

*Hiroshima*, Kirk Palmer by Carol Mavor

August 6, 1945:

How can something so big fit into such a little thing like a day? I can't get it ... the day was just like another day and then something stopped. Something else began.

(Eliza Minot, *The Tiny One*, 1999: 13)

“We can show you but the outer shell.” *Night and Fog* (Resnais)

*At seventeen seconds after 8:15, on the clear bright morning of August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. The pilots of the United States Air Force's 509th composite group could see flowers in the gardens below...*

*Two hours later, drops of black rain the size of marbles began to fall.* (Barnouw and Iwasaki 1970)<sup>2</sup>

These words are not from Kirk's wordless film, but are the words from the voice-over from a little, explosive documentary film that I first saw in high school. The documentary is entitled *Hiroshima–Nagasaki, August 1945*: the documentary was released in 1970 by Eric Barnouw.<sup>3</sup> Not only can I still hear the clear, male American voice-over of Barnouw's documentary that speaks the incomprehensible facts of Hiroshima in a poetics that moves one, with all of the simplicity of the silent blast of a Haiku poem—I can also hear the voice of a Japanese girl, as she gives her personal account of the bombing. The words are those of an unnamed Hiroshima girl who had survived on the edges of the blast. She speaks only once, after the start of the film, after the facts are given. Hers is a beautiful and battered voice. She reads in broken English.<sup>4</sup> Hers is the voice of a flower miraculously growing in poisoned soil.

This girl's voice haunts this unforgettable documentary and now, especially, haunts me. She speaks:

*I remember, I remember, a big light comes, a very strong light, I never see so strong. I did not know what has happened. My friend, she and I are always together, but I could not find her. So dark it gets. So red like a fire. Always smoking dark red I cannot see anyone. Many people run. I just follow. Pretty soon like fog. Red fog. And gray. And people down all around me. And people look so awful. Skin comes off. Just awful. Makes me so scared, so afraid. I never knew such hurt on people. Un-human. I think, if I am in hell, it is like this. No faces. No eyes. Red and burned, all things, like women's hair, dusty and smoking with burning. Many people going to the river. I watch them. Many people drinking water. But they fall in and die, and they float away.* (Barnouw and Iwasaki 1970)

## GOOD AND BAD WATER

Kirk's *Hiroshima* is bathed in good water, but the bad water still invisibly contaminates with all of the unseeingness of the radiation of August 6, 1945. Even if we were not born yet, we all remember the bad water of the Ota River, where people drank and died from its radioactive poisoning on that day that changed the world. Impossible to forget are the *drops of black rain the size of marbles* that drenched and stained Hiroshima two hours after the dropping of the bomb. Aiko Sato was nursing her baby by the window of her home, some 2,000 meters from the hypocentre. Black spots are still on her slip that is now housed at the Peace Memorial Museum, along with the banks steps where a patron was waiting for the bank open before he or she vanished. But all of these shadows and spots and marbles of black rain, all of this bad

water is now just a memory that invisibly soaks through Kirk's *Hiroshima* as seeping colour, like that of old photographs.

Kirk's *Hiroshima* is coloured by a colour of another time, perhaps the forties, fifties or sixties, or seventies: the years that the city was rebuilt into the New Hiroshima, a brand new city, which looks somehow out of date, old fashioned. The architectural style of the city (as well as the feel of the film) is eerily anonymous, reminiscent of the structural design found on American military bases.

What time is it there in the hypocentre of Kirk's *Hiroshima*?

The good water, like the bad water, is also of the Ota River. It flows throughout the film as if mirroring the fact that city authorities today are striving to rebrand Hiroshima as 'Aquapolis' — 'City of Water'. Turning the bad water of the rivers choked with bodies and the sky darkened by black with rain into good water.

In Kirk's new Hiroshima, there is the fountain in the park that seems to bloom epically, about three-quarters of the way through the film. A quiet reference, perhaps, to the blossoming of the mushroom cloud, its shape as beautiful and mesmerizing as the horror and devastation that it would cause. Likewise, there is the serpentine aquamarine swimming pool where we find children wearing brightly-coloured swimsuits (red, blue, orange), as they float in their yellow 'life saver' tubes alongside the safety of their families. And there is the Olympic-size swimming pool, which is filmed empty of swimmers and then with swimmers. Why is it that the pool feels more empty with swimmers?

Water, water, water.

Kirk's *Hiroshima* is a long cool drink of the city's almost beautiful, absolutely banal, institutional post-war modern look. The bicycles, buses, cars, perfect gardens, tennis courts, shadows, umbrellas (for the sun, not rain), the mirrored buildings, the 'Welcome to Hiroshima' sign, in Japanese and English are all bathed in this banal beauty that is both the form and content of Kirk's handsome film.

Water gives way to the ordered and perfected world of a big-screen Hiroshima, delightfully miniaturized by Kirk's camera-work. Kirk renders this totally new city, as if it were just bought at the local toy store, it as if it were part of the world of a model railroad, with neat little buildings and tiny trains and even tinier cars. 'Like those Japanese dwarf trees which one feels are still cedars, oaks, manchineels; so much so that if I arranged a few of them beside a little trickle of water in my room I should have a vast forest stretching down to a river, in which children would lose their way.'  
(*Captive*, 166)

Why does it look like make-believe? *Here is the chapel; here is the steeple; open the doors and see all of the people.*

Even the sounds are hushed and tiny: crickets, the distant sound of mall music.

At the hypocentre, there was no sound. Kirk has prettily and eerily, marked this fact with barely audible sounds, sounds that hover more like colour than nameable sounds.

What are we hearing? Hushed, far and near at once, the sounds emphasize how quiet this wordless film is. The sounds make Hiroshima quieter than if there was no sound at all.

Kirk's camera voice breathes, like the wind in the trees, but not speak, does not even whisper. Nevertheless, sometimes it feels as 'though [something, perhaps] the sea [or a cloud] was beginning to swell as though the worm was [somehow] making itself felt...a gathering roar of breath'] (*Captive*, 89).

It is, as if, the tv is on in the apartment next door. It is, as if, the sound of the television is on, but switched to a station that we do not get. It is, as if, we can hear the mechanics of a movie projector or a video player but the sound is off. The aurality of Kirk's *Hiroshima* is distanced, as if, from a miniature world. Like when Proust describes the sound of a plane high up in the sky making the tiny sound of a wasp. Notice how sound is heard and what is heard is seen, how there is a migration of the senses.

"Look," said Albertine, "there's an aeroplane, high up there, very, very high." I looked all over the sky but could only see, unmarred by any black spot, the unbroken pallor of the unalloyed blue. I continued nevertheless to hear the humming of the wings, which suddenly entered my field of vision. Up there, a pair of tiny wings, dark and flashing, punctured the continuous blue of the unalterable sky. I had at last been able to attach the buzzing to its cause, to that insect throbbing up there in the sky, probably six thousand feet above me; I could see it hum.

Indeed Kirk's Hiroshima, the place feels magically small, almost enchanted, providing us with what Fredric Jameson refers to in his 2004 essay, 'The politics of Utopia', as 'the special pleasures of miniaturization...utopian constructions [which] convey the spirit of non-alienated labour'. (Nevertheless, as Jameson points out, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.)

It is as if Kirk's Hiroshima has sprung out of water, just as all of Combray sprung out of Proust's famed nibble of madeleine dipped in tea: 'as in the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which...the moment they become wet...become flowers or houses or people'.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, we really do not *really* see anything at all. We do not see the shadows where people vanished from the thermal rays, leaving behind 'a memory of shadow and stone' (yet we do see striking shadows of live people walking on the sunny sidewalk, with umbrellas to protect them from the sun). We do not see Peace Square or the statue of Sadako covered in paper cranes or the skeleton of the iron bones of the Industrial Hall. We see in an around the hypocentre, as the film focuses on the precise place of the epicentre, which is not Peace Square, but a strange apartment block, perhaps, like his hushed sound, a truer picture of emptiness.

To see nothing, is in Kirk's hands, is to see the unrepresentable, to see Hiroshima.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, Vol. I of *In Search of Lost Time*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D. J. Enright (New York: Random House, 1992), 64.

Kirk's *Hiroshima* feels melancholic to me, because like an Atget photograph: it seems that we are witnessing the aftermath of a disaster or one that is about ready to take place. It looks to be held by the time of before and by the time of after Hiroshima, prior to and subsequent to all of those watches that froze at 8:15 am. I am reminded of the character in Tsai Ming-Liang's 2002 film, *What Time Is It There?*-- who sells watches on the streets of Taipei and whose father has just died. The character wants to be on both sides of time like the woman heading off to Paris, who he falls in love with, who wants to buy a watch that keeps track of the time in both zones.

As a child, I always thought the bomb would destroy the world before I grew up. I marvel at the fact that the world is still here. But what time is it there, where the world did end, where time did stop?

It is the shockingly still time of Kirk's *Hiroshima*, which has the courage to let last for a full seventeen minutes. "Slowness," claims Helene Cixous, 'is the essence of tenderness.' Slowness is also courageous. Kirk has the courage to let last, so that we think through what is unrepresentable: Hiroshima before the blast and Hiroshima after the blast at once.

Kristeva, *The Black Sun*, 60: "Riveted to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by... Let us remember that the idea of viewing depression as dependent on a *time* rather than a *place* goes back to Kant... their desire is a search for the *time* and not for the *thing* to be recovered."

Kirk's *Hiroshima* is deep melancholic work, that is searching for 'the *time* and not for the *thing* to be recovered.'

*Hiroshima* gives us not only the outer shell, but also the kernel. But the kernel, the seed, the marble is left intact, in order for the memory to exist without betrayal. And we have to find it ourself through the slow time of Kirk's film. His is a method of unfulfilled mourning, a deep melancholia, necessitated by the demands of representation in the post-nuclear. In seeking the shell we find the kernel intact (unbetrayed).<sup>i</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This concept has been influenced by the psychoanalytic theory of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. See, for example 'The Shell and the Kernel' (Abraham and Torok [1969] 1994: 79-98)

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It is his utopian gesture that moves me.

What is the difference between a method of recovery (mourning) and a method of non-recovery (melancholia)? What happens when we seek the shell, but leave the kernel intact, without betraying it? The answer is Kirk Palmer's *Hiroshima*.

It all turns on the full-but-empty imagery and, of course, the full-but-empty name of *Hiroshima*.

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