

Film and World Politics

Written by Michael J. Shapiro

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Film and World Politics

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/23/film-and-world-politics/>

MICHAEL J. SHAPIRO, MAY 23 2015

**This article is an excerpt from E-IR's Edited Collection, Popular Culture and World Politics.
View all of E-IR's Publications here.**

Many assume that films provide a political analysis when they explore the relationship between persons and forces involved in recognised political issues or institutions – for example, film versions of Tom Clancy's Cold War-themed novels such as John McTiernan's *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), a film about a strategic encounter between US and Russian operatives over submarine technology, featuring a CIA analyst (Clancy's often-used character Jack Ryan) and Russian defectors. The approach to film and politics here operates with a different assumption. Its primary focus is on film form rather than content or narrative. The cinematic art, I argue, is political not because its content references familiar political institutions or situations, but because of the way it challenges familiar senses of reality. It does so through its temporal rhythms – the way it composes images, words, and sounds – and through the way it disables viewers ordinary modes of perception, in some cases with an aesthetic of shock that disrupts habitual viewing expectations, and in some cases by restoring what perception tends to evacuate.

While undoubtedly many films supply what Siegfried Kracauer (1960, p. 306) famously referred to as 'corroborative images ... intended to make you believe not see', thereby reinforcing the dominant perspectives operating within the socio-political order, many critically orientated films summon what Gilles Deleuze refers to as a 'seer' (*voyant*), one who must ask herself/himself 'What am I seeing?' In contrast, the less critical 'cinema of action' continually summons for the viewer the question, 'What will happen next?' (Deleuze 1989, p. 272). Crucial to the way film allows thinking critically is what Deleuze famously calls the 'time image'. As I have noted elsewhere:

The modern cinema has discovered that the "time image" constitutes a way of reading events that is more critical than mere perception. As long as the camera merely followed action, the image of time was indirect, presented as a consequence of motion. But the new "camera consciousness" is no longer defined by the movements it is able to follow. This consciousness, articulated through modern cinema, has become sensitive to a model of time that is more critical than what such a derivative model supplies. Now, even when it is mobile, the camera is no longer content to follow the character's movement. It employs the time image to think about the time and value of the present (Shapiro, 1998).

Rather than beginning with a rehearsal of what is now a vast corpus of film theory and film-as-philosophy, I offer a reading of films that subsumes critical theorising about film and demonstrates how the cinematic art challenges mainstream accounts of geopolitical history. I analyse Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), a film based on Marguerite Duras' screenplay, which thinks critically about the bombing of Hiroshima.

Although it is Resnais' first feature film, it has a documentary feel. Indeed, one way it has been construed is as 'a documentary on Emmanuel Riva' (Domarchi 1959, p. 63), the actress who plays an unnamed French woman having a post-bombing affair with an unnamed Japanese man. Briefly, the film opens with the two lovers in bed. We see body parts whose morphology is indistinct because they are too close and the scene is too cropped to allow the viewers any certainty about what they are seeing. Duras describes the opening:

As the film opens, two pair of bare shoulders appear little by little. All we see are these shoulders – cut off from the

Film and World Politics

Written by Michael J. Shapiro

body at the height of the head and hips – in an embrace, and as if drenched with ashes, rain, dew, or sweat, whichever is preferred. The main thing is that we get the feeling that this dew, this perspiration, has been deposited by the atomic ‘mushroom’ as it moves away and evaporates. It should produce a violent, conflicting feeling of freshness and desire (Mavor, 2012, p. 115).

Among the political implications of the film is the challenge to the US’s rendering of the Hiroshima bombing as merely a final act in a war strategy. In contrast with a strategic story in which the bodies of Japanese victims are rendered in an abstract war discourse as ‘casualties’, the film renders those bodies in two experiential registers: the bombing’s effects on relations of intimacy and the specifics of the bombing’s inscription on bodies. Bringing the two registers together – the event time of the devastating bombing and the micro-temporality of the rhythms of intimacy – the lovers ‘seem to be under a rain of ash’, as the skin of the bodies simultaneously registers moments of ‘both pleasure and pain’ (Mavor, 2012, p. 115).

Challenging various narratives of the Hiroshima bombing that have shaped US collective memory, which usually includes a persistent ‘visuality of the atom bomb’ (Steele, 2011, p. 1) rendered as a mushroom cloud, the film disturbs any attempt to establish an unambiguous historical temporality. Through the rhythms of its editing, it shifts back and forth between past and present, cutting between subjective time and historical time and thus between memory and history. The film interweaves three narrative strands, the present love affair between a French actress and Japanese resident of Hiroshima, the woman’s (Riva’s) story about her past love affair with a German soldier, and the background story of the bombing of Hiroshima. It thus creates a transversality between two love stories and the material and social destruction of the city.

Foregrounded is the film’s main narrative thread, the love affair between an unnamed French actress from the city of Nevers, referred to as ‘Elle’, and an unnamed Japanese architect from Hiroshima, referred to as ‘Lui’. That narrative plays into a critical disjuncture for, at the outset, as their bodies connect in mutual passion, their conversation is dissensual. The lovers begin their conversation this way:

He: ‘You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.’

She: ‘I saw everything. Everything.’

The images play into the dissensus as well, for at the same time that their dissensual conversation is taking place, there is a dissensus between what Elle narrates and what the viewer sees. She notes, for example, that by the fifteenth day, a vast profusion of blooming flowers are poking up through the ashes, ‘unheard of in flowers before then’. At that moment, however, what is shown is morbidity rather than vitality; damaged, grotesque bodies are on screen, being treated by medical staff. The musical score also underlines the dissensus. Early on, it has a rapid, frenetic pace, which adds to the tension between Elle’s statements of what she sees and what is shown. In contrast, during Lui’s rebuttals, his remarks are backed by a contrapuntal, single (seemingly woodwind) instrument, which contrasts with the flute and string accompaniment to Elle’s insistences.

With such disjunctive juxtapositions and other aspects of film form, *Hiroshima mon amour* establishes a temporal trajectory for what Mr Shizuma, a character in Masuji Ibuse’s novel *Black Rain* (1965) about the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, refers to as the bombing’s “moral damage”. The film literally puts flesh on that expression, animating the process of bodily disintegration. At the same time, it tracks processes of witnessing, while producing a diremption between witnessing and knowing. In response to Lui’s frequent assertions that she saw nothing, Elle reports the evidence of her eyes: for example, ‘I saw the hospital, I’m sure of it ... how could I not have seen it’. However, when stating that she saw what was in the museum in Peace Square ‘four times’, she introduces uncertainty into that witnessing by evoking the concept of lack; referring to how the museum reconstructs the Hiroshima event, she calls it a ‘reconstruction for lack of anything else’.

As Elle’s narrative voice proceeds, the film evokes a distrust of fixed images and iconic representations and develops a politics of temporality. As its narration proceeds, an epistemology of the gaze gives way to an epistemology of becoming, as the film articulations sense memory with a grammatical framing of history that reaches toward an

Film and World Politics

Written by Michael J. Shapiro

uncertain future. That valuing of becoming operates in the interface between narrative and image. During her remarks about seeing and knowing what is in the museum, there is a tracking shot of a mother and children approaching the museum, and further tracking shots explore the outside and inside of the building. What can we make of those cinematic moments? Jean Luc Godard's provocative suggestion is that the aesthetic and moral aspects of the film coincide. In response to a query about whether the film is jarring aesthetically or morally, he says, 'Tracking shots *are* a question of morality' (Godard 1959, p. 62).

Affirming Godard's observation, the film incessantly juxtaposes the memory of the Hiroshima bombing to the movement of bodies involved in war tourism, especially by cutting from tracking shots of the memorial venues in Peace Square to shots of hands caressing skin. What is therefore contrasted is a fixed institutionalised realisation of the bombing (a fetishising of the event in buildings, posters and glass cases) and a dynamic bodily sense memory, as the two lovers caress each other's skin while at the same time verbally questioning their different loci of enunciation and the experiential trajectories that have brought them together. That they represent two different temporal trajectories – the war experience of Elle, who is shamed in her city of Nevers because of an affair with a German soldier, and that of Lui, who has resided in Hiroshima but was not near ground zero during the bombing – is subtly represented by a shot that shows the crossing of their two wristwatches on the night stand of the bed where they are exploring each other's bodies.

To amplify Godard's observation about the morality of tracking shots, we can heed the way other aspects of the film's form articulate a morality. It is through montage, the cutting back and forth between the scenes of devastation and the lovers (cuts between the instantaneous destruction of bodies and the slow rhythms of intimacy), that the film makes its primary moral statements, which are about the disruption of the temporal rhythms of the life world. Among the exemplary cuts that speak to one aspect of that disruption (interventions into ordinary biological time) are these: At the same time that the lovers are engaged in a slow caressing of each other's smooth, unblemished skin, Elle mentions that when the bomb dropped, there were 200,000 dead and 80,000 wounded in nine seconds. And earlier, as the camera tracks the displays in the museum, there is a long take of glass containers with (what Elle's voice-over refers to as) 'human flesh, suspended, as if still alive – it's agony still fresh'. Subsequently we see 'anonymous masses of hair that the women upon waking, would find had fallen out', followed by the badly burned flesh of a man's back. Those references to both instantaneous and rapid morbidity are followed by a scene of the lovers slowly caressing each other's smooth skin. The contrast between the slow indulgence with which healthy skin is appreciated and the suddenly damaged flesh resulting from the bombing is underscored with a display of scorched metal, which Elle describes as looking as vulnerable as flesh.

The discursive and imagistic focus on flesh, along with the foregrounding of an erotic relationship between Elle and Lui (both of whom are married), effectively lends the film a counter Pauline morality. As is well known, Pauline theology juxtaposes the spirit to the flesh. Denigrating the flesh, Saint Paul mentions, among other things, 'fornication, impurity, licentiousness ... drunkenness, carousing' (Galatians 5, pp. 19-21), anything that involves the 'carnal sins', which are associated with a sensual enjoyment involving 'the flesh'. In contrast, Elle virtually celebrates what she calls her 'dubious morals'. In accord with Elle's indulgence in an erotic jouissance, the film suggests that enjoyment of the flesh – of the intimate rhythms of bodily exchange – is what the bombing specifically and the war as a whole have disrupted. In place of the slow, intimate rhythms of life, the war has produced an accelerated decrepitude.

Ultimately, through both its cinematic form and discursive narration, the film suggests that Hiroshima (in contrast to the way it is rendered in abstract policy discourses and treatises on apocalypse) is an atrocity that took the forms of instantaneous destruction, sudden impairment, and then the accelerated decrepitude of bodies. At one point, Elle provides a brief phenomenology of the war's attack on the body. After looking in a mirror, she wistfully exclaims that she was young once. Imre Kertesz's fictional character Georg Kovacs (a Hungarian Jewish teenager who ends up in concentration camps) offers a more prolix account of the phenomenology of the accelerated decrepitude wrought by that war (with a Duras-like emphasis on smooth skin). While he is in the Buchenwald *lager* Georg says:

I can safely say there is nothing more painful, nothing more disheartening than to track day after day, to record day after day, yet again how much of one has wasted away. Back home, while paying no great attention to it, I was

Film and World Politics

Written by Michael J. Shapiro

generally in harmony with my body: I was fond of this bit of machinery, so to say. I recollect reading some exciting novel in our shaded parlor one summer afternoon, the palm of my hand meanwhile caressing with pleasing absentmindedness the golden-downed, pliantly smooth skin of my tautly muscular sunburned thigh. Now that same skin was drooping in loose folds, jaundiced and desiccated ... (Kertesz 2004, p. 165).

Along with the destruction and impairment of physical bodies, *Hiroshima mon amour* dwells on the ethics of memory, which, through Elle's narration, is articulated as a primary aspect of the film's morality. She dwells on the importance of not forgetting Hiroshima – which is as important, she says at one point, as never forgetting either her former love for a German soldier in Nevers (here, the city name has special resonance: implying 'never again') or the current one in Hiroshima (even though that second love bids to efface the memory of the first). In order to cinematically represent the theme of forgetting in the present, and to do it with a Proustian emphasis on sense memory, the film suggests an equivalence between the two objects of forgetting: lovers and historical events. Elle notes that she had been 'under the illusion I would never forget Hiroshima', and she laments her forgetting of her first love, the German soldier:

I was unfaithful to you tonight with this stranger. I told our story. It was, you see, a story that could be told. For fourteen years I hadn't found ... the taste of an impossible love again since Nevers. Look how I'm forgetting you Look how I've forgotten you.

Resnais' film has recently returned, with an altered significance, in Rosalyn Deutsche's treatment of the film's mobile temporality in her book *Hiroshima After Iraq* (2010). Her focus is on artistic representations that articulate the event of the bombing with a more recent historical episode, the Iraq War. Conceptualising the critical temporality that derives from the grammatical tense that locates the past in the future – the future anterior (the 'will have been') – she analyses the significance of three returns to Hiroshima. For example, reviewing one of them, she points out that Silvia Kolbowski's video, 'After Hiroshima Mon Amour', 'returns to Hiroshima to confront the legacy of the atomic bombing, linking it to the present invasion and occupation of Iraq' (Deutsche, 2010, p.10). Recasting Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* with a different temporal pacing and different mode of oral address, and interspersing images from Iraq, Kolbowski creates a heterogeneous temporal association of the two wars, giving both the past and the present different interpretive significance.

To appreciate Kolbowski's achievement, we have to recognise cinema's present historical moment. As Victor Burgin (2005) has pointed out, whereas once the recovery of instances from a remembered film was possible only if the film returned to a theatre near you, the new technologies of video reproduction and streaming make it possible now to recover sequence images that interconnect remembered fragments from former viewing experiences in order to explore and create a critical perspective. Enabled by the new temporality of film viewing to analyse the film-memory relationship, Burgin gives us an example of his own experience, in which there are sequences from two films. In the first, a woman climbs a path toward the camera and the camera adopts a variety of locations to position her in a landscape (from Tsai Ming-liang's film *Vive L'Amour* [1994]). In the second, there's a long shot of a woman entering the frame and, thereafter, as in the first film, Burgin recalls, the camera positions her in the landscape from various locations (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's film *A Canterbury Tale* [1944]). Because the first reminded him of the second, Burgin was able to replay them in order to gauge the significance of the way they constitute an antithesis: town and country, old and new world, East and West (Burgin 2005). In effect, Burgin explicates the temporal structure of a contemporary media situation that has enabled much of my analysis of the politics of film.

To appreciate the implications of such a politics of film for international relations, we can contrast the way film, as a constantly accreting archive, challenges the more static media within which exchanges of recognition among states takes place. For example, the US's Smithsonian exhibition of the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, and the impact of the event, displayed in Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Museum, constitute fixed stories of the Hiroshima event. In contrast to the museum-ification of inter-state exchanges of recognition, film versions of international events are endlessly repeatable, making possible reinterpretations that alter and decentre exchanges of international recognition. In contrast with museums, films function with the civic sphere, where public culture can challenge official culture.

Film and World Politics

Written by Michael J. Shapiro

References

- Burgin, V. (2005) *The Remembered Film*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Deleuze, G. (1989) *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deutsche, R. (2010) *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Domarchi, J. (1959) in 'Hiroshima Notre Amour', *Cahiers du Cinema*, 97: 59-70.
- Godard, J. (1959) 'Hiroshima Notre Amour', *Cahiers du Cinema*, 97: 59-70.
- Kertesz, I. (2004) *Fatelessness*, New York: Vintage.
- Kracauer, S. (1960) *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mavor, C. (2012) *Black and Blue*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shapiro, M. J. (1998) 'Toward a politics of now-time', *Theory & Event*, 2: 2.
- Steele, B. (2011) 'Hiroshima: The strange case of maintaining (US) collective memory', paper delivered at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association.

About the author:

Michael J. Shapiro is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. His most recent book is *War Crimes, Atrocity, and Justice* (Polity, 2015).