merely beautiful, and try out surprising, strange, shocking combinations. Shock is, *par excellence*, the evidence of (something) *happening*, rather than nothing, suspended privation.<sup>25</sup>

We should add that this art does not merely search for intense effects, but is born of them. It does not only aim to shock, but is born of the experience of shock itself: shocked by the fact of survival, art dwells in the pain and the pleasure of living on after death. Just as we cannot deny the pain of trauma, we cannot deny the pleasures, however complicated those are, of survival.

### *Duras, the Traumatic, the Sublime*

Although not a survivor of Auschwitz or of Hiroshima herself, Duras’s writing dwells under their dark shadow. A child permanently scarred by the ravages of war and mass murder of the Nazi and the American kind, she writes the possibility of desire in these shadows. In this Duras shares the motto of Bertolt Brecht:

Motto

In the dark times, will there also be singing?

Yes, there will be singing.

About the dark times.<sup>26</sup>

Duras's narrations attempt to sing the darkness, to sing the pain, to sing the crimes we commit, continue to commit, the darkness we cannot expel from ourselves. Duras's aesthetic project grapples with death by attempting to "grasp the death encounter and render it significant."<sup>27</sup> What Lifton accomplishes in the discourse of psychiatry and history, Duras pursues in the imaginative field of the novel and film.

Duras's narrations escape the traumatic core that energizes them through a discourse of inventions, lies, memory, and forgetfulness. Duras's characters speculate as they remember; they invent the present rather than repeat the past. The aesthetics of the sublime permits this in the most comprehensive way because it finds its base in the undeniable pain of history, all the while seeking respite in new forms that are adequate to the experience and that can speak the truth of that experience. While this approach runs the risk of coming very close to a formalism of the sublime, it is, paradoxically enough, in this insistence on form that we come closest to historical work. Traumatic events themselves, while situated in history, occur as ruptures in it. Only in a recounting do the events become properly historical, that is, given a meaning, truth value, and context. My insistence on forms of expression and presentation, what Lifton calls symbolization, becomes a primary way to write the history of the process of human survival. The aesthetic of the sublime acknowledges its insufficiency with regard to determinations about the truth of history, but its power resides in its ability to present what knowledge cannot comprehend. Trauma disrupts the truth of experience, and as Cathy Caruth notes well, it provokes a crisis in truth as a crisis in correspondence. For at the moment when we are closest to the event, we cannot judge the truth of that event. Traumatic experiences cannot, at the time of their happening, be subsumed into categories that allow us to understand them as experiences.<sup>28</sup> Traumatic experiences ruin truth. They ruin the predication of truth or falsehood to propositions. While the sublime will never give us the *truth* of the event, it will show us a field where enjoyment may enter again into life. Trauma indicates an event of death; the sublime includes an event of death in suspension, a death that does not arrive, a death that threatens to happen but never happens. After this suspension, a second movement of life against death, a commitment to survival,

the possibility to enjoy again surges forth. To think the survival of trauma in the context of broad psychical numbing, we must, as Maurice Blanchot instructs, "Learn to think with pain" [Apprends à penser avec douleur].<sup>29</sup> To learn to think with pain requires giving a form to the source of that pain. The sublime becomes a privileged field for the reconstruction of meaning conferring signs not because it fixates us to traumatic history, but because it can think the present with the memory of the terrifying past.

## Hiroshima

Following such experiences, whose horror should have, in principle — but in the end, what is this principle? — left the world quaking, the desire to put an end to them is more powerless than it ever was. We live in a darkness without fear and without hope.

— Georges Bataille<sup>30</sup>

In darkness with neither fear nor hope, numbed, the love affair between a French actress and a Japanese architect simply happens. The scenario for *Hiroshima, mon amour* that Duras provided for Alain Resnais's film serves as the base for this discussion of the negotiation of darkness, terror, and the ecstasies of desire. The narration that characterizes Resnais's film becomes the hallmark of Duras's own narrative style. Her sparse, even bare dialogue, silences, and her use of indeterminate references work to enthrall readers or hearers of her words.

Duras's scenario of *Hiroshima, mon amour*<sup>31</sup> opens with a layering of image and text. Ultimately not used in the film, but retained in the scenario, Duras counterposes the mushroom cloud of the Bikini island explosion with the image of the naked shoulders of the lovers in an embrace. With the contradictory images of death and continuing desire, the first discussion in the film occurs as a reading: "A man's voice, flat and calm, as if reciting, says: He: You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing" (15) [*Une voix d'homme, mate et calme, récitative, annonce: Lui: Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima. Rien*] (16). To this enigmatic speech, Duras instructs the second voice, of a woman,

"also flat, muffled, monotonous, the voice of someone reciting, replies: She: I saw everything. *Everything*" (15) [*Très voilée, mate également, une voix de lecture récitative, sans ponctuation, répond: Elle: J'ai tout vu. Tout*] (Duras's emphases, 16). The insistence on the recitative quality of the speech between him and her continues through the first part of the film. It indicates the resistance of memory of the events the film will come to disclose. Recitation serves as a mechanism of defense against the power of representation that places the text and the writing in close proximity to the painful images of death; the bomb on Hiroshima and the death of the German lover in Nevers.

As "She" approaches the story of her impossible desire for the German, her enunciations lose their deliberate, read quality. To present the traumas of impossible desire, desire after the death events at Nevers and Hiroshima, Duras presents images of the sublime that grapple with the events of history in the continuity of life. Like Duras's other narrations, the scenario of *Hiroshima, mon amour* falls apart when one tries to follow the truth of the enunciations.<sup>32</sup> It is uncertain how we are to understand the truth of the text when the speakers consistently lie: "He: When you talk, I wonder whether you lie or tell the truth. She: I lie. And I tell the truth. But I don't have any reason to lie to you. Why?" (35) [Lui: Quand tu parles, je me demande si tu mens ou si tu dis la vérité. Elle: Je mens. Et je dis la vérité. Mais à toi je n'ai pas de raisons de mentir. Pourquoi? . . . ] (41). This form of discourse interrupts the usual economy of sense and non-sense. Traumatic events, Caruth claims, provoke a crisis in truth. This crisis appears in Duras's texts as the collapse of discursive forms of knowing. The collapse of the discourse of truth and lies reveals an option beyond them, the possibility for sublime presentation. This presentation takes several forms in the film, the presentation of ruins, of fragments of speech, of natural images of the sublime, and non-discursive forms of communication, cries, and caresses.

The ruins at Nevers signal the collapse of a vibrant world and at the same time witness the endurance of desire beyond that destruction. In the scene showing the illicit lovers' embrace at the base of an arch, the conflict of past and present holds our attention. The spectator knows from the conversations in Hiroshima that this desire leads to death and not fecundity. The lovers know the



impossibility of their future, yet they hold onto their desire, they follow it. Their desire becomes a sublime desire which carries death and madness with it and whose pleasures dwell in the terror of death. The sublime image of the lovers gives a general model for desire: "She: At first we met in barns. Then among the ruins. And then in rooms. Like anywhere else" (48) [Elle: On s'est d'abord rencontré dans des granges. Puis dans des ruines. Et puis dans des chambres. Comme partout] (62). The sublime enters in desire among the ruins; desire is not free, flourishing, beautiful, but ecstatic, devastating, ruinous in spite of its commitment beyond ruin in the ruins.

The sublime appears in *Hiroshima, mon amour* also as the ruins of language, or syntactical fragmentation. Such fragmentation, again, circulates around desire and love: "He: You give me great desire to love. She: Always . . . chance love affairs . . . me too" (41) [Lui: Tu me donnes beaucoup l'envie d'aimer . . . Elle: Toujours . . . les amours . . . rencontre. Moi aussi. . .] (53). The fragmentation of her enunciations signifies a difficult affirmation in the context of the ruins of desire. She has already suffered the madness of impossible desire, and goes toward it again, among the ruins of Hiroshima. The sublime points to an object that is impossible to comprehend (to take together, to understand *in toto*). When the enunciation nearly falls apart, the scenario instructs: "Some extraordinary object, not clearly defined, passes between them. I see a square frame, some (atomic?) very precise form, but without the least idea what it's used for" (41) [Passe entre eux un extraordinaire objet de nature imprécise. Je vois un cadre de bois (atomium?) d'une forme très précise mais dont l'utilisation échappe complètement] (53). Where language fragments, sublime objects appear as the supplement to the terror of silence that a fragmenting language imposes. At other times when discourse fails, other forms of communication intervene to signal terror and relief from terror. The privileged form of communication is the cries,<sup>33</sup> which tend to signal the terror of death in *Hiroshima, mon amour*. While she is in the cellar of her father's house at Nevers, cries become her connection to the world. Such connections are in fact, disconnections, for they do not open a path that would offer others a way to respond. Crying out, she signals only her isolation and solitude.

However, what binds the two lovers together more than any discursive function is the body. We see the bodies of the lovers in

sublime figurations throughout the film. Desire itself becomes sublime and this process of forming desire among the ruins is an effort to give form to traumatic history. If we take as an example her hands as they grip the Japanese lover and her hands as they cling to the cellar wall at Nevers, we see the terror of loss and the ecstasies of survival. These ecstasies, however, remain mixed with pain and stained by loss. The loss persists as she condenses her dead German lover and the lover of Hiroshima into one. The question thus arises whether her desire is committed to the Japanese lover or whether she remains attached interminably to the dead man of Nevers. In the end "He" and "She" both appear as interminably bound to their histories, each one assuming the name of the site of the trauma: Hiroshima and Nevers. In spite of their desire, in spite of its sublime power and testament to survival, its ecstasies remain limited and bound to pain. But is this not also the strength of the aesthetics of the sublime, that it links enjoyment and terror? It does not hide the terror or ask us to forget it, but links our pleasure to our pain.

Michael Roth claims that *Hiroshima, mon amour* is "douée de memoire" [endowed with memory] because the film remembers that forgetting happens.<sup>34</sup> Writing as a historian committed against forgetting, he makes a compelling case for the historical argument. But from the perspective of the aesthetics of the sublime, the film and scenario (which has been my main object of study here) present the beyond of forgetting and memory. As interminable desire among ruins, the film takes us beyond memory and forgetting to consider the pain and pleasure of living after the catastrophic death event. The death event at the core of the narration hovers at the limit of presentation between origin and destination, the thought of history and possible transformations for a felicitous future. For Lifton, the thought of the traumatic in history thrusts itself upon us as a condition that we suffer. In this condition, Duras's narration unleashes the aesthetic of the sublime as a critical response to the culture of death inaugurated by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Auschwitz and Dachau.