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Silence: History and the existential threat of nuclear war in *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* and *Hiroshima mon Amour*.

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Silence: History and the existential threat of nuclear war in *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* and *Hiroshima mon Amour.*

by

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Report

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Dedication

A mis padres: Evelyn y Enrique.

Abstract

Silence: History and the existential threat of nuclear war in *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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The paper focuses on the Cuban experience of the Missile Crisis, as portrayed in Edmundo Desnoes' *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (1968), while tracking the influence of Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) in the nuclear threat narrative. The paper will compare the processes of historicization contained within the films and the books. That comparison serves to examine the impact that the peril of nuclear war had on the concepts of memory and history in the context of postmodernity. The Missile Crisis functions, I argue, as a historical event horizon that signaled the end of the metanarrative of reason-based history; as a kind of knot that produces an epistemological break in Western history.

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Introduction

После нас - тишина — After us, silence.

Motto of the Russian Missile Troops

In the popular mind, as well as in professional historiography and academic circles, the threat of nuclear war was, and remains, often the defining feature of the Cold War: it changed the way we understand the relationship between human beings and history, we who were now in control of the material conditions to effectively end history and human life. How, then, were the processes of memorialization and historicization affected by the rise and apex of the nuclear threat narrative?

This question guides this project, which focuses on two narratives about key events of the Cold War that have become part of the cultural canons in their homelands and the world: the Bombing of Hiroshima as portrayed in Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*[1] (1959), and the October Crisis[2] as told by Desnoes' *Memorias del Subdesarrollo*[3] (1968). This essay will examine how these narratives, both in text and film, grapple with how to historicize and render into narrative form the existential threat of nuclear war; and, in turn, how these two texts exemplify the emergence of this threat, affecting the conventional understanding of history and memory. Together, these texts

1 "Hiroshima, My Love" (All translations by me.)

2 The name of the Crisis itself is a major point of scholarly debate. In Anglo-American discourse, it is usually referred to as the "Cuban Missile Crisis;" placing the emphasis on the fact that there were missiles in Cuba and reducing the event to a military or political confrontation. The Russian name for it is the Карибский кризис, or the "Caribbean Crisis," which artfully avoids acknowledging that there were missiles involved, and instead presents the events as geopolitical in nature. The Cuban name for the affair, the "Crisis de Octubre" or "October Crisis," is the most appropriate for the purposes of this paper, as it frames the issue as one not limited by geography or geopolitics; one that greatly affected the temporal (and thus historical) narratives about the Cold War, in particular, and modernist history, in general.

3 "Memories of Underdevelopment"

bookend the global nuclear threat: its beginning with the Bombing of Hiroshima, and the October Crisis as its climax. This span of time and events became the existential moment of modernity, the moment when the limits of rationality were exposed and the modernist conception of history was exhausted; the moment that led to the collective realization of modernity's mortality.

I propose in what follows that the October Crisis is intrinsically connected to the crisis of inherited cultural metanarratives because, as a near-recurrence of Hiroshima, it made apparent the internal contradictions of modernity, a purported era of postwar peace which actually manifested as the tendency towards self-destruction, global instability, and crisis. The October Crisis made apparent that the West's metanarrative of rationality, both as the internal logic of history and as guiding principle for human agency, contained within itself the epistemic means of its own collapse; the condition of contradiction overpowering rationality as status quo.

The present discussion will tie these two issues together. First, it rebuilds the historical narrative of the October Crisis to show how this event truly constituted a point of no return for the grand narrative of Western Civilization where the material conditions for the end of history were manifested. After outlining the event, I will argue that this narrative contains within it a critical breaking point of metanarratives and thus, it is the key to the understanding of postmodernity. I will theorize this event as a collective existential crisis, measuring its impact on historicization as, what I call, the 'historical event horizon' that divides traditional teleological history from what Lyotard defined as the postmodern condition— the end of a kind of master historical narrative. Finally, I will analyze *Hiroshima Mon Amour,* and *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* to track the impact of

this historical event horizon in two specific cases: the Franco-Japanese experience of Hiroshima (as origin of the nuclear threat) and the Cuban crisis (as climax of the nuclear threat) as the origin and culmination of the contradiction within the modern model of history and historiography, giving way to the intrusion of memory and the subjective experience.

Context: The Cold War and its Threat Narratives

The twentieth century saw the two largest armed conflicts ever before reaching its midpoint. World War I, the "war to end all wars," was quickly followed by World War II. After the wholesale devastation of Europe, during the Potsdam Conference on July 17, 1945; the UK, the USA, and the USSR negotiated the partition of Europe: the west administered by the Allies, the east by the Soviets. This agreement meant the metaphorical descent of the Iron Curtain separating the Eastern and Western blocs. In the following years, relations between the USSR and the USA continued to deteriorate and led to the policy of “Communist containment,” which emphasized that “stopping Soviet expansion was the West’s top priority” (Hillstrom 28). In 1947, President Truman committed to actively “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures” (Hillstrom 43). This commitment translated into policy as a determination to counter the Soviet Union, or any real or perceived international Soviet involvement, at every move. The fundamental opposition of the Cold War was set into place: "Communists" as a threat against the West.

The situation escalated when the ideology was reinforced by the military, and a new commitment to nuclear warfare, purportedly keeping the peace through a policy of mutually assured destruction. The US had bombed Hiroshima in 1945; the Soviet nuclear

program detonated its first device in 1949, the RDS-1 (Hillstrom 69), the same year the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed—by no means a coincidence. In response to the creation of NATO, and particularly to the inclusion of West Germany in it, the Warsaw Pact was formed in 1955, which included the Soviet Union, East Germany, and most of Eastern Europe. These two 'defense alliances' formed the map onto which the battle of Communism versus democracy was to be projected. During the 1950s, the Korean War was understood in the terms set up by these decisions. The Korean conflict was characterized by Truman as Communism's attempt to "conquer independent nations" (Hillstrom 70) through invasion and war. Stalin, on the contrary, more directly continued narratives from the Second World War rather than allude to post-war developments, when he deemed the Korean War a struggle "for liberation from the imperialist yoke" (Hillstrom 80).

What is striking about such political narratives from the period between the end of World War II and the October Crisis, both superpower blocs arrogated unto themselves absolute teleological historical justification; meaning both claimed to have history on their side, allowing them to claim their actions as rational and within the framework of threat and military enforced peace.

Just a few years later, in 1953, the power of this historical narrative would manifest itself in the Cuban Revolution. Initially, the uprising of the people against a corrupt government of elites was positively received by both the USA and the USSR. Both traced narratives of these events as a nationalist revolution not aligned with either power. When the Cuban revolution that had started in 1953 finally came to a conclusion on January 1, 1959, its place in history began to be rewritten, as it became evident that

the right-wing, military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista was heavily backed by the US. Through the Cold War Framework, the subsequent events became understood as an ongoing struggle of communism against capitalism.

During the revolution, the Communist party of Cuba sided with the Batista regime and not with the revolutionary movement. Soon after taking over, the Castro government "moved decisively to reshape Cuba as a Communist nation," (Hillstrom 233) nationalizing the oil and sugar industries, which represented major economic interests of the United States, and gaining the favor of the communist party. Although the Platt Amendment ("An Act Making appropriation for the support of the Army" 11), which had given the United States power over Cuban defense and foreign affairs in the aftermath of the Spanish-American war had been abrogated in 1934, the new revolutionary government sought to eliminate any colonial links between the two countries. The anti-Americanism of the revolution made the United States increasingly worried, and the Soviets increasingly hopeful. As Khrushchev put it: "They feared, as much as we hoped, that a socialist Cuba might become a magnet that would attract other Latin American countries to socialism" ("Khrushchev Remembers" 492). A socialist, even if not yet Soviet-aligned, independent Cuba simply would not do for the Eisenhower administration.

Slowly but surely, the Cuban revolution became more and more aligned with the Soviet Union as it became its principal trading partner and international backer. The White House charged the Central Intelligence Agency to come up with a plan to "remove" Castro (Jones 13), which included working with the "Mafia" to assassinate Fidel (Kennedy 9). The Eisenhower administration came up with a plan to attack Cuba

with a group of 1400 men, set to land on the Bay of Pigs, which would then serve as the spark to start an anti-revolutionary war. The invasion was a failure and further inflamed the animosity between Cuba and the United States (Hillstrom 234). In Washington, support for a major military action against Cuba mounted, including major voices in and out of the administration, the likes of Richard Nixon (Jones 14) and General Curtis LeMay, whose command had dropped the atomic bombs over Japan (Morris 13:05). President Kennedy himself participated, aboard the Enterprise aircraft carrier, in the military exercise "Quick Kick" which simulated an invasion of a Caribbean island. The exercise, which mobilized more than 40,000 troops, took place on the east coast of the United States and on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques (Jiménez Gómez 65). This move was interpreted by the Cubans as an aggression and a threat; and the final step into the Crisis took place in June 1962, when Kennedy and Khrushchev met in Austria to discuss Berlin and nuclear proliferation; however, the summit ended in "a diplomatic disaster" (Hillstrom 234).

Khrushchev, aware of the presence of US nuclear missiles in Turkey, Italy, and the UK and convinced that a US invasion of Cuba was imminent, decided to send Soviet nuclear missiles to the Caribbean ("Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes" 170). Castro, who had originally sought a declaration of military aid from the USSR, was not interested, at least initially, in obtaining nuclear missiles. But Khrushchev's view prevailed and, secretly in merchant ships, the Soviet Union began smuggling nuclear weapons and medium range missiles as well as thousands of troops into Cuba. Both countries then began building the missile launch sites under the cover of the tropical jungle. On October 16, 1962, the Kennedy administration received information from the

CIA that “dozens of Soviet missiles with nuclear warheads were being deployed to Cuba” (Hillstrom 234) Although the United States had obtained evidence of the presence of Soviet weaponry in the island, the Kennedy administration had no precise information about the number of missiles, nor if they were operational. The following 13 days would be marked by tense negotiations, distrust, and chance.

The full scope of the Crisis was not clear until thirty years later when, in a meeting with Fidel Castro in 1992, former Secretary of Defense and advisor to President John F. Kennedy Robert McNamara learned that during the crisis there were up to 162 nuclear weapons in Cuba (Morris 16:35), including dozens of medium-range missiles that could reach the east coast in minutes. After regaining composure, McNamara and company finally realized how close it had been: “in the event that the communications link with Moscow might be severed, Soviet field commanders were authorized to use tactical nukes against an American invasion” (Kennedy 8), an invasion that was being planned and pushed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the Crisis developed.

This is the crucial moment for the West's historical narrative: although the parties involved did not know so at the time, all the material conditions for the consummation of the nuclear threat were given. I will quote Premier Khrushchev at length describing this exact moment and the consequences of invading Cuba, to show that his view of history had become virtually apocalyptic:

> If you did this as the first step towards the unleashing of war, well then, it is evident that nothing else is left to us but to accept this challenge of yours. If, however, you have not lost your self-control and sensibly conceive what this might lead to, then, Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the ends

> of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose (Khrushchev "Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 26, 1962").

Khrushchev described with simplicity the epistemic content of this event: history had reached an endpoint, beyond which the chain of normal signifiers would cease to refer to experience and when the narrative itself would cross the threshold of the historical event horizon to become a narrative of a quite different type.

The metaphor of the rope and the knot allows us to consider the October Crisis as more than a political and military conflict. These are narratives of collapse, reflecting an epistemic crisis, the end of the metanarrative of a reason-based understanding of history. The tension between East and West, both with their own credible claim to rationality, had led to the creation of the material conditions to destroy all narratives, including that of rationality itself. When understood in this light, the Crisis constitutes a unique event, one which, in a metaphorical space, constitutes a boundary outside of there are no more historical events to be understood in conventional terms. The incompleteness intrinsic in the two parties' subjective perspective led to a seemingly rational view of reality that, suddenly, had become untenable. There can be no complete theory of the world; there are no master narrative, only *petit récits,* localized narratives.

Postmodernity: When Metanarratives Fail

The rise of postmodernity is marked by the fall of grand narratives like those that came to an end with the October Crisis, creating what the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard famously defined as "incredulity toward metanarratives" ("The Postmodern Condition" XXIV). One of the first "casualties" (XI) of postmodernity is, according to Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson, the modernist conception of history and its *telos*. Throughout World War II, the fierce rhetoric of liberal democracy, fascism, and soviet communism contended against each other for the title of the master narrative of history, all sharing the claim to some kind of preordained fate, be it nationalism, individual liberty, or equality. Within these narratives persists a modernist Hegelian conception of history, that rests on the Hegelian notion "that world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational process —whose rationality is not that of a particular subject, but divine and absolute— this is a proposition whose truth we must assume; its proof lies in the study of world history itself, which is the image and enactment of reason" ("Lectures on the Philosophy of World History" 28). With progress at its heart, the idea of an ascending, rational, and teleological history continued and was shared by both blocs of the Cold War: the liberal capitalism of the West, and the Soviet communism of the East.

Understood in a dialectical framework the clash of ideas can be seen as part of a dialectical historical process. In this case, it would make sense to agree with Fukuyama about the end of history ('end' here meaning completion; not cancelling) later in the century. But the October Crisis, although heavily resembling a dialectical moment, was not so much so, as it did not produce a synthesis so much as a breakdown of its own

internal logic: reason—it was a knot, not a dialectic. Both parties were convinced of the rationality of their positions, as well as of being on the 'right side of history' and relied on the same narratives of reason and progress to sustain their irreconcilable positions. The Crisis, as a metonym for nuclear war, thus manifested the limits of rationality as a theory of history. As McNamara points out "We came that close to nuclear war. Rational individuals – Kennedy was rational, Khrushchev was rational, Castro was rational – rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies. And this danger exists today … In the end we lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war." (Morris 15:00).

It is also useful to examine this failure of the idea of history as process, with each era following from the previous one, according to an internal, coherent logic that eventually reaches the logical result of those steps: a completion. This characterization of history would make it independent, to a great degree, of human agency: it would be equal to a natural law for a materialist worldview, or the will of God for a theist one. In both of these scenarios, human beings are passengers in the metro of history. I posit that the counterfactual at the heart of this narrative crisis, the nuclear war following the Crisis, as well as the Crisis itself, marks a fundamental shift in the understanding of history. The event meant that history could no longer have a *telos* external to humans, since the material conditions were now present for humans to end, to cancel, history by their own choice and agency. The Crisis was, in a way, a collective existential crisis for modernity; the realization of its own (literal, bodily) mortality.

This connection between historical narratives and the body can serve to understand the rise of the use of the term 'memory' in parallel, and sometimes in place

of, ‘history’ in academic literature referring to the era past the Cold War. Klein tracks the usage of the word in historical discourse, saying: “History, as with other keywords, finds its meanings in large part through its counter-concepts and synonyms, and so the emergence of memory promises to rework history’s boundaries. Those borders should attract our interest, for much current historiography pits memory against history even though few authors openly claim to be engaged in building a world in which memory can serve as an alternative to history” (128). The discovery of the boundaries of history demanded of critics a rethinking, not just about the boundaries of collective self-imagination, but about the process of creating history itself. The emphasis on memory and conflicting narratives instead of history allows for new kinds of discourse to emerge, ones that are not bound by the presumption of rationality and individuality, and instead based on material conditions and experience, as Klein puts it a “diverse and shifting collection of material artifacts and social practices” (130). Memory, contingent on materiality and interaction, is much more fragile than history, or more accurately, it is equally fragile but much more self-aware of its fragility.

Let us continue examining Hegel’s definition of history in order to better understand what has been lost when historical narratives turn into knots instead of conflicts: “History combines in our language the objective as well as the subjective side…. It means both *res gestae* (the thing that happened) and *historia rerum gestarum* (the narration of things that happened)” (“The Philosophy of History” 76). In this historical model, the fact and the narrative are inextricably linked by reason and it seems to contain equal parts objectivity and subjectivity; providing a solid stability based on the *res gestae*, the illusion of having ‘history on our side.’ The October Crisis, and the later

rise of postmodern of incredulity towards metanarratives, make evident that the relationship between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* is not a one-to-one relation but a one-to-many relation: a single event can produce many histories; thus destabilizing the process.

However, I must make a clarification: this is not an anti-materialist argument; it is true that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 11-12), but rather the results of said material conditions are not univocal. Here, it is useful to bring up phenomenological perspectivism, first formulated by Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. The idea here is that every object or situation produces an infinite number of possible perspectives, all equally authentic for their corresponding point-of-view (55). It is fair to say that an Ortega y Gassetian omniscient observer, who comprehends all possible perspectives through a single subjectivity, would be this Marx's perfectly-determined-by-the-material-conditions consciousness. But, in nature human minds are limited in spacetime and, thus, in the number of perspectives that they can comprehend for a single object or event. Even collectives of human minds, such as the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union, could not comprehend the totality of the event unfolding in Cuba. Rationality is, thus, hard limited by the phenomenological nature of information.

It is no coincidence, then, that existentialism rose in European thought after World War II alongside the narrative breakdown I have been describing. After the grand social narratives had led to the largest human conflict, the limits of rationality and the fragility of collective human bodily existence became apparent. The centrality of human

actions, and the need to understand those actions as history, is at the heart of Sartre's notion of existentialism, which "affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity" (Sartre 18) and that "Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre 22).

Existentialism declares as valid only narratives that proclaim the absolute freedom and agency of the individual human, which can be both empowering and crushing, since it rules out the possibility of an objective epistemic foundation for human life, and thus for history as well. This is the reason why I identify the Crisis as a collective existential crisis: although individual human mortality has always been a possibility, collective human mortality only became possible with the invention of the bomb, and only became probable and likely during the Crisis. As a result of individual and collective human agency's centrality in history, the line between history and memory has becomes increasingly blurry, once the era's politics moves beyond dialectic and into mutually assured destruction. As a result of the loss of *telos* and a grand unifying narrative after the bomb and after the October Crisis, it becomes harder and harder to fix, explain, and theorize history.

History becomes principally contingent on one set of material conditions: human agency. We will begin by examining the origins of this existential crisis of the border between history and memory, as depicted in *Hiroshima Mon Amour.*

First Archipelago: Japan

Hiroshima Mon Amour (1959) is a French-Japanese film, directed by Alain Resnais, that portrays a conversation between a French actress and a Japanese architect in postwar Hiroshima. The story of the film itself is intertwined with the plot, which revolves around a French production crew shooting a documentary about the bombing of Hiroshima since the director of the film, Alain Resnais, initially set out to make a documentary about the atomic bomb, but ended up being unable to complete the task and instead made the film we know now (Monaco 34). Marguerite Duras wrote the screenplay and was actively participant in the production of the film, revising the text as the process went on, and calling the final result a "false documentary" (Monaco 34), a film that uses documentary footage to tell a fictional story.

The film opens ominously, with a shot of bodies made of or covered in ash or sand. Extra-diegetically, their voices begin the struggle for the sovereignty of memory: "Lui — Tu n'as rien vu, a Hiroshima. Elle — J'ai tout vu. Tout" [4] (Duras 3:00). The opening line sets the tone for the rest of the film: not just narratives, but also the process of memory breaks down when confronted with the unspeakable. The unspeakable here is not a hyperbole. It is an act that, by virtue of its own ultra-violent nature, cannot be witnessed and recounted: "You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it….How can you know that the situation itself exists?" (Lyotard "Differend" 3). The oxymoronic form of the opening line raises an important issue: although She has seen everything in

[4] "He — You have seen nothing in Hiroshima. She — I have seen everything. Everything."

Hiroshima (the place), meaning the material remains of the place as well as the museums for the victims; She could not have seen any part of the event.

In this depiction, the ultra-violent nature of the bomb problematizes, not only how to historicize something that cannot be remembered, but even how to remember something that cannot be witnessed. She asks Him: "Tu y-étais toi, à Hiroshima? — Non… biensur"[5] (Duras 16:00) He responds, indicating the impossibility of witnessing this event. The film recognizes this problem as a *mise-en-abîme*: there is a film within a film, since the French actress is in Japan shooting a documentary; Hiroshima itself is not history, but a particular kind of fiction. This hierarchy can be seen as recognition of the limits of history as a narrative, itself circumscribed by the limits of reason, when facing the unspeakable. The recognition that, in different ways, both Hiroshima (the historical event) and Hiroshima (the film) are manufactured narratives attempting and failing to grasp the *res gestae* of the bombing.

After the event of the bombing, the very ability to remember has been compromised. "Non, tu n'es pas douée de mémoire"[6] (Duras 11:00). He says to Her. It is not that Her personal memory has disappeared, it is that the modernist conception of history that had thus far shaped Her individual and collective memory has been rendered obsolete and completely unable to describe (much less historize) an event like Hiroshima. "Comme toi, moi aussi, j'ai essayé de lutter de toutes mes forces contre l'oubli. Comme toi, j'ai oublié. Comme toi, j'ai désiré avoir une inconsolable mémoire, une mémoire d'ombres et de pierre"[7] (11:10). She ponders the crisis of history and memory brought

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5 "Were you there, in Hiroshima? — No… Of course."

6 "No, you are not endowed with memory."

7 "Like you, I, too, fought with all my strength against oblivion. Like you, I forgot. Like you, I desired a inconsolable memory, a memory of shadows and stone "

forth by this *oubli*, which materially translates to the bomb, but finds it impossible to counteract it; to go back to an edenic conception of history, eternal, teleological, and rational. She would like to have a memory beyond consolation, that is to say not requiring the consolation of a purpose, but one that is able to interiorize the Camusian absurd. The sequence continues: "J'ai lutté pour mon compte, de toutes mes forces, chaque jour, contre l'horreur de ne plus comprendre du tout le pourquoi de se souvenir. Comme toi j'ai oublié..."[8] (11:30). The point of rupture corresponding to the bombing can be seen as a rupture in the chain of signifiers, the entrance into a timeline where meaning can longer be assigned. This moment of the unspeakable threatens not only the ability to make sense but also the structure of sense-making. In other words, a moment of the unspeakable destabilizes referential sense-making systems (like the chain of signifiers) that depend on continuity; since, once there is an element that the system cannot process, the continuity is broken.

The film hints at the unique nature of the Bombing of Hiroshima as the start of a larger process: "Lui — Qu'est-ce que c'était pour toi, Hiroshima en France? Elle — La fin de la guerre, je veux dire, complètement …. Le commencement d'une peur inconnue"[9] (21:09). The "unknown fear" is the inability to historicize, the loss of memory that plagues the protagonists is not limited to them now, but it is a feature of the postmodern framework. The collapse of the grand narrative of modernist history leads to the self-awareness of narrative, which in the film is represented when She is questioned:

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8 "I fought on my own, with all my strength, against the horror of no longer understanding at all the reasons to remember. Like you, I forgot."

9 "He —What was it like for you in France, Hiroshima? She —The end of the war, I mean, completely… the beginning of an unknown fear."

"Pourquoi tu es à Hiroshima? —Un film. Je joue dans un film"[10] (16:47). This utterance is true both in the fictional diegetic sense and also in the historic sense, which now becomes intertwined with the extra-diegetic level: both Emmanuelle Riva and the character she plays are French actresses shooting in Hiroshima. The uncertainty on whether the utterance breaks the fourth wall or not speaks to the uncertainty of the wall being there in the first place; in other words, the separation between historical and fictional narratives is reduced to a minimum.

A final point about Hiroshima is the ominous presence of night and silence. Since 1947, the Doomsday Clock maintained by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has been used represents the likelihood of nuclear war, where midnight means nuclear war is imminent or underway. Hiroshima resorts to this symbol in several points: "Elle — On dit qu'il va faire de l'orage avant la nuit"[11] (31:14); "Elle — La nuit, ca ne s'arrête jamais à Hiroshima? Lui — Jamais ca ne s'arrête, à Hiroshima"[12] (1:02:40); "La nuit ne vas pas finir"[13] (1:14:00). Apart from the association of night and death on a personal level, night here stands for the threat of the end of historization and the material end of events, and thus, history. The night of nuclear war functions as this historical event horizon, a point of no return in a timeline that would render all other timelines unviable: the end of narratives and absolute silence.

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10 "Why are you in Hiroshima? —A film. I'm acting in a film."
11 "She —It is said that it storms before nightfall."
12 "She —Night; does it ever end in Hiroshima? He— in Hiroshima, it never ends."
13 "The night will not end."

Second Archipelago: Cuba

If *Hiroshima Mon Amour* tells the story of the breakdown of the border between memory and history that comes with the first atomic bomb, then this film about Cuba and the crisis, signals the knot and its fate. *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (1968) was directed by Tomás Gutierrez Alea and written by Edmundo Desnoes, and it is, probably, both authors' best known work. The plot revolves around Sergio, a bourgeois failed writer, furniture producer, and landlord. After it becomes more and more clear that the Cuban revolution will lead to a socialist state, his wife and family decide to flee to Miami. Sergio decides to stay to examine the course of the revolution, or at least that is the excuse he gives his family, since the precarious state of their marriage is revealed early in the film.

The first scene after the title credits shows Sergio saying hugging his wife in the airport, as she prepares to leave Cuba. After leaving his arms, he mouths a couple of words, but nothing comes out (Desnoes 3:44). His wife and family are not the only ones leaving Cuba: "La Habana 1961 — NUMEROSAS PERSONAS ABANDONAN EL PAÍS"[14] (Desnoes 2:08). These "numerous people" are the Cuban bourgeois: all wearing suits, ties, hats, and pearls, and have the means to suddenly leave the country. This bourgeois exodus is especially damaging to a country like pre-revolutionary Cuba: extremely unequal in terms of wealth and education, and heavily invested in the creation of a liberal, European-style, nation state. As Adam Sharman points out, "'The people' may figure in European anthems and constitutional tracts, but it is the bourgeoisie which manages both the nation and representations of the nation, making the nation in its own

[14] "Havana 1961 NUMEROUS PEOPLE LEAVE THE COUNTRY"

image and making itself the citizen or, rather, subject of the nation" (Sharman 647). The loss of the bourgeoisie means in this case the loss of the manager of the state and of national identity.

The now declassed Sergio goes back home and immediately sits down at the typewriter: "Todos los que me querían y estuvieron jodiendo hasta el último minuto se fueron"[15] (Desnoes 6:00). Much in the same spirit as Hiroshima Mon Amour, Sergio is writing his journal, which, at the same time, is the film we are watching about him writing his journal. The *mise-en-abîme* reëstablishes the historiographical function of the film: to remember an event that cannot be witnessed, and thus the necessity of blurring the lines between historical and fictional narratives. One of Sergio's first lines of dialog confronts the historiographical crisis he finds himself in: "Llevo años diciendome que si tuviera tiempo me sentara y escribiera un libro de cuentos o llevara un diario… ahora voy a saber si tengo algo que decir"[16] (6:40). Much like the female protagonist of Hiroshima, Sergio has lost his capacity to memorialize.

Sergio realizes he is now in an ahistorical situation when he looks out the window and declares: "Aquí todo sigue igual. Así, de pronto, parece una escenografía, una ciudad de cartón"[17] (8:10). The historical narrative has lost its metaphysical aura and is now exposed as a societal construct, and a flimsy one at that.

Memorias, like *Hiroshima*, does not follow a linear progression. Here, the narrative goes, unannounced, to the worst parts of his marriage when he's torturing his wife with recordings of her voice (9:50). Then, jumping again to the future, Sergio's life

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15 "Everyone who loved me and annoyed me until the very end is now gone."

16 "I've been telling myself for years that, if I had time, I'd sit down and write a storybook or a diary… Now I'll know if I have anything to say."

17 "Here everything stays the same. At first sight, it seems like a stage, a cardboard city."

narrative has lost any structure: he's alone except for one friend who is also leaving, he seduces several women, his writings are disconnected and his self-image becomes more and more broken. After a political roundtable, supposedly revolutionary but an event that seems to Sergio as simply a rehash of the old society, he is walking around on his own (1:07:00), his feelings of alienation reaching their acme: "The round table ends, Sergio leaves and the film cuts to a long shot of him walking alone. The camera gradually zooms in on Sergio until he is so close that his image is obliterated. This visual obliteration is accompanied by the protagonist's own voice-over...: 'ahora empieza, Sergio, tu destrucción final'[18]" (Sharman 655). Sergio's personal breakdown comes as a result of the fall of his class and of his national identity. The liberal bourgeois state that is at the center of the nation-state project needs the teleological model of history to justify itself and now, at the cusp of the October Crisis, all metanarratives have lost validity, especially for Cubans in the eye of the storm: "The decomposition of the image is the prelude to Sergio's disintegration...: he laments the lost relationship with Hanna; is tried for seducing Elena; learns of the imminent Missile Crisis and slowly goes to pieces, shocked by people's insouciance" (Sharman 655). The collective loss of *telos* that the breakdown of modernity produces also implies the individual loss of *telos*. A narrative with a future and a goal make no sense to him in a country that has lost the means to plot its way forward.

It is at this point that the film enters the October Crisis, in scenes during which Sergio has virtually no lines. With scrolling text and voiceovers of Kennedy's and Castro's speeches over newsreels, the film shows the failed attempt made by the modern

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18 "Now begins, Sergio, your final destruction."

nation-states to historicize the crisis. The film cuts to white and, seemingly, to an explosion, static overwhelming the audio channel, light overwhelming the visual channel (Desnoes 1:32:25); but, immediately afterwards, we see Sergio walking alone again, this time by the ocean. The next scene alternates cuts of Sergio in his apartment suffering an existential crisis, and images of tanks and other military equipment being deployed; it seems that he has nothing left to do but wait for the end. The shot shows the Cuban military deployment in Havana, with Sergio looking on in silence and impotence; the film cuts to white -- his nuclear experience of a narrative exploding, like a bomb demolishing his world

When discussing what he deems "apocalyptic events," Antoine Bousquet describes them as "revelatory and prophetic experiences which rupture our sense of continuity of time, thus forming a temporal break and omnipresent point of reference around which we subsequently reïnscribe our historical and political narratives both leading to the event and flowing from it" (741). Although this description is very useful to think about an event such as 9/11in the United States, or even the bombing of Hiroshima, it is still not radical enough to deal with the counterfactual of nuclear war posed by the Crisis, because there formers are only locally apocalyptic events, while after the latter there can be no "political or historical narratives… flowing from it;" it is the very end of narratives. The threat of permanent silence makes historiography aware of its own bodily limits and contingency, and creates the existential moment of history that attempts to comprehend its *telos*-less, properly absurd, finitude and limits.

A conclusion

The two films in the scope of this study confront the single greatest issue of the postmodern era when history, as their protagonists know it, has collapsed. How to speak of the unspeakable? How to render into a narrative that which cannot be witnessed or retold? The concept of the sublime, formulated by Immanuel Kant as part of his work in aesthetics, is that which "is absolutely great… what is beyond all comparison great. What is indicated is not a pure concept of understanding, still less an intuition of the senses; and just as little is it a concept of reason, for it does not import any principle of cognition" (Kant 78-79). Following from this definition, the sublime cannot be *begriffen*[19] through reason, nor perceived with the senses, nor imagined (and thus described); it is that which escapes the human mind and its capacity to memorialize and historicize. I hold that the expanding narrative arc, reaching from Hiroshima's destruction to the possible normalization of utter destruction that people like Sergio confront in the Cuba of the October Crisis, is properly located in the liminal space between history and the sublime. Nuclear war, of which we catch a glimpse from this side of the historical event horizon, has become the new master signifier of the Cold War era, reaching to past narratives of ideology and national threats. The atom bomb, thus, came to be seen as the culmination of total war, the purest expression of conflict's escalation in intensity and breadth, the harnessing and projection of all available energies for the purpose of the complete submission of the enemy, including through his total destruction if necessary. The two films sketched here, *Hiroshima* and *Memorias*, are thus both engaged in an impossible task: comprehending the "unthinkable" (Bousquet 758). Hiroshima attempts

[19] Grasped

to memorialize the event of the bombing by circumlocuting it. Describing all the events of personal memory before, and after, and around, it remains fully aware of its inability to narrate the event in order to rationalize it or historicize it; instead the film opts for aestheticizing the effects of the bombing as vaguely comprehensible memory rather than properly fact-based history; in Symbolist fashion: “Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit.”[20] (Mallarmé 307). *Memorias* takes more from a later, evolving, absurdist philosophical position contained within the escalation of the Cold War into mutually assured destruction, thus reinforcing the materiality of human existence over and against the mostly irrational internal logic of national narratives that no longer serve their nations or their citizens. The self-manifestation of the limits of rationality and the power of the absurd make it hard for Sergio, and the modern subject, to continue existing in a world without a *telos*.

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20 “To paint not the object, but the effect it produces.”

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