

MEMORY AND FILM

Cinema is obsessed with memory.

Time, memory and the past are thematic threads which run through the whole range of film, persistently recurring in national cinemas across the international spectrum.

From the popularist mainstream to the obscurest avant-garde – from Steven Spielberg to Andrey Tarkovsky, Alfred Hitchcock to Jean Cocteau, David Lynch to Wong Kar-Wai – it's difficult to think of a major film artist who hasn't explored the theme of time, memory and the past.

The medium exhibits properties which makes a focus on memory attractive to cinema. The frisson of film, its actuality quality, its ability to pinpoint a moment of time visually and aurally with a visceral immediacy difficult for other mediums.

Yet also the sweep of cinema, its ability to move through time and space with the momentum of montage and the evocation of flashback. Cinema can give us an entire life in a few seconds. The fleeting mental images cinema is able to summon – the pictures in the fire – resemble the process of recall itself.

Cinema is protective of memory and its veracity. Many films harbour deep suspicion of experiments with memory – *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Condry, 2004) and *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002) are examples. I can only think of one movie which guardedly approves of experiments with memory and recall

being of potential benefit to mankind – Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World* (1991).

Living vicariously through the recall of others is negatively portrayed in dystopian post-apocalyptic narratives such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *Strange Days* (Bigelow, 1995) and *Johnny Mnemonic* (Longo, 1996). Such films together with non-dystopian narratives such as *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001) frequently express memory confusion, the reawakening from amnesia or emergence from trauma involving expressionistic imagery where the screen itself appears to disintegrate.

Other cinema has involved itself in alternative realities, where memory and experience is subject to the interpretation of different individuals, the latest example of which is the shallow and manipulative *Vantage Point* (Travis, 2008), recently in cinemas. Yet Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) still remains the supreme example of this form.

The themes of time, memory and the past have many manifestations in cinema across all forms and genres. The most influential of such movies remains Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo*, the director's favourite production – and much imitated, paid homage to and referenced throughout cinema, again in both mainstream and avant-garde. The famous scene where the ghostly Madeleine points to the cross-section of a tree and says, 'here I was born... and here I died' is embedded in cinematic history.

Vertigo made an impression upon the French experimental filmmaker and writer, Chris Marker. His 1962 30-minute dystopian film drama *La Jette* is comprised entirely of a montage

of black-and-white still photos resembling memory film. *La Jette* was greatly influenced by *Vertigo*, which is referenced in *La Jette* and also in Marker's 1983 global documentary, *Sunless*.

La Jette was in turn to inspire Terry Gilliam's 1995 movie *Twelve Monkeys*, which also references *Vertigo*. Both films embrace the theme of the time traveller, but also – like *Vertigo* – explore the concept of reconstruction, history repeating itself and predestiny.

Images from childhood haunt the lead protagonists of both films – images which foretell their deaths, reprised and reconstructed from the earlier images in the final moments of each film.

The process of filmmaking in itself is a form of reconstruction. History and experience are reconstructed in films, both fact and fiction, forming a memory bank of images. Wong Kar-Wai filmed areas of Hong Kong in his movie *In the Mood for Love* (2000) in order to create a record of the cityscape before it disappeared.

In the mid-fifties, Chris Marker worked with a French documentary director who would become the most important auteur of the theme of memory and time: Alain Resnais.

His films include *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Muriel* (1963), *Providence* (1977). He was an important participant of the French New Wave, although different from the magic circle of Godard, Truffaut and Chabrol. Resnais came into the New Wave not through film criticism but from documentary filmmaking.

Resnais is the great film artist of time and memory. Born in Brittany in 1922 and still making movies now in his seventies, Resnais suffered sustained bouts of illness as a child and spent most of his childhood reading Proust.

I am going to discuss certain aspects of Resnais first fiction film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, in some detail. It's a very complex film, but I want to explore certain specific areas of the movie, especially in relation to a project of my own.

I am developing a practice-based PhD at Bournemouth University on the theme of time and memory and its representation in cinema. The practice part involves writing a movie screenplay.

My screenplay is about one of the pilots involved in dropping the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima on the morning of 6th August 1945. There is an immediate and obvious connection between what I am writing and the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

The true story of Hiroshima pilot Claude Eatherly is the subject of my screenplay. Eatherly was so guilt-stricken at having been a member of the team which dropped the A-Bomb that upon his return to America he began robbing banks and forging cheques with the intention of starting up a fund for Hiroshima victims. He spent the next twenty years in and out of prisons and asylums.

Eatherly was not actually on board the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber which dropped the A-Bomb on Hiroshima. He was in the advance weather plane and had conducted reconnaissance an hour before. Eatherly had sanctioned the dropping of the bomb on the basis of the favourable weather conditions.

He was distressed by the fact that the original targets were changed because of the vagaries of the weather and the brutal irony of life and death being dependent upon a quirk of fate.

Back in America, Eatherly committed crime deliberately as a means of destroying his image as a heroic figure. He wished to efface any possibility of being perceived as a hero – as one of the men who helped end the second world war.

He wished to disabuse everyone of the idea that bombing Hiroshima was a heroic act and to undermine the concept of hero.

He refused to be a war hero or an anti-war hero, despite being celebrated by the peace movements of the sixties.

In my screenplay Eatherly is traumatised by his immediate past. Likewise the lead protagonist in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is traumatised by her past.

Eatherly has similar traits to the French woman in Resnais' film – breakdown and loss of identity, but also criminality.

The woman in Resnais' film says: 'I went mad about being bad.'

There is one main difference between the two characters: Eatherly wishes to keep the memory of Hiroshima alive by committing crime and collecting a fund for the victims of the A-bomb.

Conversely, the French woman in Resnais' movie has suppressed her tragic past, eradicated it from her mind.

A major influence upon Alain Resnais was the work of French philosopher Henri Louis Bergson, 1859 –1941. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, his major works are *Memory and Matter* (1896) and *Creative Evolution* (1907).

Bergsonian philosophy emphasises duration as the basic element of experience. It asserts the existence of a life-giving force that permeates the natural order – a creative principal present in all matter and responsible for evolution.

Applied to Resnais, this represents an unbroken chain of time, a vital linkage with the past. A series of connecting dots stretching through experience. We are defined by our pasts.

Characters suppressing or denying their pasts in part or whole lose touch with themselves and their identities. They experience the very breakdown and trauma they try to repress.

George Santayana remarked in his 1906 *The Life of Reason*: ‘Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’ Likewise a line of dialogue from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* speaks of ‘the horror of forgetting.’

Many of the characters in Resnais’ films have broken pasts which they suppress or deny. As a consequence they suffer trauma, breakdown and loss of identity.

Hiroshima Mon Amour is set in Hiroshima ten years after the bomb has dropped – a Hiroshima trying to rebuild itself.

Originally the plan was to make a documentary. Resnais was a distinguished documentary-maker prior to *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. However, Resnais felt that the evolving Hiroshima documentary was too similar to *Night and Fog* (1955), an acclaimed documentary he had made on the Holocaust.

Resnais decided to make a feature-length fiction film. However, the origins of the original project can be seen in the early section of the film which in places resembles an embryonic documentary.

Resnais asked the eminent French novelist and playwright, Marguerite Duras, to write the screenplay. Born in 1914 in Indochina, now Vietnam, Duras was a formidable talent of international repute. However, this was her first encounter with movies. Encouraged by Resnais, by the time of her death in 1996 Duras had written and directed a number of films.

Unlike many auteurs who choose to produce their own screenplays, Resnais was heavily reliant upon writers and cherished their contribution. The novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote the screenplay for Resnais' second feature, *Last Year at Marienbad*, and the English playwright and screenwriter, David Mercer, wrote the screenplay of *Provvidence*, Resnais' first English-language film.

The French poet Jean Cayrol wrote both the documentary *Night and Fog* and the feature film *Muriel* for Resnais. Latterly Resnais has worked with the English playwright Alan Ayckbourn.

The search for the essence of time and the exploration of human relationships is at the core of Marguerite Duras' authorship. Her

great art was the interior monologue of which she was a major innovator – ‘voices haunt me,’ she said. Her interior monologue novel *The Lover* (1984) is a striking example of her art.

Duras used interior monologue extensively in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and experimented with different forms of voiceover in her screenplay. In particular she developed the now famous duet of voices between the two lovers who are the film’s main characters.

The story is simple. A French actress visiting Hiroshima where she is making a peace film has a one-night stand with a Japanese architect. Neither character is named in the film, they are symbolic representational figures.

The couple contemplate the tragedy of Hiroshima, its past and present. It emerges that the woman has a past tragedy of her own which she has suppressed – a wartime love affair with a German soldier in her home town of Nevers in occupied France.

The affair ended tragically with the soldier’s death at the hands of the Resistance and the woman’s public disgrace: she was tarred and feathered, followed by months of virtual house arrest.

The woman is unable to speak of these events. Her recall is locked up inside her. It is the story of her past which preoccupies the film is a thriller of the heart, of the emotions.

The movie in structure and form often resembles a memory film – fragmented, self-deceiving, a jumble of images, impressions and sounds – similar in nature to how we remember – not logically but often incompletely, a bit at a time, selectively.

Much of the story is told back to front, with delays in information and sequences presented in an illogical order. Again as we remember events – arbitrarily and pragmatically. There are many random, scattered images which only connect later.

The film moves from a depiction of tragedy of Hiroshima to an evocation of the woman's wartime past in Nevers, from the public to the personal. The structural norm of cinema is reversed.

Looking at the film as an entity, the successive stories of Hiroshima and Nevers divide into three parts:

The first part evokes Hiroshima and its past, including a documentary-style reconstruction.

The second part is concerned with the woman's past in Nevers, and contains extensive flashback sequences recreating it.

The third part montages images of Hiroshima and Nevers and intercuts them on a moving camera producing one continuous imaginary city – yet a visual counterpoint between old and new.

Old Nevers and new Hiroshima. A tale of two cities.

We hear the woman's masochistic interior monologue as she walks the streets of Hiroshima.

As we hear her thoughts, the camera moves restlessly between the two worlds of Hiroshima and Nevers – searching, as if the buildings and places themselves hold memories.

As if the past can be found in the very bricks and mortar.

The camera probes buildings and landscapes for evidence, for clues of the past.

As if history is in the veins of buildings, the walls and ceilings.

Places other than buildings are included. Ancient churches and ruined buildings, but also landscape – the woods and trees of Nevers and the banks of the Loire form part of the visual tapestry.

CLIP: HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR.

I want the character of Claude Eatherly to similarly respond to the spirit of place. I see him as a man affected by the moods and atmospheres of locales, both interiors and landscapes. He is someone to whom places are deeply associated with memories.

The last time Eatherly sees Hiroshima is from the reconnaissance weather plane. He sees the city spread below on a clear bright August morning. The next time he sees this city is in newsreels, a flattened skyline, almost devoid of buildings or trees.

To fill the vacuum of this devastation and to assuage his despair, he invents a Hiroshima of the mind – a city of people, streets and buildings. Like the Frenchwoman in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Eatherly constructs his own memory of a situation he hasn't witnessed, constructing a scenario of the city in his mind.

The concept of place as character is fundamental to Alain Resnais' cinema. Buildings are cast-members in his films.

In Resnais celebrated documentary about the holocaust, *Night and Fog*, a derelict concentration camp still haunted by the past becomes a character in the film.

Night and Fog is another film about the importance of remembering. There is the sense that in its dereliction the decaying concentration camp, witness to many atrocities, remembers the past and the reasons for which it was built.

CLIP: NIGHT AND FOG.

In Resnais' second feature film, the controversial *Last Year at Marienbad*, the camera again explores the interior of the elegant chateau in an attempt to unravel its past.

CLIP: LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD.

The streets and buildings of towns and cities in Resnais' films are portals of the past. His towns and cities are characters.

Resnais' view of the city and its environs is positive. He doesn't share the suspicion of cities and urban habitats of many artists, such as those of Romantic Tradition and the English Nature Novel who insisted upon the importance of man's intuitive communion with nature, rejecting the mono conformity of urban life.

In Resnais the city and urban dwellings represent man's success in dominating his environment. The buildings have a history.

The buildings remember. They offer a collective and individual identity. But what happens when the city is destroyed?

The Americans called the A-Bomb they dropped on Hiroshima 'Little Boy.' The bomb contained 20,000 tons of TNT.

Little Boy exploded 1850 feet above the centre of Hiroshima.

80,000 people died instantly. 51,000 were wounded or missing. 200,000 people were ultimately to die, many from radiation.

70,000 buildings were destroyed. 6,000 were left standing.

Little Boy destroyed the memories contained in those buildings. The collective memory of Hiroshima was almost entirely wiped.

It became a traumatised city, a place suffering a breakdown.

The film, itself a reconstruction, recreates the memory of Hiroshima through relics and reconstructions – in a line from the Frenchwoman – 'since there is nothing else.'

In the film, the aftermath of Little John is presented through newsreel, archive footage, photos, re-enactments, museum exhibits and guided tours of Hiroshima.

The interior monologues of the two lovers – the duet of voices – over the montaged images are reconstructions as well.

At the beginning the Frenchwoman tries to reconstruct the experience of Hiroshima which she did not experience through newspaper reports and newsreel accounts.

Newsreel and archive footage can be seen as a form of flashback, which in itself is a reconstruction of memory.

The film within the film – the peace film which the woman is in – includes a peace procession with photos of the disaster and a model of the Atomic Dome. More reconstruction.

Hiroshima and Nevers are described factually during the interior monologues, in the style of a documentary reconstruction.

The woman's past is reconstructed through a complex pattern of flashbacks in the second part of the movie. The first flashback is really a flashcut because of its brevity. It is a snatched momentary image triggered by the back of the Japanese man's hand as he lies asleep in bed in the woman's hotel room.

CLIP: HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR.

The flashcut image is like a moment of memory breaking through into the woman's consciousness, despite her attempts to suppress her past. Other flashcut images break through as well – for instance this shot of a balcony recurs several times.

CLIP: HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR.

It is only later in the film when the woman recounts the entire brutal experience that we discover this is the locale where her German lover was killed by the Resistance.

This concept of shards of memory breaking through into consciousness is an element I wish to adopt for the Claude Eatherly story. Eatherly's attempts to continue with a normal everyday life after Hiroshima will be continually undermined by these flashes, these graphic little images in his head. However much he tries to suppress them, the fragmentary snapshot moments keep surfacing.

In Resnais' film, the Japanese man becomes a conduit for the woman's reconstruction of her past – he draws her out, becoming the ghost of her dead lover, enabling the painful re-enactment.

She says: 'He was not French. We met in barns first. Then in ruins. Finally in rooms. The usual story.'

Again, the emphasis is upon places, on locations. Shots of these buildings and places are emphasised. The flashbacks visually connect the German soldier of the past with the Japanese architect of the present.

He says: 'Why are you in Hiroshima?'

She says: 'A film. I'm acting in a film.'

With the double-irony that she is also in Hiroshima acting in Resnais' film with its ethos of reprise and reconstruction.

The reconstruction of the woman's past can be seen as symbolic of the therapeutic process. An acknowledgement of the past, getting it out into the open, remembering it.

The woman is in denial and resistant to the healing process. She is melodramatic, masochistic in her suffering, desperately wishes to cling onto her trauma, is frightened of change.

Remembrance of things past requires reliving the events and recalling the places they occurred in, as if for the first time. The scene-of-crime must be reconstructed in all its emotional horror.

That painful traumatic exploration was expressed by T S Eliot in his poem about a place, *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

The woman has to accept her past, what happened to her in Nevers. It is part of her making, who she is.

In Resnais' film places and buildings are not surrogate characters, but the two characters do come to symbolise the places they come from – the woman Nevers, the man Hiroshima.

The two cities represent the pasts of the characters, the essential linkage to their presents and futures. So the unnamed lovers are characterised by the names of their cities.

In the final moments of the film the lovers refer to one another by the names of the cities they come from.

CLIP: HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR.

As we have seen, the woman is resistant in her masochism right until the end. She wants her pain to continue, it's easier than facing it down. But the film finally suggests that she is able to take the first few difficult tentative steps towards stability.

In the last surreal moments of the film, the woman says:

'Hiroshima... it's your name.'

The man says: 'It's my name, yes. Your name is Nevers. Nevers is in France.'

So the place names in *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* become poetic keywords, finally linking place with person, past with identity.

John Foster
April, 2008