ABSTRACT

THE CONTEXT OF LOSS:
CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE LANGUAGE OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY IN
HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR AND LE RAVISSEMENT DE LOL. V. STEIN

by Gina Marie Stamm

This paper examines two works by the author Marguerite Duras in an effort to determine the relationship between genre and for and the protagonists’ experience of traumatic and melancholic memory. The psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan as well as Jacques Derrida’s discussion of writing and context are used to explore how the form of a work, especially the use of images and sound in film, affect the relationship of a character (and thus, a person) to the language they use to recount a traumatic event and through that language to the event itself and their ability to work through it.
THE CONTEXT OF LOSS:

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HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR AND LE RAVISSEMENT DE LOL V. STEIN

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The Context of Loss: Contextualization of the Language of Traumatic Memory in
*Hiroshima mon amour* and *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*

**Introduction**

Two works by Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, seem to have parallel plots: a young girl loses her fiancé right in front of her eyes (whether to death or to another woman), an event that precipitates a bout of madness in both of their cases. Long after the original incident, after many years of "normal" life during which both women marry other men, each woman revisits the original event at the same time that another man arrives in her life. More specifically, he is another lover who in some way, either personally or in terms of his relationship with her, reminds her of the man she has lost. In addition to their many plot resemblances, characteristics of technique also link the two works. Foremost among these similarities are the use of flashback and repetition and the ambiguity and switching of narrative voice and of the referent of indexical words such as personal pronouns.

While similar in these key aspects, *Hiroshima* and *Lol V. Stein* diverge significantly in their form and their relation to historicity. *Hiroshima* makes integral use of, while *Lol V. Stein* (and perhaps also *Lol V. Stein*) conspicuously lacks, *images*—either visual or rhetorically depicted. While this may seem to be a superficial distinction to draw between the two (since they are different art forms, why say that one lacks something?), one must recall that Marguerite Duras, working in both genres, was able to decide what she wanted to be a book and what she wanted to be produced as a film. *Hiroshima mon amour* was written to be a movie—it was not an adaptation, and Duras herself had much influence on Resnais’s film. *Lol V. Stein*, written four years later could have been made into a movie, as after *Hiroshima* Duras began to work more and more in cinema. Even had it not been practical at the time, a later film adaptation of *Lol V. Stein* could have been made, but wasn’t—in fact, it is the first of two works in the so-called “India Cycle” (of which the rest are *Le Vice-Consul* [1965], *India Song* [1973], *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta desert* [1976], and *Nathalie Granger/La femme du Gange* [1973]) not to be made into a movie. What, then, is the significance of Duras’s choice? Why was the later work never given a concrete visual form?
In order to understand what is at stake in *Lol V. Stein*’s iconoclasm, one must first determine the role or function of the image in *Hiroshima mon amour*. How is the image used to tell the story of “elle,” the protagonist of the film? How does *she* use the image? What is its effect on us as viewers, on our experience of the characters and their lives? Specifically, how does the image interact with the elements that these works have in common—traumatic loss, repetition, flashbacks, shifters? Once these questions are addressed, we will be able to begin to see what is missing in *Lol V. Stein*, and what thematic or narrative characteristics render the use of an image either superfluous or deleterious. In other words, what are the narrative and thematic functions not only of the actual images (the actual film), but of “the image” as such, especially in a novel so preoccupied with the seen and unseen as is *Lol V. Stein* with its theme of voyeurism, in which the ability to see specific images or events is the main focus of desire. What relationship, then, if any, is there between “the image” as such and loss/trauma as experienced by the protagonists of these works? What is the relationship between the viewer and this experience as mediated (or not) by images accompanying the work? What is the relationship between the *form* of these two works overall—grammar, narrative structure, genre—and the content; when that form differs, does the effect on the content change (or from what difference in content does that difference in form emerge)?

The other primary difference between the two works, one that raises similar questions as to its function, concerns the historical and geographical location of the events of *Hiroshima mon amour*, set fifteen years after the bomb was dropped on that city. How does this specificity affect the characters differently than in *Lol V. Stein*? Both of these characteristics—image and "situation"—are part of what Jacques Derrida would call the “context” of a certain instance of language, and his essays “Shibboleth for Paul Celan” and “Signature Événement Contexte” will serve as the theoretical frame by which to consider the relationships between context and language in these two works and their conclusions (and the ways in which we are able to read them), and look in turn at what these works can tell us about language and its use in, with, or as a specific context.
Chapter I: Hiroshima and Naming

Beginning an analysis of the formal aspects of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*—rather than merely the screenplay—as the work of Marguerite Duras requires some justification. Duras’s contributed the screenplay to the film, which was as a whole a collaboration between herself and Alain Resnais. One has a tendency to view the script as the work of Duras, and the film itself as the work of Resnais, which would bring comparisons to Resnais’s previous film, *Night and Fog*, and focus attention on the issues of history, memory, and historical catastrophe, which, although not mutually exclusive with a reading of the film as the personal story of the two main characters, downplays the quality of their interaction to focus on the mere existence of this relationship and how it relates to the grander historical narrative. Even at the risk of obscuring Duras's characteristic focus on personal story, there are reasons to focus on the film as a whole, rather than trying to delimit, so as to ignore, Resnais's "discrete" contribution. The first is that *Hiroshima* was written originally as a screenplay (rather than as a novel that would later be adapted into a film): it was created to be viewed and heard, to be experienced as a combination of sound and images. In addition, nearly every shot corresponds to the stage directions given by Duras in the published version of the screenplay. Duras meticulously laid out the film shot by shot. As she claimed in the Appendix about “Notes sur Nevers,” she created these directions at the behest of Resnais; “‘Faites comme si vous commentiez les images d’un film fait,’ m’a dit Resnais” (*HMA* 125).

This second factor, however, becomes irrelevant if one considers the status of the "authenticity" (or, perhaps, good faith) of the published version of the screenplay, which was published three years after the making of the film. It is difficult to treat the screenplay and film as anything but one work, since the latter matches the former almost exactly (with minimal exceptions noted by Duras, including footage of a mushroom cloud at the very beginning of the script which was ultimately not included in the theatrical release of the film). Thus it becomes problematic to privilege the screenplay in this way as exclusively the work of Duras, in contrast to the finished film, as it is entirely possible, even probable, that changes were made to correspond with the film (and to account for, among other things, the images). Even if one admits the original quality of the screenplay, one cannot avoid the idea that Duras must have had, in that case, near-total control of the images included in the film. One may be allowed, in this
case, to see the images (and sounds)—the material aspects of this film—as medium and as stylistic elements used by Duras herself, even though she was not actually behind the camera, as she would be with later films such as *India Song*. The materiality of image and voice in fact becomes integral to *Hiroshima's* particular construction of the sort of narrative of personal traumatic loss that Duras scripts variously, recurrently, throughout her oeuvre.

The function of the images has less to do with an internal rhetoric of filmic images than with their relationship *as material/sensory objects* to the language used, a language that possesses an unusual preponderance of deictic or indexical words (to the point of exclusion of more defined words), which demand a material "anchor".\(^1\) The only names by which we know the main characters of *Hiroshima mon amour* are simple pronouns: *je, tu, il, elle*—words which depend on specific contextual information, in the absence of which their referent remains fluid and nonspecific. This supports a common observation about the movie (by Cathy Caruth among others) that one person can take the place of the other and still remain "you"—a situation in which the principal female character (a French actress) allows her Japanese lover to take the place of her dead German lover, and so is able to finally communicate the loss of the latter that she suffered as a young woman. What ambiguities are created by the use of deictic language in the dialogue of *Hiroshima mon amour*, and what tensions or resolutions are created when words are juxtaposed with onscreen images? More specifically, how does the image affect the relationships of presence and absence, of identification and de-identification created by the use of deictic language?

The first explanation that presented itself for the exclusive use of personal pronouns, and which would be suggested frequently, was the departicularization of the story. "Il" and "elle" allegedly become universals as they would be in a written or printed text. While this may have some element of truth, a few problems arise. First of all, what universals would they represent?

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\(^1\) "Les formes appelés traditionnellement ‘pronoms personnels’ ‘démonstratifs’ nous apparaissent maintenant comme une classe d’« individus linguistiques, » de formes qui renvoient toujours et seulement à des “individus”, qu’il s’agisse de personnes, de moments, de lieux, par opposition aux termes nominaux qui renvoient toujours et seulement à des concepts. Or le statut de ces “individus linguistiques” tient au fait qu’ils naissent d’une énonciation, qu’ils sont produits par cet événement individuel et, si l’on peut dire, “semel-natif”.” (Benveniste 83)
Il and Elle alone could be every man and every woman, but their voices, perceptible to the
viewer from the beginning, tell us already that it is more specific than that: the existence of the
voice, a unique physical presence, does not allow the universalization of these characters, but
rather the possibility of being any rather than every. Is it any French woman and any Japanese
man? This explanation is made fairly plausible by the first 15 minutes of the film in which we
have no visible referent for the “je” and “tu” whom we can clearly recognize by their accents as
French and Japanese. The (presumably French) audience of the film might identify then with the
French voice, each one being addressed individually by the Japanese, who insists, over images of
the aftermath of the atomic bombing, that “[t]u n’as rien vu à Hiroshima.”

It is important as well to note, that while the main characters are known as ‘il’ and ‘elle’
in the screenplay, they are not, to the viewer of the film, verbally distinguished by even this
much. The film’s audience is introduced to them only as “je” and “tu,” appellations that, from
the very beginning, have no (even temporarily, for the duration of the film) fixed referent within
the film, lending even more ambiguity to their use. Both are “je”; both are “tu.” While difficult to
judge what the viewers’ reaction would be upon seeing the movie with no previous information,
the characters are certainly never named in any way that might permit them to be distinguished
from each other. They are identified to the viewer only by the material or sensory qualities
of the actors on the screen. (The details about their personal lives that accrue in the course of the
film never include their names). Voices thus far are unidentified, what Michel Chion calls
“acoustmêtres”: sound-beings whose source we cannot see. For Chion, the acoustmêtre "s’engage
si peu que ce soit dans l’image, [et] est investie de pouvoirs magiques, le plus souvent
maléfiques, plus rarement tutélaires... du simple fait que le corps supposé l’émettre n’a pas
encore été inscrit dans le champ de vision” (Chion 28). Being disembodied, voice becomes in a
certain manner superhuman or transhuman, and thus would serve as a universal, were one to
ignore the individuality conferred by the voice itself. Without a body, however, a voice could
belong to anything—a god, a phantom, a person who "hears" the voices within his or her own
psyche.

However, after about fifteen minutes, a point of reference is given for these voices,
pulling them out of the universal register allowed by their voices and grounding them firmly in
images. Not only are we given particular bodies to whom the voices are supposed to belong, but
body and voice are directly joined by the focus on the careful, perfectly-synched enunciation of the two actors.

Il y a un point ultime de la désacousmatisation, et c’est la bouche d’où sort la voix… Tant que le visage et la bouche ne sont pas révélés complètement, et que l’œil du spectateur n’a pas “vérifié” la coincidence de la voix avec la bouche… la désacousmatisation est incomplete et la voix conserve une aura d’invulnérabilité et de puissance magique.

(Chion 33)

This superhuman invulnerability and power are denied to these voices as soon as actress Emmanuelle Riva (to whom the woman’s voice belonged) exaggeratedly articulates the name of her lover: “Toi!” We see the seam between the voice and the body, and this “je” and “tu” are revealed to belong to Okada and Riva—these particular physical individuals.

What troubles this identification, however, is a recurring situation in which the “toi” of Riva’s speech no longer appears to be referring to the Japanese man in front of her, but to her long-dead German lover, the story of whose death she finally recounts in full, as well the story of her ensuing madness and departure from her native city of “Nevers.” The Japanese man himself seems to enter into this memory as they sit in a tea room at night, asking her, from what seems to be the point of view of the dead man, “Quand tu es dans la cave, je suis mort?” This would appear to support Cathy Caruth’s claim that

[S]poken within the living man’s assumption of the dead man’s voice, the question recognizes that the answer can only arise within the very act of its denial; that the woman cannot know the death of her loved one, that is, without sharing this knowledge, and addressing this story, to him. Her not knowing, as the dead man’s question calls upon it, is an endless address to the dead lover. And it is only from the perspective of this death, assumed by the man who listens, that her story can be heard. (37-8)

What soon becomes evident, however, is that this assumption of identity, if it takes place at all, is extremely imperfect. In a previous scene where Riva began to tell her story, we were introduced in flashbacks to new referents for the words “je” and “tu”—a younger version of Riva and her German lover. This girl, although she is the one identified as “je”—performing all of the actions that we associate with this “je” is manifestly not the same one who is speaking. Although bearing Riva’s face, the young girl is dissociated from the speaking voice in that we, the viewers,
cannot connect the two. The woman does not *relive* her memory in the first person, is not repeating the experience from the point of view of the young woman to whom it is happening. This scene plays out for her as it does for us—as a film. Once speech is detached from the person performing the actions attributed to the linguistic “je,” this “je” is no different from any other name given to a third party. The camera never switches to point of view, and so the disembodied voice does not belong to the girl’s cinematic perspective. She [Riva] is not speaking *as* the young girl, but *about* her.

The image, in this case, explicitly contradicts and overrides the identification evoked by the use of this pronoun. The woman has been transformed into a narrator/observer of her own past, and her Japanese lover into another, whose status is somewhat ambiguous, given the fact that it is not his memory, nor is he in front of the screen of her memory, watching the same film as we are. Neither is his motive for entering into her memory explicit. He does take here the position of an analyst, verbally inhabiting her memory. Whatever the character’s particular motivation for taking this position, it allows the viewer to see to what extent the episode of Nevers corresponds to the Lacanian idea of the fantasm, to a “Courte scène dramatique extrêmement rapide...qui se répète, toujours la même, sans jamais être perçue nettement par la conscience” (Nasio 14). Nevers is, for the female protagonist, “La chose du monde à laquelle [elle] rêve le plus. En même temps que c’est la chose du monde à laquelle [elle] pense le moins” (*HMA* 58). Replayed innumerable times by her unconscious, the loss of the soldier is shunted away from her conscious mind to such an extent that the mere parallel with her liaison with the Japanese man does not suffice for her to recall it; only his *insistence* forces her to do so. She doesn’t see the fundamental importance of this scene, but *he* does:

“A cause de Nevers, je peux seulement commencer à te connaître. Et, entre les milliers et les milliers de choses de ta vie, je choisis Nevers »

« Comme autre chose? »

« Oui »

« Non, ce n’est pas par hasard. C’est toi qui dois me dire pourquoi »

« C’est là, il me semble l’avoir compris, que tu as dû commencer à être comme aujourd’hui tu es encore. » (80-81).
He has identified the location of her fantasm, the scene in which the *objet a* will appear, the unidentified object of desire, the *absence* at the center of her fantasm. It is the analyst’s work to replace the *objet a* in the fantasm (Freud in Nasio 30) in which it is no wonder that the pronouns would have become confused, given that “[l]e mécanisme principal organisateur de la structure fantasmaticque est l’identification du sujet devenu objet” (Nasio 40). This fantasm located within the scene at Nevers remained for so long in the woman’s dreams. Even less aware of it than of the episode as a whole, the consciousness of the woman cannot approach one specific place: the exact moment of the man’s death, which she claims not to remember: “Quand? Je ne sais plus au juste...le moment de sa mort m’a échappé vraiment” (*HMA* 100).2 The identity of the “je” and “tu” is also rendered problematic by the material aspect of the Japanese man’s voice. On the printed page, he is fully capable of assuming the German’s place, as the printed word is neutral, but once that voice takes on an acoustic and imagistic manifestation, his accent disrupts our capacity to suspend our disbelief and assimilate the two men. He cannot take the place of the dead man for us, and, therefore, not for the woman either. What Caruth seems to ignore is that what appears to be a conflation of identities on the printed page of the screenplay ceases to be so as soon as it is forced into the "reality" of the on-screen world. While we are tempted via the dialogue to assume that the two lovers are acting out a conversation between the *other* couple, both the camera and the soundtrack expressly forbid us to complete that identification. The camera interrupts the identification that the film's use of deictic language creates and calls attention to the ultimate futility of our attempts to identify a unified linguistic subject. While the use of pronominal shifters originally emphasized the fluidity of the referent beneath such signifiers (and their signifieds—the signified of the signifier “je” being merely “the person talking,” for example), the camera work undermines even *this* amount of stability, driving a wedge even between signifier and signified and thus also, at every step, the attempt to create any unity between the self and its linguistic expression.

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*2 Caruth reads this scene as*

The culmination of her story, the body marks the very transformation, in her own telling, from the shock of an arrival at an utterly singular and irrefutable moment...into an endless possibility of arrival. Her bodily life, that is, has become the endless attempt to witness her lover’s death. Her final address—“do you understand”—spoken from within this eternity, no longer truly knows a history of loss, but rather speaks, beyond its knowing, the impossibility, precisely, of having her own history. (39)
There is yet another part of this scene that renders problematic Caruth’s statement that it is only from the perspective of his death that the story of the German soldier can be heard. In addition to the imperfect identification of the modern couple with their counterparts of fourteen years prior, at the moment when she actually tells about her experience of the loss of her lover, she ceases to address (or refer to) him as “tu”:

Il est devenu froid peu a peu sous moi. Ah! Qu’est-ce qu’il a été long à mourir. Quand? Je ne sais plus au juste. J’étais couché sur lui...oui...le moment de sa mort ma échappé vraiment puisque...puisque même à ce moment-là, et même après, je peux dire que je n’arrivais pas à trouver la moindre différence entre ce corps mort et le mien. Je ne pouvais trouver entre ce corps et le mien que des ressemblances...hurlantes. Tu comprends? C’était mon premier amour. *(HMA 100)*

If an identification of two people takes place here, it is clearly not between the dead man and the new lover, but between Riva’s character and the dead man, which does not seem to play into the scenario that Caruth describes, in which Riva would be addressing the two men at once. Importantly as well, while she says that she can find no difference between his body and hers, it is only between their *bodies*. There is no linguistically subjective identification between the two, no confusion of their interiorities. In this dialogue, which will be acted out by her flashback, Okada’s character attempts to become incorporated into her psyche as “tu”—an available addressee. He begins by inserting himself in the place of the *objet a* (in the place of, for lack of a more precise alternative, the German soldier: a loss about which "she" was not permitted to speak, being relegated to the cellar when she called his name). This incorporation falters when the soldier is relegated to the third-person “il,” separating the two. The events of the film, however, are not merely a senseless repetition of the scene in the woman’s unconscious but rather function as an analysis.

Un montage qu’on bâtit séance après séance, autour d’un trou...l’analyse est un fragment de la vie nouvelle composé de multiples fragments de l’histoire de la vie du patient, reproduits dans l’ici et le maintenant d’une séance sous la forme des fantasmes... Un autre avantage offert par le transfert est d’amener le malade à se faire se dérouler nettement sous nos yeux un *fragment important de son histoire*. Tout se passe comme
s’il agissait [fantasmatiquement] devant nous au lieu de seulement nous informer’ (Freud cited by Nasio 74-5).

This “montage” permits a visual de-identification in the visual flashback, in which the woman has managed to disengage the dead man from her unconscious—to see him, and to separate him from her own subjective point of view.

It is at this point also that we stop seeing the woman’s past play out before her as a film. The “je” is no longer attached to a separate presence, to this other, wordless body. The other “tu” disappears as well, and we are left with a speaker who is finally visually identified with the “je” of her speech, and she speaks not to her dead lover about his own death, but about him, using the third-person singular pronoun “il.” In addition, it is here that Riva begins to use past tenses, returning temporally as well as visually to the tea room in 1950s Hiroshima. The beach at Nevers is elsewhere and in another time from the person being identified as “je.” There is a dichotomy, as well, between the implicit "maintenant" of the tea room, and the "Nevers" of which the woman speaks. The “never” carried around with her prevented her from ever truly inhabiting the present linguistically. And without speech originating in a present, there can be neither past, present, nor future—only "[N]ever[s]."

“[La temporalité] est produite en réalité dans et par l’énonciation. De l’énonciation procède l’instauration de la catégorie du présent, et de la catégorie du présent naît la catégorie du temps” (Benveniste 83). She is speaking about someone who is neither physically nor visually present for her. By returning to the café on screen and speaking finally as her present self, about someone outside of the visual “je-tu” that is made up of her and Okada’s characters, she has acknowledged his existence apart from their couple, has acknowledged his absence and his death, even if she did not witness the actual instance of its occurrence.

Caruth’s analysis of this final scene seems to imply that even now, even after telling her new lover this story, "she" will never successfully know the loss "she" has experienced, or, therefore, be able to work through the experience. This seems to play into a sort of permanent melancholia on the part of the woman, an internalization in the fantasm of the man whose death she was never able to accept as a specific moment of her life. She “cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” (Freud 1917, 245) because she could never acknowledge that moment of loss. This psychological state seems to correspond to the mobility of pronouns that we see elsewhere
in the movie—an inability to properly identify one person with one [linguistic] subject, since the nonexistence or nonpresence of the German soldier has not been acknowledged, and thus he cannot be correctly placed in relation to her own “ego.” But at the moment where she begins to speak about the soldier’s death, she can no longer address the dead man, nor speak about him as someone to be addressed—this ‘third-person tu’ that we experience during the flashbacks. Both she and the camera distance themselves from the past, and identify people properly: _je_ is the woman who is talking, _tu_ is the man sitting across from her to whom her words are physically addressed, and _il_ is the one who is both spatially and temporally separated from them both, who is not there, who is _lost_. It is at the moment that she acknowledges this linguistic separation that she acknowledges her real separation from the soldier. Just because she does not experience the exact moment of his death does not mean that she is unable to understand that he did die, that he has been gone from that moment forward.

This is not the only, nor is it the last scene in the movie in which voices and narrative voices become disembodied. Shortly after this exchange, the woman goes back to her hotel room and has a vivid conversation between her voice over, herself, the camera, and her reflection in the mirror in which she uses the subject pronouns _elle, tu, nous, je, on_, and an impersonal subjunctive expression invoking a mysterious “ceux.” As the camera isolates her reflection in the mirror, we hear Riva’s own voice in voice-over, speaking ostensibly to the lover, but visually to _herself_, to the representation of her physical body, although this time as an adult rather than the mental picture of herself as a young girl. “Tu n’étais pas tout à fait mort. J’ai raconté notre histoire. Je t’ai trompé ce soir avec cet inconnu. J’ai raconté notre histoire. Elle était, vois-tu, racontable...Regarde comme je t’oublie...—Regarde comme je t’ai oublié. Regarde-moi.” While the implied (and grammatical, according to the screenplay’s masculine past participle) _destinataire_ is the dead lover, the visual and aural _destinatrice_ is the image of Riva, dead, betrayed, and forgotten by the _acousmêtre_-Riva, whose voice we hear announcing the death of her character’s representation of herself (again, an instance in which the image opens multiple interpretations not available to the mere reader). It was the story of Riva and her own lost younger self as well as of that younger Riva and the German soldier. This younger self, this image of the past, repeated in the image in the hotel mirror, dies and is forgotten, and is called at the same time to look at and acknowledge its own destruction. “Regarde comme je t’oublie...—
Regarde comme je t’ai oublié. Regarde-moi.” The reflection, the image, is called on as “toi,” as object, to recognize the subject who now speaks as the linguistic “je” that belonged for so long to the image of the flashback, her representation of her former self. The image, representation, reflection is no longer in the place of the linguistic subject.

Can one be permitted, then, to call this a resolution, a catharsis? This is not the end of the movie, after all, but is followed by several scenes which seem to imply that the relation between the two main characters is far from neatly resolved. They come together and break apart, walking the streets of Hiroshima while Riva’s voice reprises part of the introduction to the film, addressed to a visually unspecified “tu,” taking up again also a question to which we have not yet heard the response: “Qui es-tu?” (115).

This question of resolution or the lack thereof brings us to a recurring characteristic of Duras’s work: that of repetition without a satisfactory resolution—what Kristeva calls in Black Sun “[a]n aesthetics of awkwardness on the one hand...a noncathartic literature on the other” (225), to which she makes an exception: films.

We now understand why Duras’ books should not be put into the hands of oversensitive readers. Let them go see the films and the plays; they will encounter the same malady of distress but subdued, wrapped up in a dreamy charm that softens it and also makes it more feigned and made up, a convention. (227)

While it is clear that there is a qualitative difference between the non-catharsis of, for example, Lol V. Stein, and Hiroshima, this difference does not come from a nebulous softening of the blow of depression by conventionalizing its effects, but rather from the fact that the image allows the first of two major turning points in the film, two major interruptions of the "noncathartic" repetition that might otherwise continue indefinitely. The first is the fixing of the linguistic subject to a particular visual individual and the return to the present, the visualization and then abandonment of the forgotten memories of Nevers.

The second change takes place in the last moments of the film. Up until this point, the two main characters are only verbally identified by personal pronouns (with two exceptions, these are ‘je’ and ‘tu’). Both characters are "je," both are "tu," and the viewer has relied on visual and aural cues to know to whom they refer in each specific material instance. These pronouns, according to Benveniste, have two main characteristics. First, as already cited, they
function as ‘individus linguistiques’ in that they “naissent d’une énonciation, qu’ils sont produits par cet événement individuel” (83). Second:

Le pronom personnel n’est pas l’unique forme de cette nature. Quelques autres indicateurs partagent la même situation, notamment la série de déictiques. Montrant les objets, les démonstratifs ordonnent l’espace à partir d’un point centrale, qui est Ego, selon des catégories variables : l’objet est près ou loin de moi ou de toi...Le système des coordonnées spatiales se prête ainsi à localiser tout objet en n’importe quel champ, une fois que celui qui l’ordonne est lui-même désigné comme centre est repère. (Benveniste 68-9, italics added)

This designation does not actually happen until the visual identification that takes place in the tea room and the hotel bathroom, an omission which has implications not only for the two speakers but for everything that they name—here, there, now, then, this, that, him, her, they, etc. The whole world of the screenplay (and part of the film) is organized around an indeterminate center devoid not only of any referent (as is the case with most fiction), but of a consistency that would permit signified, if non-referential content. This indeterminacy is partially remedied finally by the end of the scene in the tea room in which a concrete and consistent visual referent emerges for the personal pronouns.

A change occurs at the end of the film that reiterates the visual changes already seen: the characters are finally named.

“Hi-ro-shi-ma. Hi-ro-shi-ma. C’est ton nom”


A verbal center has finally been given for the linguistic worlds that have been constructed around these two people via their use of deictic language. However, instead of fictional names of people, they are called by place names. To give them names merely for the sake of doing so would have been nearly meaningless. Personal names, even when unique, are hardly more individualizing or concrete than personal pronouns. They could refer to anyone, except when attached to specific referents, physical people—hence the use of a toponym, which supplies individual content and context to these fictional characters. The content of these toponyms comes from their place in the coded system of geography as in Derrida’s discussion of a similar phenomenon related to dates in “Shibboleth for Paul Celan”:
Under certain conditions at least, what dating amounts to is signing. To inscribe a date, to enter it, is not simply the sign of a given year, month, day, or hour…but also to sign from a given place (SPC 14-5).

Dating…involves marking a missive with coded signs. It entails reference to charts, and the utilization of systems of notation and spatio-temporal plottings said to be “objective”…Assigning or consigning absolute singularity. (SPC 9)

It is not so much the actual content of these words—that is to say, the specific characteristics of the cities of Hiroshima and Nevers, but that they are part of a system of coded singularities of maps and calendars.

The cipher of the seal, the imprint of the seal, the imprint of the ring, counts, perhaps more than the content of the message. As with shibboleth, the meaning of the word matters less than, let’s say, its signifying form once it becomes a password, a mark of belonging, the manifestation of an alliance. (SPC 21)

The names "Hiroshima" and "Nevers" thus mark the existence of these two individuals at the center of the linguistic networks they have created. It is important, as well, that these names were not imposed from the outside, but were given by the characters themselves. Thus the man and woman not only were named, but each participated in the act of naming, affirming their own ability to be present to the other. “Whoever inscribes the year, the day, the place, in short, the presence of a ‘here and now’ attests thereby to his or her own presence at the act of inscription” (SPC 17). Both of these characters assert at the same time the singularity of the other and their own active presence to this singularity.

In addition, however, to the value of these names as ciphers, the use of “Ne-vers-en-France” enigmatically evokes its English homophone “Never in France,” seeming to indicate not only the specificity of the name, the singularity, but also the rootlessness of the female character, her estrangement from the actual content of this word. ‘Nevers’ is present to her in its physical absence, as she is "Never in France," although it continues to signify her individuality through the singularity of this place name. “Never” is also a term that negates all temporal deixis—all nows and thens. “Now,” in pointing to a time that is constantly changing, is also a “never,” an empty deictic, where its referent, that which it indicates, is always disappearing. While creating a
singularity with the geographical reference of this name, “Nevers” also references the instability of the language used prior to this point.

Thus, at the end of the film, despite a lack of change in the material condition of the two characters, and even a physical return to the setting of the first scene (the woman’s hotel bedroom), a change has taken place. The woman has externalized her unconscious memories of the loss of the German soldier and visually separated herself from this fantasm. This visual separation is concretized by the “dating” of her character, its marking as an individual, around whom the world is organized by the use of deictic language. The use of image by Duras/Resnais, as well as toponyms in an act of naming the characters, demonstrates the successful movement of the female protagonist beyond the tragedy that lurked in her subconscious, a movement that permits her to finally inhabit the present, separated from her dead lover.
Chapter II: The Aporia of Lol V. Stein

Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein presents at first glance many of the same thematic and stylistic characteristics as Hiroshima mon amour. The personal narrative of the female protagonist is quite similar in both cases: engaged as a young girl, her fiancé is lost, precipitating a period of madness "cured" by isolation and later by marriage to another man and having children. Both protagonists are forced to confront the earlier, ignored episode by the interest of/in a new man. This confrontation takes place in the text and film through a series of retold flashbacks, and, in both cases, the narrative voice shifts perspective. In Lol V. Stein, a first-person narrator is revealed, only approximately one-third of the way into the book, to be one of the characters already introduced in the third person, and the narration continues to switch back and forth between the two perspectives for the remainder of the novel, sometimes multiple times within a single paragraph.

However, several differences remain between the two works in addition to the question of form or genre. First among these is that, unlike Hiroshima, the characters are named in the first sentence of the book (“Lol V. Stein est née ici, à S. Taha” [11]). Second, the nature of the loss suffered is qualitatively different—both the original event and the way it lingers and structures each woman's state of being (“Je vois ma vie. Je vois ta mort. Ma vie qui continue. Ta mort qui continue. [HMA]”—as well as the fantasm that results from it. Last and most important, in contrast to the end of Hiroshima no change takes place at the end of the novel.

The first issue to be addressed here is the naming of the characters. Each of the characters already has a name at the beginning of the book, in contrast to the “je” and “tu” of Hiroshima mon amour, and they all retain names until the very end. Can one say that these characters begin with a singularity, a specificity that is denied the couple at the center of the world created in Hiroshima? The nature of the naming in Lol V. Stein belies such an assertion. All of the characters have names: Lol(a) V(alerie) Stein, Tatiana Karl, Michael Richardson, Jacques Hold, Jean Bedford, Pierre Beugner, Anne-Marie Stretter. However, none of these “proper” names has anything in it that would be more proper to one specific person than another (beyond, at the limit, gender). As the names of people, but of people of whom we know nothing, they could designate anyone. This is reinforced by the ambiguous nature of the names themselves—a mix of French, English, Russian, and German. The names that are missing are
precisely those that would provide some stability and singularity through references to
singularities in an extralinguistic system—the place names: S. Tahla, T. Beach, U. Bridge. The
few real place names that are mentioned designate places where we can know they are not:
France, Calcutta, etc. While the names “Beach” and “Bridge” imply that the story takes place in
England, we are left without any context that would deny, confirm, or elaborate on this idea.

We are given to believe from the very beginning that the points at the centers of the
linguistic world(s) are established by the names of the characters, but these singularities prove
illusory and are even more utopic and ahistorical than those of Hiroshima, where both time and
place are inscribed throughout the film, both in the mention of Hiroshima and the time that has
passed between the bombing and the events of the film, and by the visual context provided by the
film itself—the visual record of 1959 Hiroshima and 1944 France (not to say Nevers itself, as
many of the scenes in France were actually shot in Autun).

To assume the non-specificity of the characters in Lol V. Stein would seem to be a moot
point, however, without any further support. It would be futile to argue that the use of
decontextualized human names undermined the stability of the characters within the world of the
novel if actions or speech could be clearly attributed to one character or another, if the characters'
name could serve as a stabilizing center point for each linguistic world organized (as we have
seen in Benveniste 68–9) around one particular “ego.” The universe of the book could be
coherent within itself, if those arbitrary names were used consistently to designate separate
points of origin for each set of actions. Although devoid of actual content for the reader (beyond
the characterization provided by the author), these voids could act as organizing singularities
much like a black hole that has no content in itself, but whose gravity organizes matter around its
event horizon, by which it itself can be seen.

Characters’ actions, words, etc. cannot, however, be so neatly organized. As has been
previously stated, the narrator's voice frequently changes position, as in the following passage:

\textit{Je} reprends:

--Lorsqu'elle est arrivée, elle avait cet air, méritoire, \textit{vous} savez, son air de remords et de
fausse honte, mais \textit{nous} savons, \textit{vous} et \textit{moi}, ce que cela cache en Tatiana.

--Petite Tatiana.

--Oui
Il raconte à Lol V. Stein:

Tatiana enlève ses vêtements et Jacques Hold la regarde, regarde avec intérêt celle qui n’est pas son amour. À chaque vêtement tombé il reconnaît toujours d’avantage ce corps insatiable dont l’existence lui est indifférente...Il la regarde jusqu’à perdre de vue l’identité de chaque forme, de toutes les formes, et même du corps entier.

Mais Tatiana parle.

--Mais Tatiana dit quelque chose, murmure Lol V. Stein.

A sa convenance j’inventerais Dieu s’il le fallait.

--Elle dit votre nom.

Je n’ai pas inventé (RLVS 134, italics added)

This momentary and repeated confusion of the narrative voice gives us two distinct possibilities: first, that the narrator himself—that is to say the character of Jacques Hold, lacks internal unity, taking himself both as subject and object, a splitting of this character that significantly disrupts the ability of a name to create a singularity, a single subjectivity. The second possibility offered by this and other similar passages is opened by the lack of indicative punctuation surrounding the part of the passage beginning: “Il raconte à Lol V. Stein.” Unlike the preceding and succeeding lines of dialogue that are set off from the narration by a dash, the paragraph describing what happened in the hotel room between Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl is told in free indirect discourse, indicating the possibility of a narrator other than Jacques Hold, a co- or meta- [third person limited] narrator who has at least a certain amount of direct access to Jacques Hold and to the other characters via Jacques Hold, but that is not itself a character within the diegesis of the story—if this were the case, throughout the book, the narrative voice would then slip without warning between the two of them. Leslie Hill understands this as: “Duras has Jacques Hold fulfill his duties as represented narrator in a strangely intermittent way" (68). The dominant narrative voice is interspersed with another, extradiegetic voice. These two interpretations, while in appearance mutually exclusive (either there is a second, separate narrative voice, or Jacques Hold’s subjectivity is split), are both present in potentiality at all times, and there is nothing that would at any point rule out one of these. The two possibilities continue to coexist as just that—possibilities.
As Jacque Lacan wrote in his essay “Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras du ravissement de Lol V. Stein”: “[Jacques Hold] non plus, n’est pas ce qu’il paraît quand je dis: la voix du récit. Bien plutôt est-il son angoisse...Il n’en est en tout cas pas simple montreur de la machine, mais bien l’un de ses ressorts et qui ne sait pas tout ce qui l’y prend” (Lacan 94). Lacan questions whether this “angoisse” is “la sienne ou celle du récit?” (ibid.), to which we might add the angst of the reader, who cannot make a stable identification of the narrator, and thus cannot identify with a stable point of view. The potential for a metanarrator also renders problematic certain feminist readings of the book that contend it is

[N]ot the story of a female subject, as many critics have maintained, but a story of mediation, male desire, and, ultimately, of epistemological crisis. It is the story of the way a male attempts at knowledge, in objectifying a female subject, mediates and determines...what can be known. (Edson 19)

The presence of a male narrator whom we know to be untrustworthy would make it impossible to analyze the character of Lol without either adopting or taking as another object the point of view of Jacques Hold, who thus would become the true subject of the book.

It is surely because Marguerite Duras is a woman that passages such as this have been interpreted ironically, ultimately suggesting that the text is inviting the reader to pass judgement on the narrator and, by extension to criticize the way men represent women. The point then becomes that there is an unbridgeable gap between the narration and the diegesis, the 'message' of the novel being that, through men, we can know nothing of women. (Hanrahan 918)

This point of view seems to find support in the frequently-invoked notorious unreliability of Jacques Hold as narrator, who, if understood as the unifying narrative voice, refers to information he could not possibly know (the account of the aftermath of the ball at T. Beach as told by Lol’s long-dead mother, for example), uses his imagination to fill in gaps, and claims access to the interiority of other characters (Lol’s, Tatiana’s). As Hill notes, Jacques Hold is “[n]ot a unified whole but made up of a complex montage of other voices and discourses” (Hill 73). If, however, one can admit the potential presence of an extradiegetic narrator who does not announce its separate presence from Jacques Hold, one can also entertain the possibility that some of this extra information (usually reported in free indirect discourse) is directly reported by
the metanarrator, and that some of it is reported by the metanarrator as *Jacques Hold’s* thoughts. As Lacan states, Jacques Hold is not “simple montreur de la machine, mais bien l’un de ses ressorts” (94) While the problem of male narration/interpretation may indeed be at issue in the text, that is not to say that “[a]ny critical reading of Lol can only echo Jacques’s subjective reading of her, since his consciousness is the medium through which all our information is filtered” (Edson 19).

Narrative voice is thus destabilized to the point that we can no longer establish the singularity of “Jacques Hold.” Nor can the singularity/ies of “Lol V. Stein” and “Tatiana Karl” be filled either by their own voice, Jacques Hold’s, or the (potential) metanarrator's, whose agenda and even presence can never be ascertained. Without the image and audible voice to support the unicity of the characters as they spoke, and with only limited punctuation to guide our reading, we have no way of definitively knowing who is speaking at any time.

Another aspect of the book that puts into question the stability of identities/singularities created by names is the conditionality often expressed when giving the name of a character—the contingency of the name upon the self-designation as such by the character.

Elle prononçait son nom avec colère: Lol V. Stein—c’était ainsi qu’elle se désingait.”

(*RLVS* 23, italics added)

Virginité de Lol en prononçant ce nom [Jacques Hold]! Qui avait remarqué l’inconsistance de la croyance en *cette personne ainsi nommée sinon elle, Lol V. Stein, la soi-disant Lol V. Stein*...Pour la première fois mon nom prononcé ne nomme pas. (*RLVS* 112-13, italics added)

Mais voici qu’elle doute enfin de *cette identité, la seule qu’elle reconnaisse, la seule dont elle s’est toujours réclamée du moins pendant le temps où je l’ai connue*. Elle dit:

--Qui c’est?

Elle gémit, me demande de le dire. Je dis:

--Tatiana Karl, par exemple (*RLVS* 188, italics added)

Il n’y a plus de différence entre elle et Tatiana Karl sauf dans les yeux exempts de remords et dans la désignation qu’elle faisait d’elle-même—*Tatiana ne se nomme pas*, elle—et dans les deux noms qu’elle se donnait: Tatiana Karl et Lol V. Stein. (*RLVS* 189)
A proper name is not permanent, nor does it belong to one person only. It lasts only as long as one chooses to designate oneself in this fashion, and more than one person can choose the same name; thus such a name could mark only a part of one person/speaker, or refer to multiple speakers simultaneously. In addition, when Jacques Hold hears his name pronounced by Lol, “[son] nom prononcé ne nomme pas.” This name is not sufficient to “name” or to differentiate him from anyone else, to establish his singularity, and Lol herself is incapable of inscribing singularity, the “here and now,” in his name, thus failing to be present, herself, as an agent, to this singularity (SPC 17).

What appeared at first to be a significant difference between these two works (especially considering the implications of the namelessness/naming of the characters in Hiroshima) is at bottom only so in appearance. Both works feature an instability of identity created by shared and/or shifting names (or pronouns) used to designate the characters, which changes or diffuses the point of reference (what Benveniste called ego [68-9]) for the linguistic world(s) organized around the characters. This is not, however, the case for another question raised earlier—that of the nature of the loss suffered by the protagonist in each of these stories. To stamp both of these events with the vague label of “traumatic loss” would gloss over some fundamental ways in which the experiences of the two characters differ: in what and who was lost, and therefore in the state of loss that they experience thereafter and what they must attain or accomplish in order to make some change in their life/condition, not to mention any possible resolution.

The progression of events in Hiroshima hinged upon the fantasm of the female character and her changing relationship to it, influenced as it was by the intervention of the Japanese man who discovered the fundamental role of this scene (Nevers) in the shaping of her identity, and thus of her encounter with him. The same is true of the relationship between Jacques Hold (who many assume, in fact, to be a psychiatrist) and Lol V. Stein:

La présence de son adolescence dans cette histoire risque d’atténuer un peu aux yeux du lecteur l’écrasante actualité de cette femme dans ma vie. Je vais donc la chercher, je la prends, là où je crois devoir le faire, au moment où elle me paraît commencer à bouger pour venir à ma rencontre. (RLVS 14)

That is to say, he begins his account of her at the ball at T. Beach, the scene replayed over and over by Jacques Hold, by Tatiana Karl, by Lol V. Stein.
This scene struck not only Jacques Hold, but also Jacques Lacan as fundamental to the understanding of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and, within it, of le ravissement de Lol V. Stein: “La scène dont le roman n’est tout entier que la remémoration, c’est proprement le ravissement de deux en une danse qui les soude” (Lacan 94). The “danse qui les soude” being the danse of Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter at the ball at T. Beach, forgetting Lol V. Stein who watched them, “rapt,” behind a screen of plants.

Should the reader assume that this endlessly-repeated scene is Lol’s fantasm, the most fundamental scene of her mental life? “[Lol V. Stein], elle pénètre dans la lumière du bal de T. Beach. Et dans cette enceinte largement ouverte à son seul regard, elle recommence le passé, elle l’ordonne sa véritable demeure, elle la range” (*RLVS* 46). While this scene is a memory, and while it is frequently repeated, it is at the mercy of Lol herself, it is too conscious, too “ordonné, rangé” to be the fantasm, this unconscious “court scène extrêmement rapide...qui se répète, toujours la même, sans jamais être perçue nettement par la conscience...que nous ne voyons pas mentalement mais dont nous ressentions émotionellement les effets” (Nasio 14). Where can we look surrounding the episode at T. Beach to find the place where Lol’s conscious mind cannot go? This is what Duras calls the “mot-trou’, the hole around which Lol’s consciousness constructs itself:

Lol ne va pas loin dans l’inconnu sur lequel s’ouvre cet instant. Elle ne dispose d’aucun souvenir même imaginaire, elle n’a aucune idée sur cet inconnu. Mais ce qu’elle croit, c’est qu’elle devait y pénétrer, que c’était ce qu’il lui fallait faire, que ç’aurait été pour toujours, pour sa tête et pour son corps, leur plus grande douleur et leur plus grande joie confondue jusque dans leur définition devenue unique mais innomable faute d’un mot...Ç’aurait été un mot-absence, un mot-trou...On n’aurait pas pu le dire mais on aurait pu le faire résonner. (*RLVS* 48).

Somewhere around the precise instant of the end of the ball (“Quand l’aurore arrive avec une brutalité inouïe et la sépare du couple” [*RLVS* 46]). There is something to which Lol was not actually present and thus of which she can have no real or imagined memory. Yet it is an event to which she desperately wants to be present, a scene into which she wishes to “penetrate,” whose existence she can infer but with which she can never come in contact.
Il [Michael Richardson] l’aurait dévêtu [Anne Marie Stretter] de sa robe noire avec lenteur... Ce geste n’aurait pas lieu sans elle [Lol]: elle est avec lui chair à chair, forme à forme, les yeux scellés à son cadavre. Elle est née pour le voir... *Cet arrachement très ralenti de la robe de Anne Marie Stretter, cet anéantissement de velours de sa propre personne*, Lol n’a jamais réussi à le mener à son terme’ (*RLVS* 50, italics added)

The undressing of Anne Marie is the point at which Lol V. Stein’s conscious recollection and imagination stop, can go no further. It is here as well that Lacan himself locates her fantasm:

Il est à suivre dans le thème de la robe, lequel ici support *le fantasme* où Lol s’attache le temps d’après, d’un au-delà dont elle n’a pas su trouver le mot, ce mot qui renfermait les portes sur eux trois, l’eût conjointe au moment où son amant eût enlevé la robe noire de la femme et dévoilé sa nudité. Ceci va-t-il plus loin? Oui, à l’indicibilité qui s’insinue à remplacer son propre corps. Là tout s’arrête. (Lacan 95, italics added)

It is clear that what Lol wants, what she can never attain, what is kept from her by its unconscious nature as *fantasm*, as "greatest pain and greatest joy,” is the undressing of Anne Marie Stretter by Michael Richardson. What is it, however, that she wants from this scene? Of what psychic use to her is the unveiling of the other woman’s body? The answer to this lies not in what she wants to see, but how she wants to see. She wants to see, not as Lol V. Stein, not as a third party, but to be “avec [Michael Richardson] chair à chair, forme à forme.” Is this a wish to be permanently united to the couple, in being fused with the body, with the point of view of Michael Richardson? Is Lol, in searching for “une place [qui] est à prendre, qu’elle n’a pas réussi à avoir à T. Beach, il y a dix ans” (*RLVS* 60), looking to be a part of a permanent triangle between herself, Michael Richardson, and Anne Marie Stretter?

In answering these questions we must confront the difference between the trauma suffered in *Hiroshima mon amour* and in *Lol V. Stein*. The woman in *Hiroshima* was in perpetual, incomplete mourning (melancholy, in Freudian terms) for her dead German lover, her fantasm fulfilling her desire to keep him with her forever, interred in the grave of her

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3 "La jouissance n’est pas le plaisir, mais l’état au-delà du plaisir; ou pour reprendre les termes de Freud, elle est une tension, une tension excessive, un maximum de tension, alors qu’à l’opposé, le plaisir est un abaissement des tensions.” (Nasio 49)
subconscious, living only in her dreams. For Lol V. Stein, however, it is never admitted to be a
question of the loss of a loved one:

--Jean Bedford croit m’avoir sauvé du désespoir, je ne l’ai jamais démenti, je ne lui ai jamais dit qu’il s’agissait d’autre chose.

--De quoi?

--Je n’ai plus aimé mon fiancé depuis que la femme est entrée. (RLVS 137)

She is not after permanent union with her ex-fiancé, whom she says she no longer loves. She
does not express at any point a desire for his restitution to her. What we are told she wants by the
narrator (which narrator we cannot be sure) is the “anéantissement de velours de sa propre
personne.” Lol seeks her own annihilation, her erasure from this scene, her freedom from the
couple that will not let her escape the perpetual replaying of the scene inside her head. In order
to do so, she must see the scene take place without existing for it as a spectator, a desire whose
own intrinsic paradoxical nature will eventually lead to its failure. It is for this reason that she
tries to imagine the same scene over and over from a point of view fused with that of either
Richardson or Stretter (while she watches the scene, although united to Richardson, it is also a
question of “cette nudité [of A-M Stretter which] s’insinue à remplacer son propre corps” [Lacan
95]).

This self-negation is the “ravishing” of which the title speaks—the desire to be at the
same time torn away from the scene and allowed to watch, to ascertain its reality while deprived
of her self. “The process of self-dissolution, of becoming absent to oneself through a ravishment
that is both annihilation and enthralling in fact defines the central figure’s fate in le Ravissement”
(Greene 128). As Duras herself described the situation: “Elle était ravie d’elle-même...Elle était
rapte. L’infirmité de Lol V. Stein, c’est qu’il n’y a pas d’étrangeté entre elle et l’autre. Elle est
l’autre” (Duras quoted in Quinney 38). She is always the Other to the couple, always their
Other, while at the same time forcing herself upon this scene, attempting to fuse with those who
are Other to her. She is trying to be her own Other. The tragedy of Lol V. Stein is that she is
forced to remain present to this couple when all she desires is to witness their existence without
her, to witness, without herself, their existence. The loss she suffered is (like the woman of
Hiroshima, but for different reasons) her independent existence in the hic et nunc. She is forever
trapped in a ternary structure from which she cannot free herself. “Where she is” will always be in relation to the other two.

It is for this reason that it is the end of the ball at T. Beach that is the key moment for Lol V. Stein. Although it is this moment that “la sépare du couple que formaient Michael Richardson et Anne Marie Stretter pour toujours, toujours,” it separates her, but doesn’t remove her. It is then when she recognizes, through her separation from the two others, her existence within the scene as an observer, her presence to the couple, and her inability to acknowledge their existence without being in some way still present to them. Before dawn comes, before her mother comes to tear her from her mute captivation behind the screen of plants, she is still unaware of the position she has taken. While she was behind the plants, while the only people to be seen in the ballroom were Richardson and Stretter, Lol was able to forget her own presence until she was recalled to herself and forced to leave. She was separated from the couple for “toujours, toujours,” unable to fuse herself with them to the point that she would lose her own presence to them, a presence that is intolerable to her: “Elle ne parla que pour dire qu’il lui était impossible d’exprimer combien c’était ennuyeux et long, long d’être Lol V. Stein” (RLVS 24), that is, to be as the third term of another couple.

The fantasm of the woman of Hiroshima is not something she wishes to accept; at the outset, she does not wish to lose it in making it conscious, in articulating it, in putting it in its proper place in a distant (spatial and temporal) past. Lol V. Stein, on the other hand, tries to make her fantasm conscious, and Jacques Hold tries to help her by performing the scene for her with Tatiana Karl, which leads us to the last and most important question about the trauma suffered by Lol V. Stein and its aftermath: the question of resolution. If Jacques Hold goes to the length of carrying on his relationship with Tatiana Karl while in love with (or as some interpretations would have it, trying to analyse) Lol V. Stein in order to help the latter, does it help, after all? Does any change take place in the relationship between Lol V. Stein and the present/absent couple of Michael Richardson and Anne Marie Stretter?

Jacques Hold, at least, believed that it would. While in the train on the way to T. Beach he projects the success of this trip to see once more the place of Lol’s “ravissement”--the dancehall at the casino at T. Beach:
Le bal sera au bout du voyage, il tombera comme château de cartes comme en ce moment le voyage lui-même. Elle revoit sa mémoire-ci pour la dernière fois de sa vie, elle l’enterre. Dans l’avenir ce sera de cette vision aujourd’hui, de cette compagnie-ci à ses côtés qu’elle se souviendra. Il en sera comme pour S. Tahla maintenant, ruinée sous ses pas du présent. (*RLVS* 175)

Do his predictions come true? This question implies several others, if one is to eventually arrive at an answer. What does Jacques Hold believe to be necessary for Lol and why? Based on what we have already determined to be what Lol has lost (her independent existence from this couple), what does she *actually* need? What happens on the new trip to T. Beach, and does this correspond to Lol’s needs? Finally, and perhaps most importantly: how and where does the novel end, and where in this ending are we to find Lol?

The last question is perhaps the easiest, as well as the most important to answer, before the “why and how?” implicit in the others. The last episode of the novel, almost an epilogue, separated from the trip to T. Beach by a break, tells us exactly where Lol is at the end of the book: “Le soir tombait lorsque je suis arrivé à l’Hôtel des Bois. Lol nous avait précédés. Elle dormait dans le champ de seigle, fatiguée, fatiguée par notre voyage” (*RLVS* 190)—that is to say, she is exactly where she is on page 62 (and several times in between). The ending has essentially looped around and joined the middle of the story in a vicious cycle that avoids any attempt at closure. Lol does not leave her husband; neither Jacques Hold nor Tatiana Karl leaves the other; Lol does not even go mad again, as she had feared (“Mais si un jour je...—elle cogne sur le mot qu’elle ne trouve pas—est-ce qu’ils me laisseront me promener? —Je vous cacherai....–Je sais que vous, quoique je fasse vous le comprendrez” (*RLVS* 139)). She too believed that a change would come on this voyage; telling Hold: “—Je ne peux plus me passer de vous dans mon souvenir de T. Beach” (*RLVS* 167), as if it is the memory of which it is a question, or, in the train: “Peut-être qu’il ne faudrait plus que je vous voie ensemble” (*RLVS* 175). Even during their stay, Hold believes that a point is reached where a change *must* happen: “La crise est là. Notre situation en ce moment, dans cette chambre où nous sommes seuls, elle et moi, l’a déclenchée” (*RLVS* 187).

They go back to T. Beach, the first time Lol has seen the site of her memory since the original event, but this is not sufficient to provoke real change. What happened before and after
this point that makes it a false crisis, leaving both of their expectations unfulfilled? For Jacques Hold’s part, it comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of what it is that Lol is attempting to do in watching him and Tatiana at the hotel.

Il devait y avoir une heure que nous étions là tous les trois, qu’elle nous avait vu tour à tour dans l’encadrement de la fenêtre, ce miroir qui ne reflétait rien et devant lequel elle devait délicieusement ressentir l’éviction souhaitée de sa personne. (*RLVS* 124)

He shows here that he understood what she is after was to see the couple that didn’t involve her. He understood that she wanted to be excluded from that scene. He mistakes, however, the nature of this desired exclusion. For him, it is the action of being excluded that is important, the *act of eviction* that he hopes will, in repeating the event, allow Lol to relive it in a conscious, cathartic way, and thus he goes out of his way to “evict” her by acknowledging her presence as a distant presence, as a third party, seeking her out with his eyes in the field, drawing her into the couple as an outsider. “J’ai cru qu’elle devait s’être aperçue que j’avais découvert sa presence. Nous nous sommes donc regardés, je l’ai cru” (*RLVS* 122).

For Jacques Hold, she needs the rewriting of the memory of T. Beach when she was left by Michael Richardson. Michael Richardson left her, and she needs, in Jacques Hold’s eyes, to be reintegrated into a couple from whom she has been excluded—reintegrated first as the third party and then as someone who is able to love and be loved, to fill the loss of Michael Richardson, not in himself but in the character of *someone for her to love*. “Elle revoit sa mémoire-ci pour la dernière fois de sa vie, elle l’enterre. Dans l’avenir ce sera de cette vision aujourd’hui de cette compagnie-ci à ses côtés qu’elle se souviendra” (*RLVS* 175). He believes that this absence, the abandoning of object cathexes around which her subjectivity would be constructed and that (following the loss of love for Michael Richardson⁴) found no substitute is what precipitated the loss of her sanity, with her subjectivity crumbling around this hole once the support that was her tie to Michael Richardson disintegrates. This is supported by her statement that “—Quand je dis que je ne l’aimais plus, je veux dire que vous n’imaginez pas jusqu’où on peut aller dans l’absence de l’amour” (*RLVS* 138); it is an absence of love, not of the particular

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⁴ “Pain is a reaction, not to some loss, but to a fracture of the fantasy that attached us to the loved other. The true cause of pain is thus not the loss of the loved one, that is to say, the removal of one of the pillars that supported the structure of the fantasy, but the collapse of that structure...I discover that my desire is bare, mad, and object-less.” (Nasio 2004 37)
loved one. Where Jacques Hold is mistaken is in the belief that Michael Richardson is gone, along with the tie to him. Rather, it has merely metamorphosed into the captivity of Lol to her bond of spectatorship to the couple—a constant presence to those people of which she desperately wants to be rid, but not by eviction. Words like eviction imply, not a true absence, but merely a modified presence. That merely repeats her experience; the same thing happens, even though it allegedly replaces one person she has ceased to love with one whom she loves and who reciprocates that feeling, which is not exactly the problem.

Lol does not want eviction, she wants absence. She wants to erase her presence to the couple, and this is anything but satisfied by what Jacques Hold offers her—a constant acknowledgement and reminder of her surveillance. Indeed, the existence of a metanarrator invoked earlier is supported by a fleeting reference to her desire to not be acknowledged, of which Jacques Hold seems to know nothing at a moment when he is being spoken of in the third person:

Jacque Hold possédait Tatiana Karl sans merci. Elle n’opposa aucune résistance, ne dit rien, ne refusa rien, s’émerveilla d’une telle possession. Leur plaisir fut grand et partagé. Cet instant d’oubli absolu de Lol, cet instant, cet éclair dilué, dans le temps uniforme de son guet, sans qu’elle ait le moindre espoir de le percevoir, Lol désirait qu’il fût vécu. Il le fut. (RLVS 123)

Lol desires the couple’s forgetting as a necessary but not sufficient condition for her to be absent to them. In order for her to be truly absent, not only must they forget her existence, but she must forget it as well. She also must lose herself in them, which never happens. Lol is fixed to herself as observer outside the Hôtel des Bois, trapped in her own inescapable presence and vision, and “combien c’était ennuyeux et long, long d’être Lol V. Stein” (RLVS 24). Lol herself gradually becomes aware of the futility of any attempt to flee from her own presence as spectator (or any other type of observer). When Jacques once more tries to pull her into his relationship with Tatiana by telling her everything that happened in the hotel room, Lol soon realizes that this will never get her what she wants or needs anyway: “Ce qui s’est passé dans cette chambre entre Tatiana et vous je n’ai pas les moyens de le connaître. Jamais je ne saurai. Lorsque vous me racontez il s’agit d’autre chose” (RLVS 136). This could mean two things: first that in his récit, “il s’agit d’autre chose” in that it is only the signifiers that remain,
alienated from the events that they mean to signify. The other possibility is that “il s’agit d’autre chose” than “connaître,” that it is impossible to “know” something (that is to say, intuitively) that is mediated by discourse. In either case Lol is inescapably present as audience to this retelling, and even should it adequately communicate what Hold wants to tell her, his activities with Tatiana, it would be communicated to Lol, who would still exist.

What is the potential utility of the trip to T. Beach, especially without Tatiana Karl? What could Lol hope to accomplish that she had found to be impossible in her observation of Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl together, if it is not to replace Michael Richardson with Jacques Hold—with someone who loves her? She wants to attempt to erase herself by putting herself in the point of view of one of the lovers, to be with them “chair à chair, forme à forme”. In the “crisis”

Elle ne se plaint plus. Elle ne bouge plus, se souvient sans doute qu’elle est là avec l’amant de Tatiana Karl.

Mais voici qu’elle doute enfin de cette identité, la seule qu’elle reconnaisse, la seule dont elle s’est toujours réclamée du moins pendant le temps où je l’ai connue. Elle dit:

--Qui c’est?

Elle gémit, me demande de le dire. Je dis:

--Tatiana Karl, par exemple. (RLVS 188)

Here she tries to put herself in the place of the woman she knows as Tatiana Karl by adopting her name, to be Tatiana Karl, to observe from the point of view of Tatiana Karl, without the presence of a spectator named Lol V. Stein, a task that is simply impossible, as we can see a few sentences later, where there is not simply one identity, but two “Dans les deux noms qu’elle se donnait: Tatiana Karl et Lol V. Stein” (RLVS 189). The contentless name of Tatiana Karl cannot give her new content, cannot actually change the person who is lying in the bed “Lol V. Stein,” observer, cannot be absent, not even in name, and so when the next day comes she is returned to her proper place: “dans le champ de seigle,” to repeat the same cycle over and over again. The reader is made to doubt, with Jacques Hold, at the end of the book, whether anything that appeared to be new for Lol actually was, or whether we have merely been, with Jacques, present at one of numerous episodes, attempts at the same thing. “Harassé, au bout de toutes mes forces, je lui demande de m’aider: Elle m’aide. Elle savait. Qui était-ce avant moi? Je ne saurai jamais. Ça m’est égal” (RLVS 188). Lol’s apparent experience makes Jacques Hold doubt whether he
really is her first lover other than her husband. If she has lied to him about that, it casts doubt on everything Jacques has taken to be true about her, and as a result almost everything the reader knows about her life, opening it up on either side of the story we are told—past and future. We know nothing, really, of any liaisons that Lol might have had prior to the beginning of the narrative or after it, thereby potentially situating the diegesis in one turn of an endless repetition that started long ago and continues with Lol back in the field, watching.

This hint at endless repetition contrasts with the uniqueness of the affair of the woman from *Hiroshima, mon amour* (and thus the change it brings about), an individuality developed not only at the very end of the film with the topographical naming/dating of the characters, but throughout the length of the movie, in which the casual frankness with which she admits to the Japanese man that he is not the first extramarital lover she has had gives more weight to her later claim that her interactions with him are of a different sort.

—Quand tu parles, je me demande si tu mens ou si tu dis la vérité.
--Je mens. Et je dis la vérité. Mais à toi je n’ai pas de raison de mentir. Pourquoi?...
--Dis-moi..., ça t’arrive souvent des histoires comme...celle-ci?
--Pas tellement souvent. Mais ça m’arrive. J’aime bien les garçons... (*HMA* 54)
--Ton mari, il sait cette histoire? *Elle hésite.*
--Non.
--Il n’y a que moi, alors?
--Oui.

...*Il est dans une joie violente.* Il rit: Il n’y a que moi qui sache. Moi seulement. (*HMA* 103)

Thus in yet another way, the newness, the change that takes place in *Hiroshima* is brought into sharper relief against the repetition that one witnesses in *Lol V. Stein.*
Chapter III: Trauma, Flashback, Context

It is in the flashback then, one of the features both works share, that they fundamentally differ. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, the scene(s) surrounding the death of the female protagonist’s lover serve to preserve her from working through his loss, keeping him alive in her memory, preventing her from moving outside this memory and acquiring consistent meaning for words like “here” and “now”—from establishing a stable linguistic connection to the present. In spite of herself, she is forced to acknowledge this loss—both the original loss and the loss of the soldier’s presence in her psyche, resolving her linguistic subjectivity in the person speaking instead of a split between the speaking subject and the images of herself and her lover preserved in her memory. By contrast, the flashbacks in *Lol V. Stein* are attempts not to preserve the lost fiancé but to separate from him through changing their content. In both cases the unconscious is doing the same thing—preserving the lost ["loved"] one while at the same time obscuring the one part of the scene of loss that would allow/force this loss to be recognized and push the women into the here and now.

Thus, the function of the repeated memory is the same for both women—to preserve the loved one(’s memory) who is long gone in the outside world. One woman wants to keep the memories intact, the other wants to override them, to forget, to be released from her attachment to her fiancé and his life. Ironically enough, it is the woman who wanted more to remain in her memories (conscious or unconscious) who must come to terms with facing the outside world, telling the story of this change in terms of personal guilt at having told the Japanese man her story: “Tu n’étais pas tout à fait mort. J’ai raconté notre histoire. Je t’ai trompé ce soir avec cet inconnu. J’ai raconté notre histoire” (*HMA* 110). She who wants this forgetting, this distance, is unable to attain it, and remains trapped with the very person she has lost in real life and wants to lose completely.

Having looked at these stories individually, including the factors influencing the resolution (or lack thereof) of the incomplete mourning of their respective fiancés, we have thus far not attempted to answer the more global question. That is to say: why? Why would it be that a woman who desperately wants to resolve her problems of psychic identification should be finally unable to do so, when a woman who has no desire to do so, who sees nothing wrong with her condition, and who resists this change at every step achieves this end? To address this
question, it is necessary to return once more to the differences between the two works beyond merely that of resolution/lack thereof. The most obvious of these, which has heretofore been left unaddressed as such, is the difference in form or genre. How do the capacities and constraints of these two genres influence their outcomes? How is the issue of form or genre addressed by/presented to the characters within the two works? What implication does this have for the relationship between different kinds of loss or mourning and different forms or genres of communication—in this case sound, spoken word, image, and written word? Lastly, in another case of obvious difference, what is the importance, if any, of the historical situation of these two works?

To begin to address these questions, one must acknowledge that the first among them (involving the characteristics of the different genres) implies another: how does the form or genre affect the reader’s/audience’s perception of the work; how do they comprehend what is being said. Derrida takes up these issues both in the previously cited (“Shibboleth for Paul Celan”) and in an earlier essay, “Signature Événement Contexte.” For Derrida, language in itself is without meaning. The essential characteristic of language is its ability to be taken and repeated outside of its original context, a context that he would define as “’présent’ de l’inscription, la présence du scripteur à ce qu’il a écrit, tout l’horizon de son expérience et surtout l’intention, le vouloir-dire” (SEC 377). This statement, although made originally about writing, is expanded to include any system of signs or symbols that can be cited—to include speech and other forms of language or sign systems. The importance of this "citationality" to writing is that it is the very condition of language itself. In order for a sign to be reproducible and recognizable, one must be able to repeat it—to repeat it outside its original context, that is to say, in the absence of the original time, place, speaker/writer, and addressee.

Cette unité de la forme signifiante ne se constitue que par son itérabilité, par la possibilité d’être répétée en l’absence non seulement de son “référent”, ce qui va de soi, mais en l’absence d’un signifié déterminé ou de l’intention de signification actuelle, comme de toute intention de communication présente. (SEC 378)

Not only deictic words, but all words change with context. Being thus in themselves without content, merely repeatable signs, they adapt themselves constantly to new contexts.
Tout signe, linguistique ou non-linguistique, parlé ou écrit...peut être cité...par là il peut rompre avec tout contexte donné, engendrer à l’infini de nouveaux contextes, de façon non-saturable. Cela ne suppose pas que la marque vaut hors du contexte, mais au contraire qu’il n’y a que des contextes sans aucun centre d’ancrage absolu. (SEC 384)

This “centre d’ancrage absolu” is what we have been seeking in both Hiroshima mon amour and le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein. The use of toponyms at the end of Hiroshima functions like naming, like signing, which seem to be unique events. But Derrida reveals the signature itself to be just another form of writing, another repeatable sign: “Pour être lisible, une signature doit avoir une forme répétable, itérable, imitable; elle doit pouvoir se détacher de l’intention présente et singulière de sa production (SEC 392). This view of writing seems perfectly to describe the structure of Lol V. Stein. The story is told almost completely through citations, the status of which is never entirely assured. Some are put “entre guillemets” some are reported as free indirect discourse. In effect, the entire narration can be seen as a citation in the physical absence of its real or supposed emitter: Marguerite Duras? Jacques Hold? Another narrator? These words are language without context, either “réel ou linguistique” (SEC 376). Even within the language of the book, as the narrative voice shifts and as citations interweave themselves, it is impossible to establish the context of each part based, not even on “reality,” but on the other parts of the text. Lol V. Stein makes evident the inadequacy of language alone to convey meaning, the not only arbitrary but impermanent, mobile, and fragile attachment to the referent and even the signified.

One of the great distinctions then between the two works is that the difference in form results in a discrepancy in the value of the content—that is to say: in Hiroshima mon amour, visual context is given for the language—there is the “présent’ de l’inscription, la présence du scripteur à ce qu’il a écrit.” We see the action of the use of language. While this may seem to contradict what Derrida says of language in “Signature Événement Contexte,” the exclusion of context and even meaning from the concept of language itself is not to say that either of these two things does not exist—far from it—he merely argues that neither of them is necessary components of the system of language itself. In fact, while language itself is infinitely iterable, infinitely repeatable, and is made up merely of infinitely many contexts, the contexts in which it is used,
the contexts it marks, are anything but repeatable, which returns us to the concept of the date, the “one and only time” (SPC 4). The date is not, in this case, merely the words used to represent it, but

What happens to them at this date is precisely the date, a certain experience of the date...What thus becomes readable is not, it must be understood, the date itself, but only the poetic experience of the date. (SPC 8)

The “poetic experience of the date” refers to the experience of an individual instance of language, and thus the presence of the speaker to what he or she says (thus context) is part of what makes up the date, the "one-and-only time." Derrida cites Celan to say that a poem is, “one person’s language become shape” (Celan qtd. in SPC 8), it is language that has a point of origination, an originator, a "vouloir-dire."

The insignificance of language, of the properly linguistic body: it can only take on meaning in relation to a place...which give[s] meaning to the insignificant, institutive passwords, bend[s] language to what exceeds it. (SPC 31 bold added)

_Hiroshima_ contextualizes speech in two ways: first, as already discussed, there is the use of images, and therefore presence not only of the signified, but of the visual referent(s) and the enunciator(s), which, when finally we arrive at a certain amount of consistency between the two of them, internal context (internal to the literary work/text object) is established. “What are images? What has been, what can be perceived, again and again, and only here, only now” (Paul Celan, quoted in SPC 13). While the images of this movie can be seen again and again, they remain in their own perpetual here-and-now. Here Derrida acknowledges the paradoxical nature of the date:

A date of this kind will have permitted its being written, alone, unique, exempt from repetition. Yet this absolute property can be transcribed, exported, deported, expropriated, reappropriated, repeated in its utter singularity. Indeed, this has to be if the date is to expose itself, to risk losing itself in readability. (SPC 8)

Indeed, the use of language to describe or evoke an event jeopardizes its singularity at the same time that it marks this singularity.

They mark only insofar as their readability enunciates the possibility of a recurrence. Not the absolute recurrence of that which precisely cannot return…But rather the spectral
return of that which, unique in its occurrence, will never return. A date is a spectre. (SPC 19)

The same kind of spectre as the memories that the female protagonist of *Hiroshima* brings up before her eyes in the tea shop. The unique event that occurred at Nevers can return only in language, that is to say in words that repeat themselves in a different context, that evoke the earlier event while at the same time signaling its absence. The images of the flashback, the referent of the woman’s language, are separated from the speaker and thus from the new context that she has for her own speech—this tea room in Hiroshima.

Another aspect of context, beyond time, date, and speaker/writer/originator, is the presence of a “destinataire”: the quality of an enunciation being *destined* for [a] certain person[s]. A ‘dated utterance’, according to Derrida:

> [S]peaks even should none of its references be intelligible, none other than the Other, the one to whom it addresses itself and to whom it speaks in saying that it speaks to him. Even if it does not reach and leave its mark on, at least it calls to, the Other. Address takes place. (SPC 35-6)

There is, at least within the diegesis of *Hiroshima*, a *destinataire* for every speech. This is reinforced by the constant and very obvious “je” and “tu” used in the dialogue. Not only are the words attached to audio and visual referents, but the speech is uttered by someone, destined for someone. This is not the case with *Lol V. Stein*, where everything exists as text, as citation, as “writing” as Derrida calls it. Although there is, allegedly, a narrator, his status is uncertain. In addition to the lack of context for the events of the diegesis, there is no context for the narration. We have no point of reference for the enunciation, neither for the time, place, nor *destinataire* of this speech or writing, even within the text itself. Jacques Hold does not refer to the circumstances of the telling of the story, does not in any way ground either the events of the diegesis or the act of narrating. Both these things exist only as *writing*, the written object, with no attachment to the *act of writing*, the genesis of the work itself as a production of Jacques Hold, this unrepeatable event. There is no address of this reader or anyone else as the work’s specific *destinataire*. The function of the material (visual, audio) aspects of a film (specifically *Hiroshima*) is to provide intradiegetic context for the language used by the characters—that is to say, for the language of the film, as there is no narrator outside these characters. In *Lol V. Stein*
there is no such intradiegetic context, there is no point—spatial or temporal, within the book, to which one can attach the narrative language used. The only context is that of its reading, the context (and thus extra-linguistic signification) ascribed to it by the reader, but when the linguistic consistency is disrupted in *Lol V. Stein*, this wreaks havoc with even this process by making it difficult to establish which character (if any) is speaking and about whom they are speaking.

The differences in context between the two works do not limit themselves to the on-screen presence or lack thereof of the character, that is, to the intradiegetic contextualization. There is also the matter of extradiegetic context—the situation of both the events recounted in the two works and the narration in relation to the extra-literary and perhaps even extra-linguistic world—reference made to events, people, or places outside the book itself, either in other works or in reality. This is also what is meant by the “dating” of the event. Not only are the actions or speech of the book tied to the actual person doing/articulating them, but they are situated in terms of ‘objective’ time and place, that are recorded/marked in systems that are both extradiegetic and extralinguistic—those of calendars and maps.

The most conventional form of dating, dating in the so-called literal or strict senses, involves marking a missive with coded signs. It entails reference to charts, and the utilization of systems of notation and spatio-temporal plottings said to be objective. (SPC 19)

By “missive,” Derrida refers not only to the strict sense of “letter”, but to a piece of writing (or language in general) addressed to someone else, and therefore a context. The missive in this case is both the work itself and the instances of speech within it. With the use of date and place (and specific speaker), “[W]hat is thus remarked is its point of departure, that to which it no doubt belongs but from which it departs in order to address itself to the others” (SPC 15). In the case of *Hiroshima*, the use of that name means two things: as was said before, its “objective” (extralinguistic) existence in another system of meaning (maps, calendars) that designates it as a singularity, but also:

The signature of the date plays a role here. Beyond the singular event which it marks and of which it would be the detachable name, capable of outliving and thus of calling…like
a title...a more or less apparent and secret conjunction of singularities which partake of, and in the future will continue to partake of, the same date. (SPC 34)

While dating indicates a singularity, something that can happen once and only once, the date refers also to the other events that occur contiguously in space and time: "A date relates to an event which, at least in appearance and outwardly, is distinct from the actual writing of the poem and the moment of its signing. The metonymy of the date...designates part of an event or sequence of events by way of recalling the whole" (SPC 22). Each date, and each event that occurs on that date, although singular in and of itself, is also a metonymic reference to everything else that occurred on the same date and in the same place. Each singularity exists as such in relation or reference to other parts of these “systems of notations and spatio-temporal plottings.” The use of place names in Hiroshima mon amour serves not only to establish the singularity/ies of these characters, but also to refer to the other events that took place at the same time(s) and place(s), bringing the personal stories of the man and woman into extra-diegetic context—meaningful context for the reader in his or her world outside the text. The limitation of narrative, of language itself without context, seems to be apparent in the events of Hiroshima mon amour, in which it is the recontextualization of her speech that allows her to resolve the effects of the earlier trauma by allowing her to finally abandon the earlier scene in which her language had been trapped. This had led to a detachment of her words from the context of their articulation. Language had become, for her, pure language, which, without context, was deprived of both stable signified and destinataire, and thus, by extension, of a stable and singular originator, herself, before she is reestablished with visual referents and by the use of topoynynms. Thus the form and thematic content of the film intertwine, underlining the necessity for contextualization of both language/writing itself and the act of speech/writing for the creation of meaning.

Lol V. Stein, on the other hand, as we have seen, is devoid of references of this type—of personal names that have any extradiegetic (or even stable intradiegetic) meaning, of identifiable place names, even of dates. Beyond a certain range of possible time indicated by the presence of certain technological advances (the wireless, the cinema, the streetcar), it is difficult to further determine the frame of the setting of the story in relation to the outside world. Reference to passing time is made, but only in relation to other intradiegetic points that, themselves, are
uncertain: “ten years later,” for example. These ostensible reference points offer no 
extradiegetic context, preventing the intradiegetic context from being definite either.

How is it that the decontextualization we have discussed here as integral to the readers’ 
experience of the book and to its intelligibility work with the experience of Lol herself, and the 
failure that she faced in her attempts to resolve her own problems of identity? This problem is, if 
one recalls, the difficulty of somehow separating herself from the couple formed by Anne-Marie 
Stretter and Michael Richardson. She wishes to do this, not by forgetting or ignoring their 
existence (repressing it?), but by seeing them together without her as the third term—this third 
either with them or watching them. Thus she wishes to see them without in fact being present to 
them—a desire that is inherently paradoxical and that does, indeed, end in check. What remains 
to be seen is how this desire and failure relate to the question of context—that is to say, to the 
question of situating language in relation to a signified and also to its origin and addressee.

In searching to separate herself from this couple, in seeking to establish herself as an 
individual apart from them, as we have noted, Lol is seeking to establish what would then 
become a stable point of origin for her own speech, existing separately from the couple (that 
could be Anne-Marie Stretter and Michael Richardson or Tatiana Karl and Jacques Hold). She is 
seeking to provide context for her speech, to give her own name the power to contextualize this 
speech. The problem that arises is in the way that she attempts to do this. In hoping to establish 
herself as an individual by erasing herself as a spectator, she rids herself of her physical presence 
to herself and to the reader, she rejects the one way available to her to retrieve the context she 
feels she has lost—establishing a presence, possibly visual, "dated" in place in time. In trying to 
absent herself in order to destroy her relationship with the Richardson/Stretter couple, she gets 
rid of herself as an enunciator, effectively denying her language context and therefore meaning, 
and by the same act denying herself a place at the center of her speech. Lol wishes, in order to 
become an individual, to destroy her relation to the others in the scene, to destroy the one thing 
that would establish her as context and contextualized—a point in space that, while individual, 
remains in relation to a specific time and place, as well as to the other speakers in the text 
(intratextual/intralinguistic context). Lol wants to destroy her spatial and linguistic relationships 
to the other people in the text, and these relations, as we have seen, are the only thing that can 
establish a singularity, unlike Hiroshima mon amour, in which the characters are established
visually (and thus spatially) and linguistically as individuals in relation to each other and the viewer. *Lol V. Stein* confuses these relationships linguistically and is unable to remedy this visually either for each other, with constantly (self?-) frustrated attempts to see the other characters. *Lol V. Stein* undermines its own contextualization—both the language of the characters within it and the language of the book itself are reduced to pure “writing”—to ‘iterable’ coded signs that have no stable significance attached to them, even, in some cases, coherence within the text itself.

Does this mean that language alone, without image, without physical situation or referent is, as Derrida suggested, essentially aporetic and iterable “*writing*”? As Susan Marson says *Le Ravissement* shows narrative to be essentially flawed, but its disclosure of the negation within language becomes an affirmation of the unknown and an acceptance of difference...Duras aims at using narrative to point out its limits and the continued existence of a singular reality which language cannot encompass. (81, italics added)

Narrative is thus both flawed in the creation of significance and fictional narrative also in its creation of a real(ism) even in the presence of “context” for the language. This context, however, can have another extradiegetic referent—the author him/herself and the events surrounding the act/event of his or her writing. Writing about *Lol V. Stein* (and the absence of this type of reference in the novel), Deborah Glassman asserts that

> In attempting to reconstruct the tale of her abandonment, the narrator evokes one of the fundamental tensions in Duras’s work: that between the atemporality of intense visual experience, and the will to historicize and represent that experience in narration...Writing thus becomes an unfinished enterprise that awaits its completion in a visual medium that offers Duras the possibility of expanding the limits of the novel, by arresting language.

(35)

This articulates the tension that has already been evoked between the singularity of the event (“the atemporality of the intense visual experience” which would resist the iterability/historicization of language) and the articulation/communication of this event via language in which signification is lost in the “iterability” of language, in addition to the “historicization” of language, which alienates the narrative from the actual event (“lorsque vous me le racontez, il s’agit d’autre chose”).
This difference between *Hiroshima* and *Lol V. Stein* begs the question: is *Hiroshima*, for all this, more “real” or “meaningful” to the reader because of its contextualization? Are the characters or events more real? This of course opens onto a fundamental concern of realistic fiction. Context appears to contribute to the “vraisemblable” in that it seems to refer to times, places, and events outside both the reader and the language itself—the “real,” the referent. *Hiroshima mon amour* situates itself in metonymic relation to real events and creates, via the images onscreen, an internal, logical coherence, both of which are lacking throughout *Lol V. Stein*, in which any attempt at creating a diegesis coherent either with itself or with the outside is bound for failure.

Can the eventual coherence(s) of *Hiroshima*, however, make these characters real? The conjunction of these two works seems to call into question the actual ability of the vraisemblable, or the realistic (in this case, contextualized) to ever go beyond the difficulties that we face as readers in *Lol V. Stein*. The characters/events of *Hiroshima* are fundamentally no more real than those of *Lol V. Stein*, despite the fact that we imbue them with more signification, and in this light we cannot read it as we would a novel or film in the realist tradition, ascribing to it a certain level of reality based in the situation of the story, despite the non-existence of its characters and the events of its diegesis. What does become more "real" for us—that is to say, situated in the extra-diegetic world—is the writing or creation of the film itself, the act of this creation, which contextualizes the speech (by giving it a relation to the unique events that inspire it) in its motivation, its intentionality, its “vouloir-dire” and thus the presence of the enunciator and therefore also the addressee. The notion of context has shown itself to be quite powerful here, both for the characters and for the reader, in the establishing of linguistic subjectivity of these characters and of the author, but the effect of this power in fiction in general, and in particular realist fiction, remains ambiguous, seeming to refer to the event of the writing of the book rather than the events contained within the diegesis, evoking the author—that is to say, the originator of the text—and thus extradiegetic meaning of the text.
Works Cited


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