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CLS 412: Deleuze on Film. From Aesthetics to Politics

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Ontological Crack: *Summer Palace* and *Hiroshima mon Amour*

There's an agony beyond an individual experience, but a succession and accumulation of all the pains within the human history, including continuous wars, slavery, robbery, conquering, sadism, and various forms of violence. These pains remain in the collective psychology of humanity. Thus, the historicity and collectivity of pain allows it to be beyond the individual. It is a collective unconscious, a primitive memory, a coding, and articulating about it, whether through writing or *movement* images would be the releasing of libido. Both the Chinese film *Summer Palace* and Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* are located at the site of an ontological crack. As the earth cracks downwards into the cellar where Elle was incarcerated, the crack within the very ontological structure of our being opens up---a metaphysical cellar within humanity that is both inhuman, beyond the limits of the human and incommunicable exactly because of this nature. Humanity is not an essence which can be preserved, or kept safely away from catastrophe, but includes, necessarily, everything---including inhumanity, that is committed by humans in their own name and on behalf of others. The fundamental quest of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is a hauntology that returns to the site of the crack, a similar quest in Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* as they both attempt to visually present the unrepresentable, the trauma that is always in a process of forgetting. What the films have constructed is a history of affect and emotions, a mapping of trauma and survival rather than a precise delineation or documentary. We get the

“sense” of these experiences that’s beyond human limits. Two major motifs recur in both films—absence and eros, which the essay will be mainly focused upon.

Absence

The 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest takes its presence like a haunting specter in the collective memory of the Chinese. It is “absent” on two levels, caused by the belatedness and confusion of traumatic memories of the generation that actually participated in the protest coupled with the censorship and lack of archive for the current and upcoming generations. The very architectural monument for this political trauma is simultaneously a “counter-monument” that denies its memorial functions. As Saidiya Hartman pointed out in *Venus in Two Acts*, “history pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive”¹, the film *Summer Palace* directed by Lou Ye doesn’t comply with such standards of historical documentation apparently, even though it is the first film in mainland China to openly discuss the event. What the film successfully achieves instead as to do a mimesis of the history of affect and emotions, to transmit the torrents of passion, melancholia, sufferings experienced by Chinese intellectuals around the year 1989 to the audience. It is an alternative form of participation to live through the trauma. More interestingly, the director is intrigued with the parallel relationship between sex and politics. By shooting the love story of the college student Yu Hong, he is actually talking about the entangled “romance” between the students and the government.

Set around 1987, the small village Tumen at the border of China and Korea, the protagonist Yu Hong has just received her letter of acceptance to a prestigious university

¹ Saidiya Hartman. *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism*. 6

“Beiqing University” in Peking. The name of the college was coined by the director, as a reference to actual schools “Peking University” and “Tsinghua University” where most of the student protesters attended. Her letter was delivered by her lover Xiao Jun. Her going to college meant an upcoming separation between the two. The night before her departure, Yu Hong met with Xiao Jun at a basketball court, where he had a fight with a couple of players to disperse his angst for the upcoming separation. He was comforted by Yu Hong, who offered him her virginity in the lawn. Yu Hong started her college life in Peking, majoring in literature. She became friends with a girl called Li Ti, who introduced her boyfriend Ruo gu and friend Zhou Wei to Yu. Yu Hong had an intense and libertine sexual relationship with Zhou Wei, during which she wrote in her journals that she felt the two of them were on the same side of the world. They spent a lot of time at the Summer Palace, indulged in sex, violence and betrayal, all documented by Yu Hong in her journal.

During the year 1989, Yu Hong and Zhou Wei were both involved in the Tiananmen Square protest. Yet the political engagement seems as libidinal and impulsive as their lovemaking. They were seen holding hands with their friends, half drunk, singing and dancing as they came back from the Square. Their relationship ended when Li Ti slept with Zhou Wei, and was caught by school officials. Chaos became overwhelming as the sound of gunshots erupted from the square.

Xiao Jun came to Beijing to bring Yu Hong back to her hometown Tumen, while Ruo Guo departed for Berlin. He was joined by Li Ti and Zhou Wei in the year 1994. The three of them was again entangled in physical relationships. Li Ti committed suicide during a rooftop party after attending a protest with her German friends. Yu Hong, who dropped out without getting her degree, meanwhile, has been leading a banal life in her small village, working at a

factory doing assembly jobs quite unrelated to literature. She tried to feel more alive through sex with married men but sank further into a state of ennui after an abortion. Zhou Wei returned to China and looked for Yu Hong after the death of Li Ti. They finally met again after all those years, but intentionally left each other without sleeping together under different excuses.

In Cathy Caruth's *Trauma and Experience*, she writes about how "The structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event."² In her 1995 text *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, she speaks about the narrative of trauma, "Retelling the stories of traumatic events can be seen as an attempt to strip away the affective power of the event but being partly inassimilable, an individual can never fully grasp the impact of the trauma, understand it completely and take control of it through language and narration, which suggests how trauma is beyond linguistic representation."³ The lack of coherence and comprehensibility for the traumatic event is well represented in the film in the scene when Li Ti and Zhou Wei met in Berlin after the Tiananmen Square protest and Li Ti asked Zhou Wei "Zhou Wei, can you tell me what happened that summer?" Unable to give an answer, Zhou Wei had sex with her. What happened last summer was the protest and the dislocation of former lovers and friends. Yet the two witnesses were not able to discuss it or recollect about it between themselves. This suggests an aura of silence, confusion and gaps of incomprehensibility surrounding the trauma of the protest. Yet it has definitely impacted the students intensely as Li Ti committed suicide shortly after that silent conversation, jumping from a rooftop. Coincidentally and symbolically, there was a similar

² Cathy Caruth. "Introduction," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. and intro (1995)

³ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*. (1996)

protest on the streets of Berlin going on when her body dropped to the ground. This liberal protest without any government interference stands in stark contrast with the one Li Ti attended back in Beijing. In fact, the connection between Berlin and Beijing has been mentioned a couple of times in the film, the first occasion when they joked about how the Berlin Wall is similar to the Chinese Great Wall. The second time a contrast between the 6.4.1989 Tiananmen Square Protest and the 11.9. 1989 Fall of the Berlin Wall. Such connection brings together two sites of trauma both suffering from communist authoritarianism and restraints on human rights. Li Ti was buried in the cemetery at Wiesenburger Weg in Marzahn, Berlin. Carved on her tombstone is the following anonymous inscription: “Whether there is freedom and love or not, in death everyone is equal. I hope that death is not your end. You adored the light, so you will never fear the darkness.”⁴

There is another layer of absence is the lack of public discourse and archive about the historical event of the Tiananmen Square protest in mainland China. The numbers of people killed are still unknown up to this day. The event was never included in history classes and forbidden to be talked about in classrooms. These are my personal experiences and the experiences of my generation. Parents avoid discussing it despite their own participation when they were college students. Any article or comments concerning the Tiananmen Square Protest will immediately be censored and put down. In fact, the Summer Palace is the first film that explicitly talks about the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest in mainland China. After screening the film in the 2006 Cannes Film Festival without government approval, the film was placed a banning order in China, and Lou Ye was officially censored. On the one hand, the treatment of the film shows how the trauma continues to this day, that the liberation, freedom and democracy

⁴ Lou Ye. Summer Palace. 2006.

that the students of the previous generation are still not granted to the citizens. On the other hand, the film finally breaks the silence around the topic, the taboo. Even the sex scenes themselves are breaking the taboo around sexual morality during that time.

In one interview⁵, Lou Ye has mentioned the lack of historical evidence and a clear view of the whole picture as an obstacle in presenting the protest. But he has used another effective method to discuss what happened to the students involved in the Tiananmen Square protest while avoiding a testimonial retelling of the event by witnesses like the TRC. Using the medium of film, a series of moving images, it constructs a “frictional” narrative that delivers the affect of the history to the audience. Instead of imagining the details of the historical event, arranging them in the order of dates, sites, people etc, it successfully transmitted what it felt like to be a Chinese intellectual full of idealism in the year 1989, while transcending the limitations of semiotics boundaries. The film never shows exactly what the students’ attitudes or political agendas were but focused on their general attitude towards life---their passion for idealism, freedom, love and justice, and their belief that peasants, workers and intellectuals should be better protected and appreciated. The film preserves the gaps and absences in the historical archives and parallels them in its plot.

In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, what is at stake is the absence of a representation, and the only solution seems to be Deleuze’s notion of writing as becoming. To write is certainly not to impose a form or expression on the matter of lived experience, but is instead a matter of becoming, a mode of existence that does not attain a form, such as identification, imitation, or Mimesis, but to find a zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indiffermentation, where one can longer “be

⁵ Lou Ye. *Making of Summer Palace*. (2001)

distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule”.⁶What matters is linking the analysis of existing conditions to the critique of the structure of representation to produce the ruin of representation: with this ruin underway---with static structures of time and space, of life and thought, disassembled---a philosophy of change becomes viable. writing is life-giving because it propels us into a where we may be reconfigured into beings we have no name for yet, something that goes beyond the language we currently anchored with. Deleuze talks about the “whale-becoming” in *Moby Dick*. Identification would only be Ahab’s attempt to take a form that has some semblance to the whale; but becoming whale suggests that the subject exists in such close proximity to the whale that their existence begins to be reorganized by the whale’s pattern of being. According to Deleuze, “writing is life-giving because it does not imbue the whale with human drives and desires in order to gain our attention and sympathy for its life but propels us into a world where we may be reconfigured into beings, we have no name for yet, something we designate as ‘becoming-whale’ only because we remain anchored in the language we have now.” Elle had a similar experience in the cellar when she encountered the cat. The cat’s eyes and Riva’s eyes look alike and stare at each other. Blankly. Almost impossible to outstare a cat. Riva can do it. Little by little she enters the stare of the cat. There is nothing else in the cellar except a single stare, the stare of the cat-Riva. “Instead, the cat’s stare or inside Riva’s stare? Oval pupils, which fasten on nothing. Enormous pupils. Empty circuses. Where time beats.”⁷The only escape for Elle within that cellar is a transformation of subjectivity, of crossing the boundaries of anthropomorphism. Only through a becoming, could she find a temporary liberation from her own consciousness weighed down by human sufferings. Madness is her intelligence.

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles. 1998. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. London, Verso.

⁷ Deleuze, Gilles. 1998. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. London, Verso.

The paradox of trying to construct a historical experience of the inhuman through language lays bare the ontological borderline of narrative and language. Language is not a mere instrument of communication, a secondary device for expressing “ideas”: it is the very dimension in which human life moves, that which brings the world to be in the first place. Only where there is language is there 'world', in the distinctively human sense. Language has an existence of its own in which human beings come to participate, and only by participating in it do they come to be human at all. Language always pre-exists the individual subject, as the very realm in which he or she unfolds...”

How to talk about the unspeakable is the fundamental quest of Duras’ writing. How to talk about the inhuman or the posthuman while situated within the condition of anthropomorphism. Such questions have been asked by Nietzsche in *his On Truths and lies in a Nonmoral Sense*: Mankind desires the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth. Toward those truths which are possibly harmful and destructive he is even hostilely inclined. What about these linguistic conventions themselves? Are designations congruent with things? Is language the adequate expression of all realities? Duras’ language is situated exactly at such site of border zones, the ambiguous and intermediate space that exists between or at the edge of identifiable domains, the strange no man’s land. “In hell one tells everything, and that is probably how we recognize it for it is; for my part, that is how it was revealed to me. Anyway, it was in what others took to be my personal hell, having to tell everything, that I found my private paradise.”⁸

⁸ HILL, LESLIE. *"Marguerite Duras and the Limits of Fiction."* Paragraph 12, no. 1 (1989): 1-22.

Cracks like Hiroshima and the cellar are the site for the catastrophe of language, where no control can be exerted over words, and an extremity is reached where no human order can be easily restored. It is a situation in which borderlines cannot be safely determined: communication or silence, speech or aphasia? It is the borderline between humanity and the abolition of the human. Why is it necessary to resurrect Elle's voice from the cave? Maybe because of the Truth in Nietzsche's sense: If human disaster cannot be represented, it makes little sense to establish elaborate systems of political representation. If one is only aware of the Truth under its commonsense representation, then the understanding of the human condition will forever be incomplete. That's why there's something prophetic in Duras' writing, it bears witness to the presence at the heart of language and textuality of something: an object or an experience, which cannot be described except as an interruption, as a cessation of discourse, as a moment of transgression or transcendence. In other words, she moves beyond the commonsense definition of Truth that's judgment making. An alternative truth which cannot be described except as an interruption, as a cessation of discourse, as a moment of transgression or transcendence. In *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the quality of Duras' language weaves beautifully together with Resnais's images. Resnais's images are constantly being rearranged according to whether they belong to a particular sheet of past, a particular continuum of age, all of which coexist. The images move across different diegetic levels, and very often adopt the technique of metalepsis, so that the narrative remains a discontinues one. Speech and sight are apart. They no longer coincide. There is the notion that an absolute image is necessarily absent and impossible.

Eros

There are two directions toward which the limits of human experiences are pushed through---the first is when energy ascends into the ecstatic: fatal attractions, religious transcendence, the shifting of the ego and consciousness through art and Eros. Downwards, humankind is reduced into the inhuman: trauma, the camp, war, disease. Both the film *Summer Palace* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour* incline towards an exploration of the complicated entanglement between sex and politics, yet they take different directions. In *Summer Palace*, the director himself has described the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest as a sex act that had gone lethal. Sex emerges as a death drive in the Chinese film, and it serves as a metaphor for the indefinite number of deaths at the Square that night. While in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Elle has returned from the dead. The night she held her lover's cold body and the cruel nightmarish nights at the cellar that drove her to madness has left a crack within her that perhaps only love itself could heal. Or could it? A fundamental question here is whether the upward pull of the ecstatic, in particular, the Eros could be a salvation for those who have returned from hell?

Just as a critic pointed out "nothing freakin" happens in this movie. Nothing!", the film completely lacks a linear narrative about the Tiananmen Square protest. In fact, the very site of Tiananmen Square has only appeared in the film twice. The first time was when Tiananmen Square became part of the backdrop of Yu Hong's romantic dates with Zhou Wei. They were half-drunk in love, dancing and laughing as they ran past the square. In the second appearance, Tiananmen Square was represented in a documentary portrayal of the 89' protest, a signifier both at the center and as the backdrop. This time, the students were also laughing, singing and dancing, echoing the previous scene. But this time they were drunk with the excitement of the political protest. This indicates the potential link between sex and politics, both as expression of libidinal impulses. In fact, the director Lou Ye has described the Tiananmen Square protest as

love making in one interview, “It was like falling in love. And then after 89, people felt like that they had lost something. Like they had broken up with a lover.”⁹ Another instance when love became an explicit metaphor for politics was when Zhou Wei betrayed Yu Hong and slept with her best friend Li Ti. This betrayal is immediately montaged with a scene from the Tiananmen Square protest when the government started using violence against the student protesters. Yu Hong’s experience of being betrayed by her lover and friend is parallel with the government betraying the students’ trust, love and hope for it.

But why does it all matter? What’s the point of using love and sex as a metaphor for politics, instead of focusing on the political itself? Why does the director focus on the individual memory of a college girl instead of showing a group portrait of the collective?

My argument is that since the event of the Tiananmen Square protest involves absences on two levels, the film itself is a visual monument to capture the memory of the trauma through imagery. It gives a frictional narrative between history and fiction. It also documents what Nuttall in her *Upsurge of Emotions* calls a history of affect and feelings.¹⁰

Secondly, the film weaves together the trauma of the female and the trauma of a nation beautifully. Yu Hong is a charming intellectual full of passion, strength, and idealism, who dreads banality and longs to live intensely. Yet all these longings were destined to be smothered under the political climate she is situated in. She showed symptoms of neurosis and suicidal attempts before the protest. Students like Yu Hong, who longed for freedom, romance, passion, equality find themselves trapped in an era of censorship, surveillance, discipline, and moral restraints, in a country still trying to heal from its many traumas. Literature, sex, imagination was their only way out. “If life isn’t filtered through idealism, then the banality of it all could kill me.

⁹ Lou Ye. *Making of Summer Palace*. (2001)

¹⁰ Sarah Nuttall. *Upsurge*. (2019)

When I gaze at my own face, it is not the face of a teenage girl, but of a mature woman. Hopeless hopes, premature emotions, cold nonchalance, all written over it. Another face appears whenever I gaze at it. How I hope that two faces could appear simultaneously in the mirror.”¹¹ Her body was her tool and medium to communicate with the world, yet the boys never understood her. The sex she had were “cerebral” instead of libidinal, they were her ways of knowing the world, and forming connections. Sex is evanescent, an intense passion that is as fleeting as dewdrops in the morning, just like the evanescence of the protest. The ending of the film is particularly harrowing in that it is drenched with ennui and boredom. The previously energetic students ended up becoming empty shells, soulless and passionless. Such melancholia is a symptom of post-traumatic malaise, and the death of youthful idealism for life and politics.

Susan Sontag wrote in her *Regarding the Pain of Others*: “Photographs objectify: They turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality. All memory is individual, unreproducible---it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story to our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings.”¹² The film is different from canonical photos about the Tiananmen Square protest like the Tank Man, in that it doesn’t immediately lead to one ideology or one particular attitude. The Tank Man elicits anger towards the totalitarian system and pity for the individual. But the Summer Palace doesn’t necessarily stimulate emotions like that, it records

¹¹ Lou Ye. *Summer Palace*. (2006)

¹² Susan Sontag, *On Regarding the Pain of Others*

the affect and feelings in a calm and un-staged way, while having its own “punctums”, using the language of Roland Barthes.¹³

One particular scene of such moment of laceration was when Yu Hong had a neurotic episode and folded her body into a fetal position at the bottom of an abandoned swimming pool. Beautiful catkins were flowing by, but she was in deep anguish. “I couldn’t sit still or remain calm. I wanted to keep writing, but I couldn’t. I did what I normally did. I shut my eyes tight. I wanted to lie down. Just to lie down. It would have done me good, Then I sat the boundary of the deep and the shallow. My breathing grew weaker. I lost consciousness.”¹⁴ The tiles on the bottom of the swimming pool forms the pattern of a red cross, with Yu Hong at the center. This is the scene that would sting a viewer with its punctum, a young girl on a beautiful spring day, agonizing alone at the bottom of an old swimming pool, on the verge of death. Yu Hong suffers in Beijing in the same way that Elle suffers in the small town of Nevers. In these tortuous streets the straight line of death’s vigil lives. Love is unpardonable there. At Nevers, love is the great sin. At Nevers, happiness is the great crime. Boredom, at Nevers, is a tolerated virtue. Their suffering belongs to the type of agony that’s beyond an individual experience but is rather the succession and accumulation of female melancholia across human history. It is important that despite the traditional romanticization of female melancholia in Chinese culture, most evidently through male author’s imitation of women’s voice in Tang dynasty poetry, Lou Ye completely avoids such romanticization. The base line is avoiding the self-alienation of human nature to the degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. Love or eros also plays the role of being a representative piece of element belonging to a larger totality. The director believes that love is a single leaf if the entire world is a tree. Yet it is a leaf

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

¹⁴ Lou Ye. Summer Palace. (2006)

from which one could read the entire message of the tree. So if the message of that leaf has been delivered with enough lucidity, then the film has successfully delivered the message of the world.

The relationship between suffering and death is later repeated as Yu Hong walked on a rooftop at the campus as the sun sets. She was near the verge but smiles when she saw Li Ti. She did not jump off. All the sex scenes in the film were equally related to death. Set with dim and often dark greenish mise-en-scene, the rooms were more like hospital wings or morgues. The bodies, though attractive, were tinged with the greenish light, moving desperately, almost in anguish, and each climax was a “la petit mort.” The deaths and suicides could be interpreted as another metaphor for the deaths and lost lives in 1989. Till this day, the numbers remain indefinite. This gives the director another reason not to portray death directly.

In some sense, the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, moves in a way that Duras describes her own writing, “aller-et-retour entre moi et moi, entre vous et moi.” But the “moi” here is what Rimbaud describes as the “Je est un autre”. I” Is another, it the other that is situated within an absent site of posthumanism. And such selves are eager to seek their own suicide, to repeat/prepare their own end, as to come to life again as something else, to repeat/remember their life. The crosscut in Resnais’s film that best captures the essence of this ontology is the opening of two bodies intertwined---a cropped image of two naked bodies intertwined in an inseparable embrace. Dust showers down, with a quiet shimmer like miniscule diamond powder that completely covers them. It is a deathly beauty of doom since the powder is actually atomic dust that rained over Hiroshima at the close of World War II. The scene then cuts into the present when the same two bodies fill up the screen only this time the fatal dust is replaced by beads of sweat. The dust is trauma, and the sweat is attraction, misting over a zone of grief and rapture.

The pull of attraction and Eros are not the saving grace for Elle, forgetting is. The rupture or the laceration created when one falls into the crack of trauma is covered up only through forgetfulness. Memories fade, people fade, people are forgotten. There is a melancholic inevitability to this. But only when the past is forsaken, can one return from the dead, from the “inhuman” back to the “human”. One needs to forget in order to live. The encounter with the Japanese man in Hiroshima and their intense physical love is a laceration, a punctum on the membrane of forgetfulness. The intensity of love situated within the extreme site of post-atomic Hiroshima is the starting point of a hauntology where Elle is finally able to recollect on her love, suffering and madness. Only in Hiroshima, in the enormity of its suffering while the world rejoiced, could she find an objective correlative for her own life. Is it politically trivializing to compare the loss of Hiroshima with her personal trauma? Perhaps, but that’s the truth for Elle, only through the mapping of affect and emotions in Hiroshima could she finally reconstruct her own narrative and recollection of Nevers. From her positionality, her life is a palimpsest that’s completed and remembered through Hiroshima. Love is not trivial even in Hiroshima, as it is one of the few things that still anchor us back to humanity. In Resnais’s film, sex is an act of writing itself. Bodies speak: When I put my hands on your body on your flesh, I feel the history of that body...Not just the beginning of its forming in that distant lake but all the way beyond its ending. It makes me weep to feel the history of your flesh beneath my hands in a time of so much loss. Language within the film is a living entity itself. Language is a skin. I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had worlds instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my worlds. My language trembles with desire. A sense of spatial dislocation dominates both films. The events of Nevers could only be resurrected in Hiroshima, while the Summer Palace carries the trauma of Tiananmen Square. Yet the actual location is the women’s bodies. Nevers and

Hiroshima merge on the map of a woman's geography, while the summer palace is the site of Yu Hong's sexual adventures and failures. Both films construct "body-cities" on a tender map.

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