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Annihilated landscapes: Disappearance, desolation and the memory of the abyss

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Abstract
This article addresses both the conceptualisation and visualisation of annihilation landscapes of suffering and despair. Rethinking the history of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and what it means for understanding the past and present of atrocity, the essay attends to key concerns with the logics of the abyss and the nihilism of technologically enabled destruction. These will be addressed through a number of films that will highlight our main concerns with the violence of disappearance, desolation and the (im)possibility of memory.

Keywords
Disappearance, desolation, abyss, annihilation

The shadow of annihilation

In his 2004 film, *Notre Musique*, Jean-Luc Godard lectures a group of students in Sarajevo. Godard's tuition relies mainly on black and white images, which he submits to the students in more or less striking juxtapositions. Godard takes one image and then—in a move that is meant to suggest the idea of the shot-reverse shot technique so familiar in film grammar—couples it with another, explaining the potential significance of their relationship. Famously, Godard juxtaposes the pictures of Jews in a concentration

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camp to that of Palestinians fleeing the Zionist militias' ethnic cleansing. Godard suggests that Palestinians have taken the place of Jews as victims of ethnic cleansing and genocide. This invariably recalls Edward Said's point that the Palestinian had come to represent the 'victims of the victim', as the logic of violence is recast and returns anew (1992: 15). Godard, however, interrupts the sequence of juxtaposed (thus edited) images to show a single image of destruction. This is a landscape of annihilation, showing burnt out and demolished buildings, and the left-overs of devastation. Godard does not offer the reverse shot to this image; he rather asks the students what they think this place is. Inevitably one of the suggestions is Hiroshima. The landscape is actually from Richmond, Virginia, a town razed to the ground in 1865 during the American Civil War.

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, his long-form poem, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish describes a day in his life, besieged by Israeli tanks, navy and infantry in West Beirut in August 1982. Darwish goes to great length to describe in evocative detail after evocative detail the destruction brought by the Israeli army upon the Lebanese capital and how a place of 500,000 people has been almost razed to the ground, to the point that even the stones have had to learn the language of destruction. The day chosen by Darwish, August 6th, is not of course casual. It corresponds to the day of the American bombing of Hiroshima, and throughout the poem, Darwish plays around with the parallel, in a macabre sign of the perpetual return of annihilating violence, but also by drawing on the landscape of destruction created by the nuclear detonation, the only historical event that can mirror and therefore illustrate and give form to the devastation of the Israeli assault on Beirut. In his introduction to the English translation, Ibrahim Muhawi writes that the poem's 'segment on Hiroshima creates a context for an apocalyptic interpretation of Beirut during the siege' (Darwish, 1995: xvii). Darwish writes,

> The sky of Beirut is a huge dome made of dark sheet metal. All-encompassing noon spreads its leisure in the bones. The horizon is like a slate of clear gray, nothing coloring it save the playful jets. A Hiroshima sky. I can, if I want, take chalk in hand and write whatever I wish on the slate. A whim takes hold of me. What would I write if I were to go up to the roof of a tall building? 'They shall not pass'? It's already been said. 'May we face death, but long live the homeland'? That's been said before. 'Hiroshima'? That too has been said. The letters have all slipped out of my memory and fingers. I've forgotten the alphabet. All I remember are these six letters: B-E-I-R-U-T (1995: 86).

In October 2024, the Nobel peace prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo, a group of atomic bomb survivors. The head of the group, Toshiyuki Mimaki, spoke at a press conference in Tokyo shortly after the announcement of the prize. Here Mimaki compared present-day Gaza with Hiroshima. In its year-long genocide, Israel has dropped at least 75,000 tonnes of bombs on the Gaza Strip, more than six times the size of those the US dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The UN Special Rapporteur, Francesca Albanese, has spoken of erasure and has written that 'as Israeli leaders promised, Gaza has been made unfit for human life' (Albanese, 2024: 7). A few days after Mimaki's press conference, on 12th November, British surgeon Professor Nizam Mamode gave evidence on the 'Humanitarian Situation in Gaza' to the House of Commons'

International Development Committee. Professor Mamode said: 'When we crossed the border, the first thing was a complete sense of shock […] The landscape reminded me of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: devastation and buildings reduced to rubble for miles around, as far as you could see. Nothing growing, no people, a few looters here and there—nothing' (2024: 2). As this and countless other statements make clear, when speaking of this *reduction to nothing*, Hiroshima stands as an unprecedented—and because of that exemplary—event, which every other annihilating act of violence, needs to be measured against. It is the ground zero for considering what we elect to call *annihilated landscapes*. The landscape the atomic bomb created in its aftermath remains the quintessential landscape of man-made destruction. Hiroshima is not just a point in space or a moment in time. It has become a visual palimpsest that catalyzes other annihilation landscapes, both those that took place before and after Hiroshima, war-made or the results of natural catastrophes.

In a summer 2024 statement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave the people of Lebanon a terrifying ultimatum. 'You have an opportunity to save Lebanon before it falls into the abyss of a long war that will lead to destruction and suffering like we see in Gaza',[1] he explained. By invoking both the lived reality and future-present imaginary of the abyss in this way, the very idea of annihilation, the reduction to nothing unapologetically returns, not as a trauma experienced but as a terror that is virtuously declared. It also reveals the inner logics of an ultimatum that only makes sense once we appreciate how it is linked to a dominant modernist myth that evokes absolutist claims of security and the preservation of certain lives through a belief in the power of technological destruction. Moreover, the very idea of the abyss is both temporally recast and politically reworked as being a stated intention that draws from the depths of history (the abyss into which Nazi Germany threw the Jewish peoples) now to become in the contemporary moment both a reality and a threat that is inflicted on others. Abyss then as a contained statement of fact and devastating possibility in a journey that mobilizes the terror of the unknown towards the ultimate destruction of the self and the lived environment—a kind of total violence which offers no prospect for escape. What therefore becomes of Achille Mbembe's 'Necro-politics' (2019) is pushed further than bio-political framings to require a new vocabulary that considered a *violence to life beyond life*. After all, the bio-political still depends upon narratives of embodiment, whereas the abyss erases all viable notions of the self as the widest conception of annihilation—the annihilation of that which sustains and gives meaning to life from its ecologies, metaphysical aspirations into the depths of its poetics—becomes an imagined possibility. As Darwish wrote in another poem, 'In a world without a sky, the earth becomes an abyss' (2007: 181).

What concerns us is not what brings us to this point, but rather what happens when such a condition—the lived reality of the abyss—takes hold? What does it mean to live within an abyss? Can we even imagine it? In our attempts to do justice to these questions, our article will address a number of non-linear stages we see appearing across annihilating landscapes of suffering and despair. It will begin by attending to the theoretical importance of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, whose theorising on the abyss and disaster are instructive. While appreciating the importance of Nancy's work in leading us to understand why an abyss comes into being, what concerns us is what happens once an

abyss has opened up and its cataclysmic effects unleashed. What happens, in other words, after the disaster has visited and the ruination has occurred? To account for this, we will explore three key stages in a passage through the abyss, which will argue allow us to have a better appreciation of its violence. These include: (1) how the issue of living in the aftermath of a cataclysmic disaster requires us directly to confront the question of disappearance, which in its forced guise is synonymous with the opening of an abyss and the reduction of things to a regime of nothingness; (2) what it means for humans subsequently to return to offer some kind of witnessing as spaces of desolation are re-encountered; (3) and finally what the encounter with the abyss means for memory and recovering the human out of the ashes of disappearance and the annihilation of life-sustaining systems. In order to explain these, the article will turn to the arts and look at cinematic works that emerged in the aftermath of the bombing and how they dealt with a passing through the abyss following Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Our focus on cinema is not simply concerned with the importance of cultural artefacts that arise in the aftermath of disaster. We begin our theorization of the abyss by appreciating how the horrors of annihilation, which brings about the destruction of all reason and rationality by virtue of the most advanced scientific developments, means it is incumbent on the arts to provide what is absent. As Deleuze (1985: 281–2) reminded, one of the most portent contributions cinema has made is to make visible the 'people who are missing, who are not there'.

We know that testimony always falls short when dealing with the abyss and the unspeakable nature of its woundings. Art thus reveals itself to be deeply political as it allows us to try and make sense of what is beyond comprehension and cannot be put into words capable of neat translation. It also provides a political counter to the inevitabilism of science and its destructive will to truth and power. Using the privileged site of cinema, the article will focus on Ito Sueo's *The Effects of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (1968), Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Homo Sapiens* (2016), Andre Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), and Alain Resnais *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). In doing so, it will provide an original reading on the theoretical idea of the abyss and how it is integral to how we conceptualize and visualize annihilation landscapes we continue to produce. Crucial here will be to explain how the abyss demands a rethinking on the reduction to nothing, and as it continues to puncture the present, breaking apart neat and linear conceptions of fractured time, it forces us to consider the real terror that resides at the heart of the modern condition: —the disappearance and impossible recovery of the subject, which in turn poses distinct challenges for memorialisation. The abyss becomes a gaping hole and a shadow which continues to cast a long and uncertain dark over a human condition marked by systems of violence that continue to deny the human and prevent us from outliving the logics of technologically enabled annihilation, whose reality is no longer in doubt.

Passage through the abyss

The post-war political moment threw Europe and the western world into an intellectual and cultural crisis. If the response in painting was to turn more fully towards abstract expressionism in order to deal with the crisis of figurative representations and the sheer limits of coming to terms with the horrors of total war (see Evans, 2021: 191–227), the critical

landscape slowly yet surely turned its attention to the dangers of grand metaphysical ideas and the general will to progress enabled by those very technologies, which brought untold devastation. Indeed, if we could identify a singularity to post-war critical thought, it was precisely coming to terms with the annihilation of the subject and the horrors that we bring on ourselves in the name of a very specific myth that has continually proved to be unfounded: —technologically enabled security. Whether we are dealing here with the thought of Adorno, Agamben, Arendt, Bauman, Blanchot, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Kristeva, Lacan, Nancy, Sontag, or Virilio, to name a few, each has in one way or another been tarrying with the potential erasure of the subject and how to do ethical justice to this concern, without falling back into the very logics of technological enabled violence that brought us so perilously close to total ruination. This was also the project taken up by painters such as Francis Bacon and Mark Rothko, writers like Samuel Beckett, and filmmakers such as Andrei Tarkovsky and Alan Resnais, who all walk us towards the edge of the abyss so that we can try to understand better the inherent nihilism of the modern condition. What is the intolerable after all if not a mirrored reflection of the abyss within the self? Can we really speak of humanity when humans are capable of this? And yet should we give up on the human, when the stakes are so high and the nihilistic power that pushes towards annihilation journeys onwards? Such questions can only be addressed by confronting the intolerable—or despite Nietzsche's warning, by gazing into and tarrying with the abyss. As Blanchot (1949: 319) wrote, 'The writer must save the world and be the abyss, justify existence and give speech to what does not exist'.

One of the most generative thinkers who has confronted the terror and violence of the abyss is Jean-Luc Nancy, who also provides us with an important conceptual framework through which our concerns can be initially understood. For Nancy, the human condition is continually pulled between two poles:—what he identifies as being myth and nihilism (see especially Nancy, 1997, 2007). This forces us to confront the ongoing tension between absolute and relative values, which in turn forces us to address the twilight bordering between presence and absence. What is crucial, he advises, is how to avoid the extremes, which border us on either side, the mythical and nihilistic extremes, both of which are utterly ruinous. Nihilism thus appears here as an abyss, which although appearing opposed to myth, is also a form of mythmaking, which creates a horrifying doubling that renders all things null and void, for the end point is ultimately of a world foreclosed upon itself. Nihilism and abyss are therefore synonymous as the world opens up and pushes itself into its end state by those who have no concern for meaning, value and of the consequences of the desire to reach for the extreme. As Nancy explains:

> Myth and abyss are the two postulations or figurations inscribed by philosophy, from the very beginning, as its own limits. Together they form the double border of the opening that philosophy itself wants to be: stating the truth of both, of myth and the abyss, and getting sense going, in the open space, as the very tension, intensity and extension of the open. Just as, to those who devote themselves to the abyss (that is, to nihilism) 'sense' makes no sense, so to those who live in myth 'sense' would doubtless appear to be deprived of sense. Sense makes sense only in the space of philosophy as it ends up by opening up the world. (Nancy, 1997: 50).

Whether we are therefore contending with the totalization or absolution of value or its total absence; either way, the push towards the extreme puts the very idea and lived reality of the world into question as the voiding of meaning becomes inseparable from the erasure of life. The latter in fact is the outcome of those who justify the former, and who knowing that each world has the capacity to destroy itself, still push us towards the extreme where the myth becomes inseparable from the abyss and any sense of the world, we may have given way to the pure logic of violence. A condition in other words in which ontology vanishes, and the pursuit of total freedom collapses into nothing.

Concerning violence, there is an important qualification that needs to be added here. Despite his warnings on the extreme, our societies nevertheless, Nancy councils, need myths in order that any sense of community can be established and maintained. In some senses, this corresponds to Girard's (2005[1972]) thinking on the sacred, who also suggested the need for some foundational myth through which the moral basis for society is established. Where Nancy and Girard, however, depart is on the need for some kind of necessary regulative violence, which for Girard is absolutely essential for the defence of myths and to ensure its foundational violence is actually seen as a crucial constitutive symbolic element in the formation of the political order. The form the myth actually takes is of lesser relevance to the idea that the myth itself must be maintained and the naked appeal to the symbolic order continually reinscribed (Evans, 2021). Such a tension invites a return to Nietzsche (in whose shadow all the thinkers we listed were operating), who noted that the very idea of a catastrophe was precisely that a society no longer believed in the myths that once held it together. This, as Nietzsche understood, proved to be a far greater trauma than the mountainous pile of bodies Walter Benjamin had us imagine in his rumination on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. We might think here of the catastrophe that befell the United States of America in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. If there was a crisis to be confronted, it was not the destruction of the towers or the spectacular loss of life; it was the very idea Americans could be made secure at home. The memory of Pearl Harbour was striking in that regard, as much as the image of the falling towers, as the artist Robert Longo[2] noted, offered an aesthetic inversion of the Hiroshima bomb as the devastating cloud formation did not reach for the heavens, but fell to earth. And indeed, just as Japanese survivors searched among the toxic ruins to find their loved ones, often in vain, Ground Zero became a site of mass searching for bodies that had simply vanished in the detritus remains of a concentrated area of a city now devastated, which through technological violence was turned into a mass grave.

Moving on, Nancy's work shows that any theorization of the abyss must further contend with the violence of disappearance. We would go further and say the *abyss is disappearance*, an incommensurable rupture, which only those who are survivors can actually look back on and try to make sense of what is ultimately the voiding of all sense. Was this not the main lesson to be taken from the words of Primo Levi? It is here we can turn to Blanchot. What constitutes a 'disaster', Blanchot (1995[1980]: 47) explained, 'does not put me into question, but annuls the question—makes it disappear—as if along with the question, 'I' too disappeared in the disaster which never appears. The fact of disappearing is, precisely, not a fact, not even an event; it does not happen, not only because there is no 'I' to undergo the experience, but because (and this is exactly what presupposition means),

as the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it'. Again, there is another important qualification to make here. Disappearance is not a singular process or event. It can take many different forms (Evans and Meza, 2023). Indeed, for many post-war thinkers, there was a need to embrace a certain kind of disappearance, for it was among the ruins of the ambitions of permanence where some of the greatest claims to violence were found. What is at stake here then is a fundamental distinction between the opening of spaces, through which new thresholds or horizons can be passed over, as opposed to the closing in of a life, whose edges hurtle towards and pull life into its depths. In the thought of Nancy, for example, the open is a space of continued emergence which is ontologically defined by difference. Such a difference is an affirmation, which in the language of Deleuze we would describe as a becoming. This becoming of ideas, subjects, worlds, makes a certain kind of disappearance inevitable, indeed welcomed as an integral outcome of a creative event. Indeed, there cannot be, Nancy insists, any sense of the world without it. As he writes, 'The fact that the world is destroying itself is not hypothesis; it is in a sense, the fact from which any thinking of the world follows' (Nancy, 2007: 35). A quick clarification: Nancy often repeats the idea that the sense of the world is also the end of the world and by this he means that the exhaustion of principles (divine or rational) that determine a priori the sense of the world (a teleology of sort) means that the world is now constantly producing sense in every instance (hence his long lists of things), without ever being fully determined by any specific instance. In this sense what is destroyed is the ultimate sense of the world, a direction or target or foundation. To this effect, he writes: 'The world identifies with a totality of beings that no longer refers logically to any other being and secondly with the enigma or mystery of the raison d'etre of such a totality. If it is necessary without being the effect of a superior reason what is that necessity? Where does the fortuitous errancy of this existence go? How does one disentangle oneself from this conceptual couple? By considering a fact without referring it to a cause.' (2007: 45).

To commit to the open therefore means that we are always walking the line that fluctuates between appearance and disappearance, which in an affirmative welcoming of the former—the opening up of new horizons of possibility, means the latter is unavoidable. There is, in short, no appearance without disappearance. What Nancy explains in terms of sense and Deleuze in terms of becoming, Blanchot gave to writing itself. This was duly appreciated by McConnell (2013) whose monograph *Approaching Disappearance* explains how the tensions between appearance and disappearance are key to understanding Blanchot's work. Appreciating this, what is clear for us is how Blanchot remains committed to a process, which is always moving towards nothingness and negation, seeking a kind of transformation or transvaluation in Nietzschean terms, thereby gives a responsibility to a style of writing that is perpetually 'going towards itself, towards its essence, which is disappearance'. But this is a kind of disappearance that has nothing to do with the disavowal of life. It is infinitely affirming.

Invariably the disappearance that concerns is the one that is not committed to the openness of new horizons—the future anterior of a life that in the present remains unknown but pulls life into the unknowable extreme of the abyss. A disappearance that is not about the reimaging of the subject, what Deleuze in his recovery of those who were missing

identified as being a 'people to come', but as a system of erasure, through which the possibilities of life close in as the ground opens up until it suffers a forced disappearance, out of which there is nothing to return. Of course, we cannot speak of such enclosure without attending to the environments on which such thresholds move. If there is a truth to our political modernity, it is precisely the realization that the more we enclose spaces, the more we exhaust them to the point of bringing about their veritable combustion. Disappearance thus meets desolation as what remains is merely a space marked by absence and the traces of scorched earths. Those who subsequently venture in such spaces are not 'witnesses' to the disaster, but those who managed to escape it and now have to contend with its logic and live with the 'shame of being human' as Deleuze and Guattari (1994) called it. For example, if the advent of a disaster, which brings about an epic disappearance is governed by an unstoppable force, the speed of which destroys all sense, what follows is a space defined by *intensive slowness*. Desolated landscapes overwhelm precisely because a sense of nothing takes hold. Sense thus returns, as Nancy insists, out of a re-encounter with nothingness and the hope of salvaging something from a desolate world, while putting into question that which brought it about in the first instance. The question of memory appears here, invariably shadowed by an epic doubt. Memory in fact, as Blanchot understood all too well, slips into madness as the attempt to recover the human is torn between the desire for remembrance and the desire to forget? As Blanchot writes in *Awaiting Oblivion* (1997: 38): 'He watched over the forgetting where she was leading him, by a calm movement that came from forgetting. Forgetting, forgotten. "If I forget you, will you remember yourself?"—"Myself, in your forgetting of me."—"But is it I who shall forget you; is it you who will remember?"—"Not you, not I: the forgetting will forget me in you, and the impersonal remembrance will efface me in you, and the impersonal remembrance will efface me from that which remembers"'. What is it that we remember and what is it that we forget? Can we even resolve this aporia? If there is a genius to Blanchot it is to show that it is through such mental anguish, which again brings us back to the line that gravitates between appearance and disappearance which is now operating within the life of the mind, the real madness can be properly understood, for as Nietzsche understood, the abyss is a madness, but a madness in the end that is *full without content* for what it reveals is the triumph of the will to nothing.

The disappearance of life

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki unleashed an unprecedented amount of destruction on the urban environment of the two Japanese cities. The intensity of the violence brought by the nuclear bombs released by American warplanes in August 1945 was revealed to the world through a number of photographic and filmic images released shortly after the end of World War 2. These images brought to global attention the ways in which the bombs had created landscapes of complete devastation, the likes of which humanity had never seen before. These annihilation landscapes became a representational trope that triggered the emergence of atomic (and post-atomic) visual culture for years to come. The film that best captures the immediate aftermath of the bombing is *Effects of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.* Photographed between

September and October 1945, and directed by a collective of Japanese filmmakers, the footage was taken to the United States and was not shown in Japan until 1968. The documentary, meant to be a survey of the destruction at varying distances from the explosion's epicentre, is the one and only work to offer a photographic record of the aftermath of the bombing before any reconstruction or rubble removal was performed. It has been rightly claimed all images of the bombing that have been forever impressed in our memory come from here. The camera pans and tilts, right to left and top to bottom to describe landscape after landscape of annihilation, flattened out, entirely horizontal views, with no more than a handful of buildings (or pieces of) still standing and few skeletons of steel structures. The only things that suggests this was once an urban environment are the paths that run in between the rubbles and that one can imagine were once highways, roads and streets. As the voiceover tells us, 90% of all buildings were destroyed by 'blast and fire'. While most destruction, whether natural or man-made, even on a large scale, becomes visually recognisable by the difference between the affected areas and the ones left untouched, what strikes in this landscape is that the destruction is seamless. Nothing can be recognized, nothing is remarkable, everything has been annihilated and reduced to a formless state. Life has disappeared from the landscape and every trace of the living that normally animates a landscape and gives it specific features is gone. The destruction is such that the view is uninterrupted and the camera—positioned on a tripod at human eye level—can smoothly pan from left to right without encountering any visual obstacle. Another peculiar feature of these images is that the natural and the man-made cannot be truly distinguished any longer, they are fused together, in a fusion that lacks any sense of reconciliation with nature or harmony, rather emerges from a general neutralization, a reduction to a general indifference or absolute equivalence. A contorted metal rod is the burnt branch of an uprooted tree, a piece of debris is a rock, a pebble is a tile. These shots are as yet unmatched in defining the very image of modern annihilation: a horizontal, unobstructed, formless vista from which human and non-human life has disappeared. To say that life has disappeared points to a crucial dimension of these images, which distinguish them for instance from lunar or other planetary landscapes or extremely inhospitable spaces on Earth: they show—barely—that life once took place here and that it is *now* no more. As such, they do not point simply to the impossibility of human life to take place *there* or to whether life is at all possible under given conditions that makes habitation possible. Rather they challenge us to acknowledge humanity's ability to disappear life as a moment of humanity's history as its surprising capacities. Life in other-words *dis*-appears. It is subtracted as the violence of the reduction declares. Precisely because these are the first images attesting this possibility as a verifiable historical moment, they have become a blueprint for all subsequent landscape of annihilation, whether the event has taken place before or after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These images constitute the most exemplary illustration of a landscape of annihilation and attract within their orbit every other. Hiroshima as such becomes not just the proper name of a Japanese city bombed by the American army in August 1945, but the image of man-made annihilation, the disappearance of life, a kind of experienceless world.

From this moment on, the disappearance of life will always recall in its cinematic (and more generally visual) expressions Hiroshima, as its original moment, as what Nancy

calls the paradigm 'for every kind of disaster hereafter' (2015: 3). At the beginning of this article, we have described a number of instances—literary and otherwise—where Hiroshima is used as a metonymy for annihilation and the irrevocable removal of life. Cinema is equally rich with examples that while confronting the disappearance of human life mobilize—more or less explicitly—the Hiroshima paradigm. Nikolas Geyrhalter's 2016 documentary *Homo Sapiens* is structured around a set of visions on places of human abandonment. These are sites that were once lived and from which for a variety of reasons life has disappeared, they are places built to learn, to play, to live, to eat, relics of the present. The sites include Fukushima and Chernobyl, known for the nuclear-related disasters, but also less catastrophic landscapes—a church, a subterranean lake in Wales, a cinema, a slaughterhouse, the Buzludzha Monument in Bulgaria—that have simply been consigned to oblivion. While not all these landscapes are generated by man-made or natural disasters, they bear the very same conditions and point to what Nancy in his text on Fukushima calls the impossibility of clearly marking what is natural and what is technical: 'From now one there is an interconnection, an intertwining, even a symbiosis of technologies, exchanges, movements, which makes it so that a flood, wherever it might occur, must necessarily involve relationships with any number of technical, social, economic, political intricacies that keep us from regarding it as simply a misadventure or a misfortune whose consequences can be more or less easily circumscribed' (2015: 4). *Homo Sapiens* shows precisely how every catastrophe, every vacating of life, will call into question the very possibility of existence of all kinds of life. The sites are filmed with a patient intensity, the camera never moves, we hear no music and only hear ambient sounds (recorded separately) and the visual language is deliberately meant to cut us (the audience) off from the scene, as if we could only be a transitory witness to the disappearance of life. We are neither afforded a comprehensive look at any of the locations, nor a shot from a different angle or of a different size. Overall, the film lacks climax, we are not going anywhere, we do not get to a specific place that would reveal, illuminate, explain. The film is built on different modes of disappearance, each with its own intensity, but there is no outside, no romantic nostalgia to anchor us, no lesson to be drawn, if not perhaps that disappearance has an inevitable, even unwanted lure, that is neither mythical (a new world on the ashes of the old one), nor nihilistic (the sacrificial heroism of humanity's immolation). Visually these shots maintain close links with the Hiroshima documentary, chiefly the calmness that inhabits them and the fact that the natural and the technical cannot be disentangled. There is here as well a kind of neutral force that collapses forms of life with inanimate leftovers.

Homo Sapiens not only allows us to bring into focus the disappearance of life as a feature of the abyss opened by annihilation, but it also helps us approach the eradication of life as a set of political practices which go beyond attempts to restrict them to large scale killing. Abandonment, dereliction, the slow and persistent removal of the conditions of life are equally practices of annihilation. As Benjamin Meiches aptly puts it, there are many 'social, processual, and other complex forms of violence' (2019) that amount to annihilation. In this the work of Raphael Lemkin is of crucial importance, as his understanding of genocide as an entirely new form of warfare (and a new form of politics) points not to the amount of death it creates, but to the ability to annihilate the viability of a form of life. As Meiches writes, 'acts of genocide are thus "creative" in the sense

not only of generating differences but producing new forms of violence' (2019). Meiches also neatly summarises the philosophical repercussions of all this: 'At stake is a political structure built on the metaphysics of presence, which overlooks the multiplicity of forms of violence that contribute to the formation of destructive processes' (2019). Destructive processes have a generative and even creative dimension that focus on physical killing and the immediately visible destruction produced by weaponry do not capture. Abandoning a metaphysics of presence and moving closer towards the disappearance of life implies that we equip ourselves with a shifting and layered sense of what annihilation is.

Walking among the desolation

If Japanese cinematic interventions in the immediate aftermath of the bombings have become the point of reference when dealing with the aesthetics of annihilation in urban contexts, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) is the defining film dealing with a journey into post-apocalyptic landscapes of desolation. The brilliance of Tarkovsky's masterpiece is to make clear that some monumental disaster has happened without giving it any specific context. We know it has happened, yet the disaster still remains unspeakable. It is never named as such. This creates an evocative sense of a past horror that can easily be related to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or perhaps somewhere else, in the future. This is captured in a beautiful passage read out and then repeated, like the twinned bombings, by the young child Martha in which annihilation, life and desire all collide: 'I love those eyes of yours, my friend, Their sparkling, flashing, fiery wonder; When suddenly those lids ascend, Then lightning rips the sky asunder; You swiftly glance, and there's an end; There's greater charm, though, to admire; When lowered are those eyes divine; In moments kissed by passion's fire; When through the downcast lashes shine: the smouldering embers of desire'. Guided by the Stalker into a wasteland simply known as 'the zone', the story focuses on a journey made by a science professor and writer who are attempting to get to 'the room', which is said to make earthly desires come true. On their journey they confront a place, which although appearing ordinary is nevertheless marked by different laws the unspeakable disaster has created. Despite the promise of some reward, Stalker is a tale marked by utter hopelessness. 'There's nothing else left to people on Earth', the stalker tells, 'This is the only place to come to when all hope is gone'.

The triumph of Stalker is to show how since the logics of the old world no longer apply, on a re-encounter what is at stake is precisely the attempt to reintroduce sense back into a senseless place. As the stalker narrates, 'The Zone is a very complicated system of traps, and they're all deadly. I don't know what's going on here in the absence of people, but the moment someone shows up, everything comes into motion. Old traps disappear and new ones emerge. Safe spots become impassable. Now your path is easy, now it's hopelessly involved. That's the Zone. It may even seem capricious. But it is what we've made it with our condition. It happened that people had to stop halfway and go back. Some of them even died on the very threshold of the room. But everything that's going on here depends not on the Zone, but on us!' As both the literary and scientific mind—what is explicitly presented as the epistemic mastery of the world

through art and science—are cast into doubt, what dominates the landscape is overwhelmingly shaped by a new condition of the senses thrown into a vortex of uncertainty. Noise, touch, movement and stasis are far more important than any scientific theorem or literary quote, as the stalker continually reminds those who cannot reconcile themselves with the absurdity of it all. With reason, knowledge and rationality derelict of meaning, the sense of abandonment itself becomes defining for a group of visitors who like foreign tourists in their own lands, are both encouraged to remember, while tasked by the stalker to try once again to reimagine what human life might mean once it is stripped back to its pre-subjective form. 'There's no going back', stalker councils, 'Nobody goes back the same way they came.'

With an evident nod to the history of violence and the witnessing of atrocity, the stalker appears in Tarkovsky's film like a reworked Virgil from Dante's Comedia, although rather than imparting eternal truths, speaks more about the need simply to navigate the space by following rudimentary rituals and gestures. Explanation primarily functions here to undo knowledge; some knowledge we might consider to be that which made the skies fall and the earth rise to begin with. What is left to say when the word now appears this way? Should knowledge itself be put on trial? In one of the more memorable scenes, the stalker appears exhausted by the constant tension between the writer and the scientist. A black dog appears as he lays on the ground in the waters of this wasteland. The dialogue continues:

WRITER: Let's say I enter that Room and I return to our godforsaken city as a genius. Do you follow me?. But a man writes because he is suffering, has doubts. He needs to prove all the time for himself and for the people surrounding him that he is worth something. And suppose I will know for sure that I'm a genius? Why should I write then? What a hell? Actually, I must say, we exist only for …

PROFESSOR: Make me a favour and leave me alone! Let me take a little nap at least. I didn't sleep tonight at all. Keep your complexes for yourself.

WRITER: Anyway, all this technology of yours … all these blast-furnaces, wheels … and other vanity of vanities, so that one could work less and could devour more—it's only crutches, artificial limbs. And mankind exists for creating … pieces of art … It's, anyway, unselfish, as a contrary to all other human actions. The great illusions … Images of the absolute truth … Are you listening to me, Professor?

PROFESSOR: About what unselfishness are you talking? People still starve to death. Did you fall down from the Moon, or what?

WRITER: And these are our brain aristocrats! You are not able to think in an abstract way.

PROFESSOR: I hope you do not intend to teach me the meaning of life. And to think at the same time?

WRITER: It's useless. Although you are a Professor, you're ignorant.

Ignorance and uselessness appear here as the formula that brings about humankind's ruination. With the camera still focused on stalker whose eyes are open, the voice of his wife returns to remind him of the horror of the disaster: 'And there an immense earthquake took place, and the Sun became dark as sackcloth, and the Moon was like covered with blood … And the stars of the heaven fell to the ground as if a fig tree, shaken by a great wind, let its unripe figs fall down. And the sky hid itself, rolled up as a scroll; and various hills and isles moved from their places (laughs) … And the kings on earth, and the dignitaries, and the rich, and leaders of the thousands, and the powerful, and all the free hid themselves in the caves and mountain gorges and they told the mountains and the rocks: fall on us and hide us from the face of the One sitting on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of His wrath is come, and who can withstand it?' As this passage further reveals, what comes after a monumental act of disappearance and before a new subjectivity is born is the question at the centre of Stalker? A question that can be answered only as the remains of the old world crumbles and those who once stood at the pinnacle of its epistemic rule, learn once again how to feel the world and slowly navigate the conditions of the new, whose logics demand a new attentiveness. What reappears is born out of the ashes of destruction, which commands a different sense of the world through which the artistic and scientific sensibility can also be reimagined and put to work. As for science, its task is to be attuned to the new temporality, one in which slowness instead of annihilative speed should be defining. And yet the very impossibility of this appears for the protagonists all too apparent in this moment as the arrival of a new condition requires thinking without any familiar coordinates: 'But how can I put a name to what it is that I want? How am I to know that I really don't want what I want, or that I really don't want what I don't want? These are intangibles that the moment you name them their meaning evaporates like jellyfish in the sun.' Hence, maybe we are condemned, to return over and over to the scene of the *Sacrifice* (1986), which Tarkovsky also dealt in an earlier film to reveal our impotency when it comes to withstanding the desires we possess to bring about our own technological annihilation.

The memory of oblivion

Having confronted the horrors of mass disappearance and the annihilation of life-world systems, all that remains is the memory of oblivion, which can only be surmised by those who never lived its full horror. As Nietzsche theorized and Levi later explained through his harrowing testimonies, one cannot say to have come face to face with the abyss fully without disappearing from the face of the earth. What we do however possess are fragments and traces, which again defy the neat logics of a time that is unfolding in any progressive or chronological way. The abyss ruins time. And the memory of oblivion it augments, creates a fundamental rupture in the psychic imaginary as the very act of witnessing becomes both a necessity and an impossible burden. This brings us back to our previous concerns with memory and forgetting and what it means to bear witness to landscapes of annihilation through which the madness of the world is fully exposed. Indeed, given the trauma such madness necessarily provokes at a societal level, bringing the human condition face to face with its *an*nihilistic impulses, so, as always, the madness

needs to be transferred elsewhere, transferred into a nothingness which prevents a meaningful critique of that which properly lies at the heart of the abysmal memory of oblivion.

Nowhere is the memory of oblivion better explored than in Alain Resnais *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). A film that clearly sets out to bring something of the human back into a ravaged world, so the past, present and future collide as multiple landscapes of despair and suffering are brought together. Written by Marguerite Duras, set in Hiroshima, the film centres on an intense and schizophrenic love affair between a Frenchwoman and a Japanese man. Its fragmented and non-linear style has been notably commented upon, especially for bringing into question representation itself. Shortly after its release, Bernard Pingaud, for example, suggested that the film is not about characters, but about time, that reveals back 'the hopeless, wretched condition of life itself' (2002[1960]: 72). Such hopelessness, he maintained, stemmed directly from the way catastrophic or abysmal time demands a conception of memory, but such memory is only realized precisely through the act of forgetting. It is as such not a film about memory, but on the contrary, the gaps or absences, the lapses and ruptures, which make memory possible. The film works to emphasize the impossibility of memory when confronted with the nihilistic power of a time marked by such destruction and the ruptures it creates. Neither of the film's characters were in Hiroshima at the time of the bombing. How could they be? As the opening instructions to Duras script explain: 'She tells him that she has seen everything in Hiroshima. We see what she has seen. It's horrible. And meanwhile his voice, a negative voice, denies the deceitful pictures and in an impersonal, unbearable way, he repeats that she has seen nothing at Hiroshima' (Duras, 1960: 8). The unbearable and the impossible collide, as the ability to speak of Hiroshima is undone by the realisation that all 'knowledge of Hiroshima' is but a 'delusion of a mind' for the Hiroshima monument is but a '*Monument of Emptiness*' in a place, beyond horror, for it is a place that death has preserved.

Hiroshima Mon Amour is a film about desire. It is about the impossibility of love in catastrophic times. But from the outset, when we witness contorted bodies, covered in what might be snow or the white atomic ash still falling from Japanese skies, we are left in no doubt that the desire for oblivion is also a central theme. We might say it even comes to dominate, through the time the lovers endure, as the madness of the world takes hold and the desire to explain means they can only explain away as sure as their bodies will appear and then disappear with the passage of time. This is masterfully depicted in the opening sequence as the narrator moves through the streets of Hiroshima and speaks of devourment, which lends itself to both an interpretation of how she feels about the desire for love, and yet also the desire for destruction. As the Frenchwomen tells:

> Listen to me. I know something else. It will begin again. 200,000 dead and 80,000 wounded in nine seconds. Those are the official figures. It will begin again. It will be 10,000 degrees on the earth. Ten thousand suns, people will say. The asphalt will burn. Chaos will prevail. An entire city will be lifted off the ground, and fall back to earth in ashes . . . I meet you. I remember you. Who are you? You're destroying me. You're good for me. How could I know this city was tailor-made for love? How could I know you fit my body like a glove? I like you. How unlikely. I like you. How slow all of a sudden. How sweet. You

> cannot know. You're destroying me. You're good for me. You're destroying me. You're good for me. I have time. Please, devour me. Deform me to the point of ugliness. Why not you?.

While Resnais' masterpiece weaves together the desire for love with one of the most horrifying episodes in human history—including the Frenchwoman's previous impossible love with a German soldier back in France, which resulted in her public shaming and shaving of the hair, if there is a time to speak of in the movement of the scenes, it is precisely the madness of time. From the Frenchwoman's descent into a state of personal madness as she is filmed licking the walls of her the cellar prison at the hands of her parents back in 'Nevers' (the cellar here being deeply symbolic as more than a prison, but a cavern marked by a wound in time that gestures to the abyss below), to her schizophrenic outrages as she confronts the impossibility of being in love with love itself, all the while the world returns to its banal normality which it so desperately craves, so in the very act of portraying the chaotic state of a woman's mind, the very location of the madness is brought into question. For the madness is not for her to possess, it never was, but belongs to a society still demanding she remembers, while insisting she also forgets. A society that demands we recover the idea of love, while forgetting all that it has to endure. A society built on madness, which then condemns life when it is unable to make sense of it. It is a film which deals precisely with the vanishment of ontology and the utter impossibility of putting it back on firm epistemological groundings. As Gronhovd and VanderWolk wrote, 'there exists in Hiroshima no ontological grounding from which epistemological questions can take shape' (1992: 121). To that end, we can say it fulfils Duras ambition 'to have done with the description of horror by horror' (Duras, 1960: 10). A horror we might add, which changed nothing in terms of manufacturing the desire for annihilation.

At the beginning of the essay, we recalled briefly the words of Mahmoud Darwish, living through another August 6th, 37 years after *that* August 6th, in a city called Beirut which was made to look and feel like Hiroshima. Darwish titles his recollection of the siege *Memory for Forgetfulness* and the title itself already encapsulates the oxymoric movement between wanting to remember and needing to forget. The poet wants to forget the events of Beirut, so he writes them down. One way then to read the title would be: memory for the purpose of forgetfulness. For the reader, however, the poet's desire to forget—his wanting to purge annihilation from his mind—becomes an act of memory, a transmission, a monument against forgetfulness and the ravages of history. Nonetheless, the importance of forgetting (one could even say the right to forget) is reiterated throughout the text. It is important to be able to forget, to forget the abyss one is living in. To this effect Darwish writes: 'We too love football. We too have a right to love the game, and a right to see the match. Why not? Why shouldn't we put aside the routines of death for a moment. In one of the bomb shelters we were able to draw electrical power from a car battery and, watching Paolo Rossi, in no time at all were feeling what little happiness there was left. You never see him anywhere on the playing field except where he has to be. A thin devil of a man who can't be seen except after the goal is scored, exactly like a jet fighter, invisible until the explosion of its target' (1995: 108–109).

As with Resnais and Duras, forgetfulness is reversed here so that the future can be reimagined. It is important to be able to forget to outlive the past. Yet can those besieged ever truly forget? Darwish asks: 'is there enough forgetfulness for them to forget? […] And who is going to help them forget in the midst of this anguish, which never stops reminding them of their alienation from place and society?' (1995: 15). Both Hiroshima Mon Amour and Darwish's text seems to suggest that there is not enough forgetfulness to forget and so the writer must engage in a struggle to find the language to put into words—a mix of poetry and prose—the experience of annihilation. The struggle to find a language that would give form to memory is a very important one. Moreover, the work of art here becomes perhaps the last refuge, the only remaining trace of something we might call resistance, for it is an enactment, a setting into work, for in the art of *re*membering it institutes a certain historical and cultural world. There is a need to write down to forget, but a need to write so that forgetfulness will become an act of memory and will help us to forget forgetfulness. We need to write so that we can forget, so that annihilation will not survive us.

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Notes

1. See Al Jazeera, Israel's Netanyahu warns Lebanon could face destruction 'like Gaza' (8 October 2024). Online at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/8/israels-netanyahu-warns-lebanon-could-face-destruction-like-gaza
2. On this see, Robert Longo, The Artist as Witness. Online at: https://www.historiesofviolence.com/artistaswitness

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