

Memory and Distance: On Nobuhiro Suwa's *A Letter from Hiroshima*

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Abstract.

A Letter from Hiroshima is the second production directed by Nobuhiro Suwa on the Japanese city that was ravaged by the atomic bombings, by the United States, in 1945. The short film is a reflective game which approach to the past is based on distancing effects. The distance, understood in the sense of Brecht and counter cinema, is part of an experimental process that becomes a political technique of construction and decipherment of memory. Suwa's work is opposed to the belief that history is something that can be narrated, since the approximation to the past is not carried out through a causal story, but by the principles of intransitivity, estrangement and narrative aperture.

Keywords.

Hiroshima, Nobuhiro Suwa, Reflexivity, Distancing effect, Memory.

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Introduction, Purpose, and Methodology

The relation between atomic bombing and Japanese Cinema has been studied from different points of view. Some critics are interested in processes of documentation; others are more concerned about representations of the event and its consequences in feature films; some others reflect on the connection between the destroyed cities and contemporary identities in Japan. The films on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are diverse and explore many aspects of the historical event: "The nuclear event will appear in documentary and fictional modes; in action cinema and contemplative melodramas; in science fiction, horror, and yakuza movies; through realist and modernist narrative encodings. The Japanese cinema of the atom bomb will be revealed as a heterogeneous assemblage of films."¹

Within Contemporary Japanese Cinema, we find in filmmaker Nobuhiro Suwa's work an example of that heterogeneity. He has directed two films about Hiroshima, his hometown, and he has particularly focused on different processes of memory regarding the past and present of the city. The first film entitled *H Story*² is an attempt to remake Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*,³ and the second film entitled *A Letter from Hiroshima*⁴ is an essay about a Korean actress and Suwa himself facing the shadows of the massacre in the present day. This document offers an analysis of the last film.

This article is part of a bigger research about the construction of time in Contemporary Japanese Cinema, especially the construction of the past and its connection with present. Processes of memory are crucial in this subject and we find that Nobuhiro Suwa's films about Hiroshima constitute a good example of what we have called "the past as surviving time." *H Story* is a complex film in which memory and oblivion regarding mass violence are a central matter. We think that *A Letter from Hiroshima* has at least two more special ingredients: the deeper involvement of the director as a central character, and the significance of Korean women. They represent Japanese past as a problematic field, in which every generation embodies different negotiations with guilt and victimhood. We also think that the link between *H Story* and *Hiroshima mon amour* has been accurately analyzed in works such as Marie Françoise Grange's,⁵ as well as other contemporary productions about Hiroshima.⁶ This is definitely not the case of *A Letter from Hiroshima*, barely analyzed in academic works. Thus, this particular study pretends to fill that blank in Contemporary Japanese Cinema studies. Besides, other documentary filmmakers' work has been object of academic attention, such as is the case of Naomi Kawase or Hirokazu Koreeda;⁷ but Nobuhiro Suwa's oeuvre is barely present in contemporary discussions about what Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano has defined as a "new genre" in Contemporary Japanese Cinema.⁸ This new genre is characterized

¹ David Deamer, *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema, and the Atom Bomb: The Spectre of the Impossibility* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

² Nobuhiro Suwa, dir., *H Story* (Japan: DENTSU Music and Entertainment, 2001), film.

³ Alain Resnais, dir., *Hiroshima mon amour* (France & Japan: Argos Films, 1960), film.

⁴ Nobuhiro Suwa, dir., *A Letter from Hiroshima*, (Japan & South Korea: Jeonju International Film Festival, 2002), Betacam digital.

⁵ Marie Françoise Grange. "Le Film pour Mémoire: Sur H Story (Nobuhiro Suwa, 2000)," *Cinemas: Revue d'études Cinématographiques* 21, no. 2-3 (2011), 171-183.

⁶ We can mention Shohei Imamura, dir., *Black Rain* (Japan: Imamura Productions, 1998), film, and Akira Kurosawa, dir., *Rhapsody in August* (Japan: Shochiku Films Ltd., 1991), film, as examples of film critics' interests. An interesting volume about cinema and the bombing effects is Deamer, *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema*. The author doesn't analyze any of Suwa's oeuvres, though.

⁷ The work of other documentarists, as highly recognized postwar director, Shinsuke Ogawa, is also subject of academic study, as we can note in Abé Mark Nornes' *Forest of Pressure. Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Koshi Ueno, "Towards a Theory of Ogawa Shinsuke's Filmmaking," n.d., Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (hereafter YIDFF), Documentary Box 19.

⁸ Mitsuyo Wada Marciano, "Capturing 'Authenticity': Digital Aesthetics in the Post-Studio Japanese Cinema," *Canadian*

by a fine mixture of fictional and non-fictional techniques of production, what we certainly find in *A Letter from Hiroshima*.

The main argument is that *A Letter from Hiroshima* constitutes a way of thinking about memory that results in a distanced and “not narrative” construction of History. These ideas have an inspiration, among other sources, in Walter Benjamin’s approach to time and history. For Benjamin, History is something that can’t be narrated in an organic sense, as he writes in his famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.⁹ So, we have found that Nobuhiro Suwa, through his film has achieved a particular way to construct one of the possible histories about Hiroshima city and its memories. This way is conceptualized as “distanced,” following Benjamin’s interpretation of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre techniques and its reminiscences in film theory.

The first part of the text is a brief description of the film, while the second one displays the role of distancing effects in Benjamin’s discussion of Brecht, as well as the brechtian heritage in the ideas of Peter Wollen about a “counter cinema”¹⁰ that would follow in some ways epic theatre’s principles. We consider also that Suwa’s techniques in *A Letter from Hiroshima* correspond to what Aaron Gerow has called “detached style,” linking this term with the critical effect that distance has, regarding memory configuration.

We will, thirdly, summarize the context of the movie in terms of filmic representations of Hiroshima, especially the use and meaning of archive images. For the analysis we used as methodology the sequence *découpage*, which results are shown in the fourth part of the document. This analysis aims to demonstrate how Suwa’s distancing resources construct time, and so, history, in a disruptive way, placing memory as problematic and past as a surviving time.

The Film

A Letter from Hiroshima is a short film made in 2002, a year after the production of Nobuhiro Suwa’s remake of *Hiroshima mon amour*, *H Story*. It is based on the correspondence between the American filmmaker Robert Kramer, to whom the film is dedicated, and Suwa, about the city of Hiroshima and the possibility of filming a movie in that place, as well as the text that Kramer wrote, entitled “Hiroshima city.”¹¹ The American filmmaker’s father worked as a military doctor in Hiroshima after the bombing, and this tie with the event is what motivated the relation between Suwa and Kramer.

In the plot, Suwa sends a letter to South Korean actress Ho-Jung Kim, inviting her to participate in the movie; however, when she arrives to Hiroshima, Suwa is not present. Another female character, a Korean resident in Japan who serves as an interpreter (Faji Lee), makes contact with the actress and informs her that the director wishes her to see the city and explore it while she waits for his arrival. Throughout the film we listen to Suwa reading the text of Robert Kramer in voiceover while he walks with his son (Mashu Suwa) around different places that commemorate the bombardment of the city in August 1945. After some days, when Kim is about to return to her country, Suwa finally appears and convinces her to carry out the collaboration.

The short film is part of a compilation entitled *After war*,¹² that won a prize at the Locarno Festival video competition and which is also integrated by two other short films: “Survival Game” (Moon Seung-wook), and “The new year” (Wang Xiashuai). This compilation is a result of the Jeonju Digital Project, proposed by Jeonju’s International Film Festival, which each year selects 3 prominent filmmakers and finance a collective production.

As we can see in the description of the film, similarly to *H Story*, *A letter from Hiroshima* is a self-referential game in which the diegesis is configured from the supposed production of the film

Journal of Film Studies 18, no. 1 (2009), 71-93.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Tesis sobre la historia y otros fragmentos*, trans. Bolívar Echeverría (México: Itaca-UACM, 2008).

¹⁰ Peter Wollen, “Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d’Est,” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 79-91.

¹¹ Kramer died a month after he wrote the letter mentioned in this film, so the joint project he had in mind could not be performed. The text “Hiroshima city”, written in Paris in July 1998, can be found online. Robert Kramer, “Hiroshima City,” *Windwalk*, July 1998, accessed July 12, 2017, http://www.windwalk.net/writing/rk_hirocity.htm.

¹² Moon Seung-wook, et al., *After War* (South Korea: Jeonju International Film Festival, 2002), film.

itself. It also shares a feature that covers practically all the work of Suwa: co-authorship in the elaboration of the plot, since the director allows the actors to improvise their lines, avoiding to fully control the words and actions that take place before a camera that also improvises in accordance with the development of the scenes.

To the Distant Observer: The Counter Cinematic Effect

The film begins with a black screen, and the voice of Ho-jung Kim recounting how she met Nobuhiro Suwa at a Festival in Switzerland and how he sent a letter inviting her to participate in a film about Hiroshima, not only as a performer, but as co-author of the screenplay. The issue of the movie would be, as is common in the work of the filmmaker, the relationship between a man and a woman. From the beginning, there are reflexivity gestures that will prevail throughout the movie: the film within the film. Although it has been noted that these resources in Suwa films are "intellectually empty,"¹³ we argue here that they constitute a way of thinking about memory that results in a distanced and not narrative construction of History, so it has political relevance, in Walter Benjamin's sense.¹⁴ It will be necessary to explain what we mean by saying that Suwa's approach to History is a distanced one, for that purpose, we will describe a theoretical background that refers to distance as a critical way to face both, cinema and reality.

Suwa is the main exponent of what Aaron Gerow names "detached style." This concept refers to an effective, structural and material distance, involving various elements of the *mise en scène* and *montage*. Gerow describes the detached style of filmmakers like Suwa as follows: the camera keeps distance from the actors, rarely resorts to the close up, the shots are long, and the viewer's attention is not directed by cuts, there are almost no subjective camera angles. As it will be shown in the following sections, in *A Letter from Hiroshima*, Suwa remains distanced from his characters, treating them as real people that we only can approach to from the outside, without waiting to find out exactly what they think or feel immediately. It is a style that underestimates the dramatic, refrains from explanations, refuses to psychologize and in general, it becomes difficult for the viewer to understand what is happening. Suwa's detached style rejects the emphasis on explanations, and therefore, creates an opaque and uncertain world. And, on the other hand, stories are populated with people who win some freedom that arises from their detachment from others.¹⁵ It is possible to relate this series of ruptures against the classical representation of subjectivity, to what Peter Wollen called "counter cinema"¹⁶ in the 1970s, and which responds to what Robert Stam has described as "the politics of reflexivity,"¹⁷ that notably invaded the French cinema, one of the most important influences of Nobuhiro Suwa.

In relation to Hiroshima, the Japanese director has argued that the French film, *Hiroshima mon amour*, is an essential part of his connection with the place, and that this film material is part of his imagination around the memory of his hometown. Since his first feature film, *2/Dyuo*,¹⁸ Suwa has shown gestures of reflexivity that resemble the counter cinema. For example, his interviews with the actors during the filming, and the way he asks them about their perceptions of their own characters. In a more pronounced way, *H Story* and *A Letter from Hiroshima* highlight what Gerow meant calling his "detached style."

In a famous 1970s essay, Peter Wollen, based on the analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's oeuvres, conceptualized a counter cinema, which would have the following characteristics:

¹³ Derek Elley, "After War," *Variety*, August 23, 2002, accessed July 12, 2017, <http://variety.com/2002/film/reviews/after-war-1200546666/>.

¹⁴ Andrew McGettigan sustains that even if there are many forms of time, for Walter Benjamin, remembrance is the one with political relevance, because the energy in tension of the past moment explodes in the instant of actualization. Andrew McGettigan, "As Flowers Turn Towards the Sun. Walter Benjamin's Bergsonian Image of the Past," *Radical Philosophy*, 158 (2009), 29.

¹⁵ Aaron Gerow, "Recognizing 'Others' in a New Japanese Cinema," *The Japan Foundation Newsletter* 29, no. 2 (2002), 6.

¹⁶ Wollen, *Godard and Counter Cinema*.

¹⁷ Robert Stam, et al., *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics. Structuralism, post-structuralism and beyond* (London: Routledge, 2005), 205.

¹⁸ Nobuhiro Suwa, dir., *2/Dyuo* (Japan: Bitters End, 1997), 35mm.

(1) **NARRATIVE INTRANSITIVITY**, i.e. the systematic disruption of the flow of the narrative rather than narrative transitivity; (2) **ESTRANGEMENT** rather than identification (through distanced acting, sound/image disjunction, direct address, etc.); (3) **FOREGROUNDING** versus transparency (systematic drawing of attention to the process of construction of meaning); (4) **MULTIPLE DIEGESIS** instead of single diegesis; (5) **APERTURE**, narrative opening instead of closure and resolution, the narrative tying up of loose ends; (6) **UNPLEASURE**, a text resisting the habitual pleasures of coherence, suspense and identification; and (7) **REALITY** instead of fiction (the critical exposure of the mystifications involved in filmic fictions).¹⁹

It is unavoidable to relate Wollen's proposal to Bertolt Brecht's approach, with which Benjamin has a great intellectual debt. Brecht defied disruption and fractures on the illusionist continuity of classic theatre, whereby different gestures of montage acquired vital importance. We cannot ignore the possible brechtian provocation contained in the detached style defined by Aaron Gerow as well: "the camera is kept at a distance from the actors, rarely moving into the close-ups that, in most films, are used to provide access to character psychology or emotion."²⁰ In short, we can say that in the case of Suwa, distance in the film works on several levels of relation: between the movie and the spectator, the director and the performers, the characters and their roles, the characters and the story, and finally, between the participants and the images that appear. Even though we may have to take into account important, yet essentialists, reflections, such as Noël Burch, Roland Barthes, and Donald Richie on anti-illusionist forms of Japanese Visual and Performing tradition,²¹ we cannot doubt that the distancing effect gestures in Suwa are more related to counter cinematic constructions of the French New Wave.

In his text "The author as producer,"²² Walter Benjamin emphasizes that it is not enough that a work has a certain tendency to say that it is a political work. The work would have to be technically built in a certain way so that it can find its political character.

So if we could make the above formulation, that the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency, now we can state more exactly that this literary tendency can be found in the progress or regression of literary technique.²³

Brecht's Epic Theater, one of Benjamin's developed examples, is relevant and illustrative to address the issue that concerns us. Benjamin mentions that the German dramatist shattered the functional connection between stage and public, text and representation, director and actor; he also highlights the value of the interruption of the actions in order to achieve the presentation of situations in a form in which montage has an essential role:

Yet the conditions stand at the end, not the beginning of the text [...] Epic theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather, it discloses, it uncovers them. This uncovering of the conditions is affected by interrupting the dramatic processes; but such interruption does not act as a stimulant; it has an organizing function. It brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and

¹⁹ Stam, et al, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, 202-203.

²⁰ Gerow, *Recognizing Others*, 6.

²¹ Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (London: University of California Press, 1979). And, Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes* (Paris: Seuil, 2015). We must mention that these authors' arguments are part of a homogeneous and immutable vision of Japanese Culture that we cannot simply assume. However, it's impossible to discuss it here in a deeper way. For some critiques to their assumptions, see Donald Kiriara, "Reconstructing Japanese Film," in *Post-Theory. Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 501-519; Daisuke Miyao, ed., "Part I," *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11-98.

²² Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), 85-103.

²³ *Ibid.*, 88.

thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action, and the actor to take up a position towards his part.²⁴

Brecht's montage method is therefore more than just a trend; it's a set of procedures, so it is a political technique.

The German playwright emphasizes that "distancing" means to place in a historical context, to represent actions and people as historic, which means, ephemeral.²⁵ Following these principles, Epic Theatre critically redefined the stage's entire philosophy. Brecht put in crisis Classical *mise en scène* because of its "inaccurate representations of our social life."²⁶ The aim of his new technique of acting and staging was to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incidents and subjects represented in the play, by erasing every magical effect. In theatre and cinema, this means to avoid giving the illusion of watching an "ordinary unrehearsed event."²⁷ As we shall see, Suwa's non-fictional resources in his films tend to put on the foreground an anti-classical construction of the plot, breaking the insidious fourth wall and the path to empathy. This treatment, called in brechtian terms "alienation effect," involves the director, the stage and the actors, presenting characters with internal contradictions that will lead to "dynamic forces"²⁸ instead of a given, predictable interpretation. As Brecht would point out, by alienating characters and incidents from ordinary life, we can make them remarkable. History and memory can be thought as unnatural if certain representations are constructed in a distanced manner.

Archive and Representations

We will try to put in a context of thinking what could be the continuation of counter cinema procedures of earlier decades in the film analyzed in this research. To outline this context we will return to some arguments that Benjamin Thomas exposed in "Time, memory and absences," one chapter of his study of Contemporary Japanese Cinema.²⁹

Thomas speaks of the reminiscences of Hiroshima in some recent productions, especially in *Kairo*³⁰ and *Women in the Mirror*.³¹ He says that there is an indifference to the past linked to the Japanese "hypermodernity" (referring to Marc Augé's conception), and emphasizes that the imaginary on Hiroshima is metonymic of a process of historic suppression that has accompanied Japanese waves of modernization, a process that has resulted in different amnesic figures that make identities problematic.

According to the author, in Japan there would be a certain policy of oblivion, consequence of a resistance to the examination of the past, which is covered with a halo of strangeness for contemporary people. Contemporary modernity is unable to read and tell its own past, since it is unintelligible.³² The author does not emphasize the manipulation exerted by American censors during the occupation after the war, which set up a *partnership with the guilt*, placing the Japanese militarism as directly responsible for the decision taken by Truman to bomb Japan.

From another point of view, Broderick poses this silence symbolically, particularly in the case of the *hibakusha* (survivors of the bombs) as a response to the "eerie stillness that befell both cities after the atomic *pikadon* (flash-boom)."³³ In particular, there was a concern about the possible effects of radiation, which were unknown at the time, and resulted in discrimination towards the

²⁴ Ibid., 99-100.

²⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Escritos sobre el teatro* (Madrid: Alba, 2004), 84.

²⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. J. Willett. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 179.

²⁷ Ibid., 136.

²⁸ Ibid., 137.

²⁹ Benjamin Thomas, *Le Cinéma Japonais d'aujourd'hui. Cadres Incertains* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

³⁰ Kiyoshi Kurosawa, dir., *Kairo* (Japan: Daiei Eiga, 2001), film.

³¹ Yoshishige Yoshida, dir., *Women in the Mirror* (Japan & France: Gendai Eiga, 2002), film.

³² Thomas, *Le Cinéma japonais d'aujourd'hui*, 135-141.

³³ Mick Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema. Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 23.

survivors. And this “silence” does not take place only in respect of the *hibakusha*: the father of Robert Kramer, who was in Japan after the bombing, could not talk about what he saw and lived when he returned home in the US. Similarly, Noam Chomsky says: “I remember on the day of the Hiroshima bombing, for example, I remember that I literally couldn’t talk to anybody. There was nobody. I just walked off by myself. I was at a summer camp at the time, and I walked off into the woods and stayed alone for a couple of hours when I heard about it. I could never talk to anyone about it and I never understood anyone’s reaction. I felt completely isolated.”³⁴ Suwa says on the subject: “I had nothing to say in principle. The Japanese cannot see or talk about this city. At the same time, it is very intimate and very huge.”³⁵ Therefore, holding that the policies of oblivion or the fight for the right to silence are only a result of the selective memory of the Japanese State reduces the complexity of the process.

In the press kit of his film *Women in the mirror*, Yoshishige Yoshida wonders about the right to speak of the bombing; if he, as a filmmaker who did not live in the flesh the explosion, can express himself about it more than fifty years after the end of the war.³⁶ A similar question guides the work of Suwa in his two films devoted to the subject. These contemporary questions are symptomatic of the change of meaning that Hiroshima and Nagasaki have had throughout history, particularly in the field of film images. We can see here the dynamism of the past, which Benjamin has defended, and that Georges Didi-Huberman has pointed out in the iconic field.³⁷

Film representations of the atomic bomb during the American occupation (1945-1952) were regulated in such a way that the bomb could only be shown as a strategic tool without which the unconditional surrender of Japan wouldn’t have taken place, and therefore World War II wouldn’t have come to an end; in addition, the visual effect of the explosion should be avoided, as well as the suffering of civilian victims and any reference to Japan as an occupied territory.³⁸ Later, the white glow became the main symbol of the time of the explosion in the iconography, as we can see in *Black rain*.

In his article “Mono no aware,” Donald Richie describes that at the end of the American occupation, in the cinematographic field, forms of approximation to the bombing normally acquired a political shift associated with the Communist left: the absence of mainstream products related to the topic is based on the dislike of many filmmakers to deal with this, because to do so meant to engage with the political left, at least to the eyes of the audience. The Communist Party had so often used the bomb as a political weapon that any representation of empathy with the victims had come to mean in Japan that the director or producer were probably Communists.³⁹

Almost at the same time that Richie was writing this, Alain Resnais was filming *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), extensively studied as paradigmatic of modern cinema, but hardly related to its role in the context of audiovisual representation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁴⁰ When it was premiered in Japan, they gave it the title *24-hours Affair*, as if it was a love story. The modernism of this film lies, in part, in the union between documentary images that occupy the top, and the fictional story that develops later, putting into question the opposition between reality and fiction. The documentary images that open *Hiroshima mon amour* come from Japanese productions: *The Effects of the Atomic*

³⁴ Kramer, *Hiroshima City*.

³⁵ Richard Werly, “Breaking the Hiroshima Taboo,” *Libération (left-wing)* (blog), October 17, 2001, accessed July 12, 2017, http://worldpress.org/europe/0102arts_liberation.htm.

³⁶ Yoshishige Yoshida, “Femmes en miroir,” press kit, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/femmesenmiroit/>.

³⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le Temps: Histoire de l’art et Anachronisme des Images* (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 2000).

³⁸ Kyoko Hirano, “Depiction of the Atomic Bombings in Japanese Cinema During the U.S. Occupation Period,” in *Hibakusha Cinema*, ed. Mick Broderick (London: Routledge, 1996), 103-119.

³⁹ Donald Richie, “Mono no aware,” in *Hibakusha Cinema*, ed. Mick Broderick (London: Routledge, 1996), 20-37. Richie points out, also, that during the American occupation the rejection of open treatment of atomic bomb also came from Japanese Government sources, and not just American. Censorship affected not only movies, but also other cultural manifestations, such as literature.

⁴⁰ Yuko Shibata, “Transnational Images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Knowledge, Production and the Politics of Representation” (Doctoral thesis, Cornell University, 2009), 1-17.

Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki,⁴¹ and *Still It's Good to Live*.⁴² It can be said that Resnais film allowed, almost for the first time, the filmed images for *The Effects of the Atomic Bomb...* to be seen in the world, since they had been confiscated by the U.S. occupation forces, and therefore, stolen from the possible visual memory of the consequences of the bombing.⁴³ For the former editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma- Japan*, Abi Sakamoto, Resnais film is an inevitable reference to Japanese artistic expression about Hiroshima: for Japanese moviegoers, the name of Alain Resnais is always linked with the "murdered city," because he was able to tell what is so difficult for the Japanese- the wound never healed, the absence of all, which makes the Japanese actor tell her French lover "you haven't seen anything in Hiroshima."⁴⁴

In his two films about Hiroshima, Suwa uses the archive images in a different way, without the censorship imposed by the occupation forces, and also out of the dichotomy between documentary and fiction that was operating in a certain way in *Hiroshima mon amour*. It is not possible at this time to look in depth at the transit that the use of the archive in the film field has had, from the documentary to the video clip. However, we can summarize, at least three different possibilities as described in the specific case of the atomic bomb: a stage of invisibilization product of the censorship,⁴⁵ another of visibility as part of a political agenda, and a contemporary stage of circulation and questioning. These different operating conditions of images are not very distant from a cinematic phenomenon, which exceeds the Japanese context. Vicente Sánchez-Biosca describes it in the following way:

A spell by material inherited from the past, a question mark over its cracks, their uncertainties, self-censorship before the spontaneous tendency to make them talk. That material connects to another world, holding its gaze, returns the deceased to live as they were regarded in life, perhaps for the last time. But it's not this world that with pristine glare is making a comeback, but the interstices of which is registered, its false shots, its lagoons and its mystery.⁴⁶

Accordingly, the methodology of Suwa, his technique, has as a result not the visibilization of material, or continuity with the dismantling of the false opposition between reality and fiction.⁴⁷ Neither is it just this "consciousness of the modern image," attached to the un-representable.⁴⁸ We find no answer to the question: what happened in Hiroshima, nor through the archive disrupts, nor through the fictionalized history that accompanies it. However, as opposed to the indifference and unintelligibility facing the past that Thomas found in Contemporary Japanese Cinema, Suwa's films represent a questioning, a fissure, the uncertainty and the mystery, not only of the image as ruin, but the time and space inhabited by them, where the past is not something that has been simply stolen from memory.

The distance under which Suwa's film operates is not a gap between past and present, is a distance as a political form of consciousness and knowledge, which, as Brecht would say, uncovers situations through an experimental process. What this experimental process uncovers is the situation of a memory, which, as we shall see, is not static, as it is not the historical significance of the city of Hiroshima.

⁴¹ Sueo Ito, *Hiroshima, Nagasaki or Okeru genshi bakudan no koka* (Japan: The Japan Film Company, 1946), film.

⁴² Fumio Kamei, *Ikite ite yokkata* (Japan: Gensuikyo, 1956), film. An interesting exploration of Kamei as one of the most important figures in Japanese Documentary, especially during wartime, can be found in Abé Mark Nornes, *Japanese Documentary Film: The Meiji Era through Hiroshima* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 148-182.

⁴³ Shibata, *Transnational Images*, 14.

⁴⁴ Werly, *Breaking the Hiroshima Taboo*.

⁴⁵ In the case of the destruction carried out by bombs on Japanese territory, it was preserved documentation, both for Japanese as for American officers; however, the images did not join the social imaginary until the era of censorship during the occupation ended.

⁴⁶ Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, «Disparos en el Ghetto: En Torno a la Migración de las Imágenes de Archivo," in *Secuencias* no. 35 (2012), 19. To these images we can add Resnais' footage, which is also part of the archive. Translation is mine.

⁴⁷ Since his first film in 35 mm., Suwa, *2/Dyuo*, the Japanese director showed that more than perpetuating this discussion, he has joined the results of this his way of filming.

⁴⁸ Luis Miranda, "Okuzaki Monogatari: El Ejército de Dios sigue su marcha," *Secuencias. Revista de Historia del Cine* no. 30 (2009), 61.

A Letter's Story: Filmic Construction of Memories about Hiroshima

Nobuhiro Suwa was born in Hiroshima, but in spite of this and according to him, he doesn't have a significant relation with the city. He recognizes that making films on the city is, for him, a way of deciphering its meaning, its memory. As the Korean characters appearing in the film, Suwa positions himself from a look of strangeness and, as we shall see, this strangeness will become a discovery technique. When Ho-jung Kim recounts in voiceover at the beginning of the short film how Suwa invited her to write the screenplay, she mentions that this had to be written in Hiroshima: the characters' confrontation with history by a present experience in sites of memory.

The first shot shows the actress lying on the bed in her hotel room. Thanks to the sound, which refers the characters as existing individuals (Suwa and the woman), the image enters into this hybrid play of staging reality, situation that will prevail over the movie and which is one of the counter cinematic features. As Brecht suggested, a new technique implied "definite gestures of showing."⁴⁹This imposes certain distance from the beginning, since what we see and hear does not have a stable anchor in generic frameworks; i.e., if it were the raw documentation of the process, what is the crew doing in the room of the actress, if part of the problem is that Suwa doesn't arrive, as planned, on the first days? The shot, long and static, in the style of the film's director, is interrupted by a bell that wakes the actress up; she rises from the bed and opens the door. The screen goes black while we hear a female voice asking whether this is Kim's room or not (in Korean). She answers "Yes". The title of the film appears in white letters while the girl informs the actress that she has a message from Mr. Suwa.

It's just after a minute and a half of the film when, for the first time, archive footage appears: in a photograph, three people are around a child with a suffering gesture, a doctor is pulling a piece of his skin with some tweezers, because it has been affected by the explosion of the atomic bomb. The montage of the title, *A Letter from Hiroshima*, followed by the image, reflects the almost immediate meanings triggered by the name of this city, and advances that it is a place in which the past interrupts, as this photograph, the course of a present that can't be thought of as independent. Then, coming back to the hotel, the two women are sitting face to face, the actress and the interpreter. This character tells the actress that Suwa cannot meet her for the moment, but while he arrives he wants her to come out, see and visit Hiroshima.

Subsequently, we hear Suwa's voiceover, telling that after meeting the actress he decided to carry out a joint project in Hiroshima, but without having a specific idea or an accurate plan. Accompanying this sound, another archive image is introduced between screens in black; it's an image of rubble and partially destroyed buildings, with the Hiroshima Dome in the background almost invisible. "What kind of story could we create together? I had no idea", says Suwa; however, the image that we see seems to say that not many types of stories are possible in Hiroshima, because the city is bisected by the past. This is confirmed in the following image, which shows Suwa with his son, sitting at a table, in front of a window, and again the Hiroshima Dome with its iconic semi-destroyed top in the background.

Suwa chose archive images that display the so-called *Genbaku Domu* in the background, surrounded by other buildings that did not resist the explosion. He locates the diegesis in a set from which the Dome can be seen and mix these images of the present and the past. The juxtaposition of these shots in the short film cannot but emphasize the temporal complexity of storytelling: a shot in the present held in an accumulated past, in this case, in a building almost in ruins.

It is possible to make an analogy between the Dome and the functioning of the visual material in this movie: the decision to keep the building as it was after the impact of the bomb helps to decipher memory, understanding this as a displacement of time that clashes with the idea of the past as a ground without cracks.⁵⁰ As one sees the building, it is not possible for these two temporalities, past and present, to become independent, because it represents destruction, but also resistance. The same applies to the montage that unfolds on the movie. The archive images break the linearity

⁴⁹ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 136.

⁵⁰ A summarized description of the different proposals around Hiroshima's ruins can be found in the chapter entitled Ian Buruma, "Hiroshima," in *The Wages of Guilt. Memories of War in Germany and Japan*, Ian Buruma (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), 92-111.

of the story and the fictitious diegesis, they are presented in an incomplete and fragmentary state, whose sense is built in conjunction with the present experience, evoked by the characters.

Suwa, again in voiceover, begins to read a letter from Robert Kramer, and declares that it's his only point of departure. The first lines describe general aspects of Hiroshima, such as its geographical location, but later it's characterized as "the town of a 3,000-year-old castle with anything older than 50 years". This sentence holds the meaning of actuality in Hiroshima, as symbolic of a semi-destroyed past, where the old disappeared and the new is "unified in a critical event, in a moment", which initiated a new era in the history of mankind. This is a Kramer's statement, and stands as a response to the concern of many scholars about Hiroshima's massacre representation - as Yuko Shibata points out, the bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki has to be read as an event with deep significance beyond Japanese borders, not only as a turning point in Japanese history.⁵¹

The letter goes on describing the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which is shown in the images. There are screens showing the Enola Gay (aircraft responsible for throwing the bomb), and several people in the room of the enclosure. Kramer describes it as a strange ritual in which "it is always August 6, 1945". The construction of the image reinforces the idea of this ritual that opens the tissues of time, since framed people appear behind a clear glass where the silhouettes of others are reflected, as well as screens. Following Deleuze and his concept of "crystal", where there's always actuality and virtuality at the same time, becoming two faces of the same image,⁵² the short film shows to the viewer these multiple faces, where current events and virtuality become indistinguishable. Suwa decides to avoid the shot-reverse shot construction and focuses on the act of looking in reflected visitors, none of those looks converge at the same point, and none of those looks finds each other. However, their different directions trigger the power of the shot out of the margins, from which the construction of the space is penetrated. The crystal allows the viewer to watch and listen to the montage of heterogeneous times: screens with the Enola Gay images reflected in the glass, and on the other side, a woman looking toward the off-screen. What could be a shot-reverse shot in its most conventional sense becomes a game of reflections where items are not presented as succession, but as layers stacked in the same field that crystallizes the present and the past.

The crystal becomes more complex if we analyze how we carry out the reading of this shot. The screens showing the plane are presenting a latent moment, which confirms that what we call truth is a problem of time.⁵³ The voice in the museum's video describes how the plane was flying over the city before the impact, and alludes to what happened shortly after; i.e. the time that passes through that image is a time that appears as a dialectical lightning: we can't see the instant of the explosion, but we're aware of the fact that after that instant, there was nothing. We get things in this sense subsequently, in a not-fixed time.

This presentation of the event represents one of the distancing effects in the film because there's not a dramatic link with the characters, at least not yet. The construction of the scene in the museum is based on the voice of the director, reading Kramer's text, facing this ritual of memory from the outside. It also carries out a counter cinematic resource, since there's a multiple diegesis thanks to the structure of time as crystal.

Afterwards, as another self-referential gesture, a photograph of Robert Kramer and his camera appears in Suwa's table, placed near the text he wrote, which Suwa is reading. In a later scene, a crowded street is shown where actress Kim is walking from the background. It is a static shot without any cuts that accompanies a text that she is reading in voiceover, a testimony in a letter from a mother to her son killed by the bombing. It is again a rapport between past and present, and a confrontation between the actress and her undefined role within the movie. The testimony is updated via the voice of the actress, and it is placed in a contemporary city, the home of several generations whose memory is built in a heterogeneous way. This is what draws the attention of

⁵¹ Shibata, *Transnational Images*, 16.

⁵² Gilles Deleuze, *La imagen-tiempo. Estudios Sobre Cine vol.2*, trans. Irene Agoff (Barcelona: Paidós, 2010), 97-134.

⁵³ "If we consider the history of thought, we find that time has always been the crisis of the notion of truth." Deleuze, *La imagen-tiempo*, 176.

Kramer, and what he writes about in his text. He is interested in young people, who back then in 1998 were about 20 years old, including “Nobuhiro, the film director”.

The sound blends excerpts from Kramer’s text, “Hiroshima city”, and the letter that he wrote to Suwa. In the letter he describes a particular wish: making a film about Hiroshima with Suwa, facing “two cameras” guided by two looks on the same city, his and the Japanese director’s, each with different questions about memory and the life of the place. Again, this proposal tends to a multiple diegesis instead of a single and linear narration of a story about the place. Suwa emphasizes these different looks in other ways: the presence of the Korean characters, and that of his son, with whom he is weaving threads of past and present, through books with photographs, visits to places, archive footage, and the final encounter with the actress. The mobilization of the significance of the past is evident when the child asks questions to his father about the victims of the bomb, and at the same time the film is a question about the meaning of a relation with their hometown. This question may be important to contemporary Hiroshima inhabitants as well.

In the second scene where Suwa appears with his son, they are in the same room with the Dome in the background, leafing through a book of photographs, from which we can see some introduced as archive images of children damaged by radiation. The last picture we look at comes from the director’s personal archive; the dialogue explains that the three people shown are Suwa and his grandparents. After a cut, we see this image accompanied by the voice of the filmmaker, recounting that his grandfather was not in Hiroshima the day of the bombing and that, nonetheless, her grandmother sought his corpse among the ruins of the city. Suwa ends the scene saying that none of them talked much about Hiroshima. We can understand here the generational breakdown in the memory of the events, involving not a homogeneous time, but different levels of construction. On the one hand, the aforementioned silence of survivors,⁵⁴ on the other hand an approximation that is filtered by the visual imagery and speeches of a character like Suwa, who intends to participate in the discussion on what we might call a personal politics, based on the development of the relation between past and present through the film, and also, the child character that is the last tip of the link.

The different perspectives on the meaning of Hiroshima are emphasized in a conversation that the Korean women sustain later in the film. The structure of this sequence is another confrontation between the characters and their roles; the two women are immersed in a reflexivity gesture on which one of the most important parts of the movie is structured. Framed in a similar manner to the first scene in the hotel, both speak about their experience at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

At the beginning, the interpreter says that the first time she visited the museum she was in primary school, and that she felt regret for the victims, concluding that “war was wrong”, and currently she sees the museum every day when she goes to work, fearing that one day “she may stop to notice it completely”; then, in an unusual reverse shot, actress Kim relates that she visited the Memorial and confesses that the bombing had never had any particular meaning for her out of what she had seen on television, until that visit.

Briefly, Kim talks about two other historical events: the Jewish Holocaust (1941-1945) and the Japanese Occupation of Korea (1910-1945), and remembers that when visiting the German concentration camps she was shocked, thinking that her ancestors may have suffered similar experiences in the hands of the Japanese army in times of war and occupation.⁵⁵ Kim confesses that her visit to the Hiroshima Memorial also generated a shock, and this changed the significance that the city had for her; she manifests, then, her empathy with the victims of the bomb, including the Korean victims, and that this has made her more “historically aware.” The confrontation with the sites and objects of memory, where the past is updated and clings to the present, is raised as a way

⁵⁴ There can be an analogy between this silence and the silence of images, which appear in the film as “silent witnesses”. See, Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

⁵⁵ Part of the reluctance to the scanning of the past that Benjamin Thomas points out, is related to war crimes carried out by Japan in Korea during the occupation, which results can be seen in the diplomatic relations until today. Suwa was surely aware of the involvement which the participation of the Korean characters would have, because of the freedom given to the actors to enter an estranged game with their role.

of knowledge and awareness through the shock: the past takes form and significance in accordance with each and every look. The structure of *A Letter from Hiroshima* allows the people involved to see the city in an unnatural way. We can relate this with brechtian proposals, as the characters face reality through a distance imposed by the realization of the movie.

Following the detached structure, the two women speak of the new city, where there are new generations beside the direct victims of the war: Is it the same city? What do the contemporaries think of the bomb while living there today? How do young people see the city? These questions exhibit heterogeneity of experiences within a present traversed by the claim of the memory carried out until today by those who witnessed the destruction. The interpreter describes how she watches constantly on television at older people demanding the end of nuclear tests and the end of the nuclear energy development, without having much echo in young people, raising not only local, but international issues.⁵⁶ Part of the inhabitants of current Hiroshima, according to the two women in the film, has become accustomed to the ruins and the Memorial, the landscape has been normalized and naturalized. This is the danger of thinking the past as a finished state of the time, and not as a problematic body with which reality maintains a not harmonic and non-organic relationship. It's a danger to have contact only with the destruction and not with the resistance that continues alluding to the present. The past as a temporality with political relevance, which Benjamin talked about, loses its power when historical meaning is considered static, when it stops moving through memory gestures. *A Letter from Hiroshima* displaces the past from one point of view to another, from one historic point to another, making its meaning a non-fixed ground.

That's why these two figures, the Korean women, have a very special significance, because they represent the embodiment of past as surviving time, specially a past that is faced through a constant conflict. The confrontation with historical memory, particularly in the 1990s, became mired in a climate of deep tensions because of what Gerow and Iida have described as the emergence of new nationalisms in Japanese politics and Academy.⁵⁷ An outbreak of historical revisionism caused adverse reactions in China and Korea because of the treatment in textbooks of the war crimes committed by the Japanese military in East Asia territories. The problematic relation of Japan with the historical memory of mass violence is cleverly posed by Suwa, because of the effect of estrangement under which we look at the work of the two female characters, not only regarding Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also about Japanese violence during the war.

It's in this context where Suwa's technique acquires meaning. His distancing effect is not due to an "indifference to the past", but constitutes a form of discovery of the situation, the state of things. The Japanese director argues that the magic of *Hiroshima mon amour* is that of a distant observer, and that the tragedy can be seen and understood only through foreign eyes, like a conversation between two points of view, an intimate relation between the city and two people who have a different view on it.⁵⁸ It is in this way how the structures of *H Story* and *A Letter from Hiroshima* work, putting at stake multiple visions, of actors, writers and directors. It is not an externality related to objectivity, but distancing effects that may lead to the historical awareness of each person involved.

In this sense, the work in the film is full of performativity, especially in the case of Suwa, who in one scene that appears halfway through the movie, recorded in a cinema, takes his son to teach him the functioning of a projector to then have a talk with another character (Naoto Kawahara) about the motivations for this kind of film. Suwa manifests his questions regarding the making of a film about Hiroshima: is there a genuine motivation? Does it have to be Hiroshima? The other character advises him to leave the movie take its own form, with which Suwa seems to agree. This talking shows the director's interest to present the film images as unfinished objects, which are immersed in a complex process, and that its construction is what allows him to decompose

⁵⁶ These demonstrations against nuclear energy augmented after the accident of Fukushima in 2011.

⁵⁷ Aaron Gerow, "Consuming Asia, Consuming Japan: The New Neonationalist Revisionism in Japan," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30, no. 2 (1998), 30-36; Yumiko Iida, "Between the Technique of Living and Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s," *Positions* 8, no. 2 (2000), 423-464.

⁵⁸ Werly, *Breaking the Hiroshima Taboo*.

historic forms that seem already explained. Methods of production allow and cause the apparition of some intimate link with reality, and the emergence of a performative experience immersed in the historical course. The accent in the process of filmmaking helps to visualize the ties between past and present in its complexity, not just by telling a story, but by the exploration of film technique, even though it has fictional components.

Towards the end of the movie we see the actress getting desperate in her hotel room, as we saw Béatrice Dalle in *H Story*. Then we see Suwa and his son looking at a scale model of the destroyed city, where a close up shows the Dome and its surroundings between rubble and surviving bridges. These images of the model (a reconstruction of the destruction) precede the last part of the film, which offers a contrast with the ruins undoubtedly inspired by Kramer's text. Suwa and his son watch some footage on a video camera, in which the kid appears playing in different places. Afterwards an image of the child joins another type of footage, which exhibits the contemporary inhabitants of Hiroshima in 2002: a tailor, a pair of young musicians, a fisherman, an old woman, all looking at the camera in a subtle documentary style reminiscent of Naomi Kawase's films. Suwa's voiceover is reading the text of Kramer.

Swarms of people out in the new streets of this new city. Young people. To tell you a truth, I am only interested in young people: young people living in the shadow of this past, and also right here and now in the present of an uncertain and troubled Japan: a place that is mostly not as we think it is. Young people in Hiroshima. Follow them in life, and work with them like actors. What they do: therefore, a possible mirror of what they are thinking about.⁵⁹

Kramer saw this shadow of the past in the current city, and not everyone should be able to escape from this shadow: "only victims have the right to remain silent. And forget, if it is possible."⁶⁰ This horror to oblivion, highlighted in *H Story*, refers to historical oblivion from the daily universe. However, the scene after the images described above is a foreword to the end. It describes in a continuous motion the inhabitants of the town in their daily lives, and serves as a response to what the American filmmaker imagined: searching in this present life what requires to be seen. The past isn't just a shadow on the existence, it is the foundation; it does not come from another body, it is also under, as basis of the built, we also found it in front of us, as it happens with the ruins, which are either a background or a foreground that does not allow the viewer to see what is behind. Blurring the present and showing it as uncertain, allows the past to be *displayed* as image, which is filtered as disruption, as an actualized fragment.

Before the final encounter between Kim and Suwa, she intends to leave the hotel and go back to Korea. With that in mind, she writes a letter to the director explaining her reasons to leave the project. The words of Kim in that letter are illustrative of the effective presence of the past in the present experience. In the image, we see the interpreter reading the letter to Suwa facing a river, while we hear the voiceover of Kim. The actress appreciates the opportunity to visit Hiroshima and claims to have in common with Suwa the indirect relation with the suffering: in the case of Korea, Japanese colonialism, and in the case of Japan, the bombing. The two of them have "inherited" the suffering of their ancestors, even if they did not live the events contemporaneously. The atomic bomb led to the unconditional surrender of Japan in the Pacific War, and thus resulted in the liberation of Korea. Kim calls this an "ironic historical circumstance."⁶¹ The voiceover continues: "we live on the brink of history with pain in our hearts. Our lives seem so small! But this trip has made me feel the weight and dignity of each small and singular life." As Benjamin defended, the dead do not speak through a false "universal history", but rather through the little voices in

⁵⁹ Kramer, *Hiroshima City*.

⁶⁰ Jesús Aldabi Olvera, "Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Oe and 'the right to speak of the dead'," *Proceso*, July 31, 2015, accessed July 12, 2017, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/411983/hirosima-y-nagasaki-oe-y-el-derecho-a-hablar-de-los-muertos>. Author's translation.

⁶¹ Recently, in the animation film about one girl's daily life around Hiroshima and Kure during the War, Sunao Katabuchi, *In this Corner of the World (Kono sekai no katasumi ni)* (Japan: MAPPA, 2016), film. In this we see a Korean flag rising within the village shortly after the rendition of Japan, announced by the Emperor Showa on August 1945.

whose experience is achieved the actualization of the past: "It is a more arduous task to honour the memory of anonymous beings than that of famous persons. The construction of history is consecrated to the memory of those who have no name."⁶²

Nobuhiro Suwa's films about Hiroshima seem to go against of what Benjamin ranks as one of the fortified positions of historicism: to conceive history as "something which can be narrated."⁶³ As we have discussed, the director's approach to the past is not from the continuity of a story, it's based on distancing processes that show a tie with history in constant tension, which includes the world of representations and its iconic archive. The process constructs time as a complex ground. The performativity of the film (i.e. direct confrontation with sites and objects of memory) contradicts what Thomas said about the indifference towards the past in Contemporary Japanese Cinema. Conversely, our analysis demonstrates that Nobuhiro Suwa, with his counter cinema, is in a deep commitment to memory.

The film is based on heterogeneous times, that bring into play the links between image and history, and problematizes the relation with the past from a present as a double-sided image. This is achieved from a series of reflections on the construction and reconstruction of historical and filmic memory, involving critical and self-referential perspectives that put the attention on the possibilities of the cinematographic image.

A Letter from Hiroshima is also a reflexive game that approaches to the past in a distanced manner. This distance, understood in the sense of Brecht and counter cinema, is part of an experimental process that becomes a political technique of construction and decipherment of memory. In Suwa's films the approximation to the past is not carried out through a causal story, but by the principles of intransitivity, estrangement and narrative opening.

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⁶² Quotation written in the first part of the Memorial to Walter Benjamin in Portbou, extracted from Benjamin, *Tesis sobre la historia*, 55.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

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