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Focalization as Perception and as Figure of Knowing

Ernst van Alphen

Mieke Bal defines focalization, the concept that constitutes the base and core of her whole career, as the relation between the vision and that which is "seen," perceived (142). She stresses the fact that events are always presented from within a certain vision and that perception is a psychosomatic process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body. It is the psychosomatic nature of focalization which is enacted in the most penetrating way in a text by one of Bal's favorite authors: Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. In Duras' text focalization is presented in its full complexity. Perception by the senses is not conflated with perception by intellect. On the contrary, Duras demonstrates how perception and knowing can exclude each other or be entangled in the most confusing ways. It is this epistemological conflict that constitutes the act of narration.

Marguerite Duras' text, which served as the script for Alain Renais' film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, demonstrates the stake of the *moral* problem of narrating catastrophic events in the most penetrating way. In text as well as film, a French woman has met a Japanese man in Hiroshima, where she is an actor in a film on peace. Hiroshima, the site of an erased catastrophe, becomes the site of their love affair. During this love affair the woman feels compelled to tell her Japanese lover the story of her love affair with a German soldier and the fatal shooting of her lover during the liberation of occupied Nevers, a small provincial town in France. However, for the woman the telling of the story of her love affair with the German through the story of his death is a betrayal of the loved one. She betrays the one who died with the one who is alive, and who listens (27). It is clear that this betrayal is not an erotic betrayal, but a betrayal in the act of telling. It is the transmission and communication of an understanding of this former love and of the death of her lover which erases the uniqueness of this person and his death. The betrayal does not consist of the idea that her narration makes public a secret story of a secret love. It is felt as a betrayal because the understanding conveyed by the narration is a mediation of the original event. This mediation increases the distance from it and frames it in a way that is not necessarily relevant to the original event.

In her narration the woman is able to minimize the increasing distance through confusing the Japanese lover to whom she tells her story with her German lover. When her parents put her in a cellar after the liberation in order to hide the shame of their daughter, she narrates this as follows to her Japanese lover:

> She: Nevertheless I call you. Even though you're dead. Then one day, I scream, I scream as loud as I can, like a deaf person would. That's when they put me in the cellar. To punish me.
> He: What do you scream?
> She:Your German name. Only your name. I only have one memory left, your name.
> ...
> She:I want you so badly, I can't bear it anymore. (57-8)

She can only tell her story by refusing the third person pronoun for her German lover. In using the second person for him, addressing him as a second person, she makes him present again. This displacement of pronouns is her solution for the dilemma that one betrays the past by narrating it.

Communicating catastrophic events is experienced as a conflict because the act of telling transforms almost automatically the visuality of the original imprint. The discourse that enables understanding and communication of the event at the same time frames and mediates it in such a way that it increases the distance to the past event. A distance that is experienced as betrayal. The way the mediation and framing of discourse is ultimately a betrayal of the original event is enacted in the opening scene of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

As the film opens we see two pairs of bare shoulders, ash-covered but also coated, as Duras says, in "the sweat of love fulfilled." A man's voice, flat and calm, says:

> He: You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing
> She: I saw everything. Everything
> She:The hospital, for instance, I saw it, I'm sure I did. There is a hospital in Hiroshima. How could I help seeing it?
> He:You did not see the hospital in Hiroshima. You saw nothing in Hiroshima. (16-7)

His denial of her seeing is, of course, not an empirical issue. His denial is based on the distinction of seeing as literal perception and

seeing as a figure of knowing. Although she is at the moment in Hiroshima and she has visited the hospital with victims of the catastrophe, she has no real understanding of the event. The nature of seeing is the origin of their conflict about the truth of Hiroshima. The man suggests that one might see without knowing.

The course of their love affair suggests, however, that the woman's claim of having seen everything is a fantasy along the lines of a screen memory – in strictly Freudian terms, a false or insignificant recollection that defensively masks a real and traumatic one, in this case the fatal shooting of the woman's German lover during the liberation of occupied Nevers. Her claim of having seen everything is then displaced from her past love to Hiroshima. This possibility of screen-memory is clearly suggested in Renais' film when, at the beginning of their time together and after having slept with the Japanese man, she looks at him while he is still asleep on the bed. In less than a second she sees then the visual imprint of the dead body of her German lover.

But there is more to it. Although she has visited the hospital, the rest of her visual account and knowledge of Hiroshima are based on multiple visits to the museum.

> She: Four times at the museum in Hiroshima. I saw the people walking around. The people walk around, lost in thought, among the photographs, the reconstructions, for want of something else, among the photographs, the photographs, the reconstructions, for want of something else, the explanations, for want of something else.
> Four times at the museum in Hiroshima.
> I looked at the people. I myself looked thoughtfully at the iron. The burned iron. The broken iron, the iron made vulnerable flesh. I saw the bouquet of bottle caps: who would have suspected that? Human skin floating, surviving, still in the bloom of its agony.
> Stones. Shattered stones. Anonymous heads of hair that the women of Hiroshima, when they awoke in the morning, discovered had falling out. It was hot at Peace Square. Ten thousand degrees at Peace Square. I know it. The temperature of the sun at Peace Square. How can you not know it?...The grass, it's quite simple... (17)

Although she has seen many things in the museum, her understanding of Hiroshima is based on indirect observations: it must have been very hot at Peace Square, because all the grass is burned and the iron is burned and broken like vulnerable flesh. Her knowledge is not based on working through literal, direct perception and experience. It is based on accounts framed and mediated by others. The woman is able to reflect continuously on what she sees. Her seeing is determined by her knowing.

> The reconstructions have been made as authentically as possible.
> The films have been made as authentically as possible.
> The illusion, it's quite simple, the illusion is so perfect that tourists cry.
> One can always scoff, but what else can a tourist do, really, but cry?
> I have always wept over the fate of Hiroshima. Always. (18)

The woman's seeing and knowledge of Hiroshima is the seeing and knowledge of a tourist. Her seeing is not one of visual imprints of the event, but of reconstructions of it. According to her, however, her understanding of Hiroshima is based on the narration of History itself:

> She: I saw the newsreels.
> On the second day, History tells, I am not making it up, on the second day certain species of animals rose again from the depths of the earth and from the ashes.
> Dogs were photographed.
> For all eternity.
> I saw them.
> I *saw* the newsreels.
> I *saw* them.
> On the first day.
> On the second day.
> On the third day
> [...] I didn't make anything up
> He: You made it *all* up. (18-9)

The idea of History itself telling, naive as it is because completely ignoring the mediatedness of the historical account (which implies focalization), is important in our discussion because it seems to be an accurate notion of the status of visual imprints. The woman uses it, however, to indicate the reliability of newsreels, photographs and other mediated accounts.

Telling: On Not Being Able To See

The man's denial of the woman's having seen, and as a consequence knowing, is not based on the fact that she was not an eye-witness. Although he is Japanese, he was not an eye-witness either. During the bombing of Hiroshima he was elsewhere, fighting in the war. But his family was in Hiroshima. He denies her seeing as a mode of knowing because her seeing of Hiroshima came after her knowledge of Hiroshima. Her knowing is not the result of working through visual imprints. The nature of her knowing in relation to her seeing is not only at stake in the long scene about the museum and the newsreels at the beginning of book and film, but also later when she explains to her Japanese lover the meaning Hiroshima has for her. She hears about what has happened in Hiroshima the moment she arrives in Paris after being liberated from the cellar in which her parents had hidden her. Hiroshima is for her the moment of liberation in a dual sense. It is the liberation as the end of the Second World War, and it is the liberation from her shame and madness in Nevers. Hiroshima is not the ultimate catastrophe, but the opposite: it is the story of liberation. This explains also why she presents the film in which she is an actor and for which she is in Hiroshima as a film about peace.

The perspective through which she *sees* and focalizes Hiroshima frames Hiroshima as liberation. It is only in her encounter with the Japanese lover, which functions as screen-memory for the catastrophe of the killing of her German lover, that she begins to see differently. The visual imprints of her dying, then dead German lover are activated by being in love again, this time with a Japanese man. It is not the horror she sees in the museum or in the newsreels that reenacts these visual imprints, but her love for another man. Her new love makes it possible that she begins to see Hiroshima differently. Her new love has that cathartic function because, like her love for the German soldier, it is an "impossible love again." These are the words which the woman uses in the last part of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* to describe what her two love stories have in common: being impossible.

It is also in this last part that the woman becomes aware of the fact that her seeing and knowing of Hiroshima have changed thanks to her new impossible love, which enabled her to address and tell the story of her first impossible love. This scene also makes clear that telling the story of her love is not only a betrayal of it. In the embodiment of the visual imprints of her dying German soldier in her Japanese lover the story of her love has also become "a story that could be told":

> You think you know. And then, no. You don't.
> In Nevers she had a German love when she was young...
> We'll go to Bavaria, my love, and there we'll marry.
> She never went to Bavaria *(looking at herself in the mirror.)*
> I dare those who have never gone to Bavaria to speak to her of love.
> You were not yet quite dead.
> I told our story.
> 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. (73)

Betrayal and possibility are imbricated, however. The betrayal of the story of an impossible love has become "a story that could be told." The memories and visual imprints had been stored as bodily sensations in her own body. The bodily sensations of her days of love with the Japanese man are what awaken these sensations. Her expression that for fourteen years she has not found the "the taste of an impossible love again" cannot be taken literally enough. The reenactment of visual imprints which occurs is the result of an embodiment she tastes. The Japanese man embodies all the sensorial sensations of her former impossible love. This reenactment-through-embodiment enables her to work through the catastrophe of the end of her first impossible love. It is only then that that love begins to belong to the past: "Look how I'm forgetting you ... Look how I've forgotten you." It is in this closure of her "betrayal in the act of telling" that she emphasizes again the visual nature of her awareness, her knowledge that she has forgotten him. She repeats "look" twice. This is the first time, however, that seeing as perception and seeing as a figure of knowing result from another, that seeing really is knowing and knowing is seeing.