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## ***Remade in Silence: Silvia Kolbowski's A Film Will Be Shown Without the Sound***

By Bliss Cua Lim



*A film will be shown without the Sound*, 2006, Silvia Kolbowski. Installation view in *The Look of Law*, UC Irvine University Art Gallery. (*Hiroshima mon Amour* by Alain Resnais, projected without sound or subtitles.)

Like any remake, the valence of Silvia Kolbowski's 2006 *A Film Will Be Shown without the Sound* (*Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959, Dir. Alain Resnais) turns to some degree on its precursor text.<sup>1</sup> Resnais's 1959 *Hiroshima mon amour*, with screenplay by Marguerite Duras, twins love and death, love and war, pain and place (the film ends by christening the protagonists Hiroshima and Nevers). It bewails the recalcitrance of memory: the horror of forgetfulness, of forgetting either world-altering atrocity or life-changing passion, and the "aberrations of memory," the ways in which the pain of remembering can come upon us unawares, inconveniently, when memory and

lived history will not let us go, will not let us forget.<sup>2</sup> Resnais tells the story of romance between citizens of nations at war: in occupied France, a young girl's first, "impossible" love is the enemy, a German soldier.<sup>3</sup> Decades later, in Hiroshima, impossible love comes upon her again, unawares, as she falls for a Japanese man who is also a double-in-memory for her German soldier. Framed by war, patriotism, and the ruinous power of the state, the romances at the heart of the film are defiantly cross-national and cross-racial, attesting to the ways in which subjectivation by the nation-state are always real but never uncontested-or at least lived under the rubric of profound disaffection.<sup>4</sup> To this precursor text Kolbowski's video projection piece *A Film Will Be Shown without the Sound* intervenes with silence. But for spectators already familiar with *Hiroshima mon amour*, the silence is not empty but filled with remembering: with or without names, with or without words, the footage-of skin and ash, charred bodies, balding children, the wounded and the mutilated, twisted metal and fused bottle caps, limbs, pain, the burial of poisoned fish, and the death of fishermen poisoned, like their catch, by the irradiated Pacific Ocean-is silent but hardly mute.

But the soundlessness of Kolbowski's remake, Resnais's film remade through silence, allows for a more interruptive and, for me, very welcome intervention as well. Resnais's film begins by invoking war as inequality- the inequities of force, of technology, of nations, of races, of classes- on a staggering scale. But wittingly or unwittingly, racialized inequities persist in the linguistic asymmetry that frames the film. The Japanese hero puts it ironically: he jokes that she has noticed that he speaks good French, whereas he overlooks the fact that, for all her time in Hiroshima, she does not speak Japanese. *Hiroshima mon amour* proceeds to ascribe full interiority, the agonies of memory, and the speaking for the unspeakable ruins of war in a Japanese city to the white Frenchwoman; her racialized Asian lover consoles her, pursues her, desires her, but always he does so, linguistically and narratively, in the French language, in a French film, in her register.

Dispensing with sound and speech, the silence of Kolbowski's remake disrupts the linguistic, national, and racial asymmetries of Resnais's film. Silence loosens the metonymic yoking of Hiroshima's historical pain to the white heroine's interiority and suffering; unmoored from her orienting voiceover narration, we notice the film is built, visually, on tracking shots of the city and the force of the two-shot, the interracial lovers fully sharing the frame.

Kolbowski projects the film without sound but also without subtitles. Silence obviates the importance of music and the primacy of dialogue, especially the heroine's voiceover narration, for securing meaning; this primacy of the verbal is not reinscribed by turning on the subtitles. The decision to suppress both sound and subtitling is interesting, because Kolbowski's doing so actually reverses the logic of the remake in contemporary Hollywood films. Writing about a Hollywood remake of a French film, one critic has characterized the American remake as motivated by an attempt to erase the foreign film's subtitles. Subtitles are always evidence of "the process of being transposed, translated, exported," of the labor of repeating and recontextualizing a film, of the need to render a foreign utterance in a local tongue.<sup>5</sup> Subtitles also disrupt the seamlessness of sound and image through the obviousness of the need to work at legibility. Hollywood remakes typically seek to efface the sign of cross-cultural negotiation in order to deliver the foreign as already domesticated and familiar; the remake becomes a deracinating act of cultural appropriation.

Appropriation contrasts starkly with translation. Jacques Derrida writes that translation delights in "idiomatic singularity." Translation is a kind of "love" or "passion" that "approach[as] as closely as possible while refusing at the last moment to threaten or to reduce, to consume or to consummate, leaving the other body intact but not without causing the other to appear."<sup>6</sup> Its antipode is appropriation, which transposes to another register the other that it erases. In this sense the conventional Hollywood remake, construed as an avoidance of subtitles, might be read

as an attempt to circumvent both the idiomaticity of the precursor text as well as the sign of the work of cultural translation.

In Kolbowski's work, in contrast, the remake that works through soundlessness is mobilized as an erasure of neither cultural difference nor the labor of translation: rather, it works to remove the dominance of speech and leave meaning unsettled. Kolbowski's film without sound confines us to the visual, but the visual is also unloosed by silence: the dappled play of light and shadow, the deep space of the *mise-en-scène*, the poignancy of gesture, movement, and light.

This silent remaking is also a rescreening, a reframing of the film in a continual loop, changing markedly the spectator's encounter with the film. Experiencing the film in an art gallery rather than in a movie theater, the spectator comes upon the film *in medias res*, rather than at the beginning; the temporality of the spectator's engagement with the film thus comes to have a contingent quality, the "tiny spark of accident" (Walter Benjamin's phrase for the optical unconscious) that animates a looped work that we might walk in and see at any moment.<sup>7</sup> The temporality and closure of narrative significance (the linearity of beginning, middle, and end) are dispersed. In giving us the visual sans sound, narrative meaning is not abolished completely; rather it is undone, unsettled, opened, inviting association. Kolbowski described the effect of soundlessness as "bringing the film into the present," a play with time.<sup>8</sup> In filling the silence of the interval, the spectator vivifies and renews the experience of the film at the time and place of this looped, quiet rescreening. For the knowing spectator, one who has seen *Hiroshima mon amour* before, it is uncanny, the familiar made unfamiliar, the lack of sound not closing off meaning or converting it to undecidability but reopening it to associations. The spectator, in the silence, must fill the gap, the interval opened by the interruption of sound and speech.

This interval is also what Trinh Minh-ha has called the "unsewing" of image, sound, and subtitling, conventionally "sutured" to "protect the unity of the subject" by "collapsing reading, hearing, and seeing into one single activity." Image stripped of both sound and subtitles, *A Film Will Be Shown without the Sound* can be understood as "freeing" the film from the "stickiness of sameness" that characterizes the usual relationship between the verbal and the visual, a "refusal of the use of the voice as homogeneous to the image."<sup>9</sup> Kolbowski's film without sound, then, is both a remake and a kind of productive refusal.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the "precursor text" is drawn from film scholars who suggest that remakes and sequels unsettle the very notion of an original, as well as its "fixity." To my mind, Kolbowski's remake of Resnais's film- projecting it in a continuous loop, without sound and subtitles, in a gallery setting- illuminates, as all remakes do, the impossibility of faithful repetition and the obverse pleasures of difference. See Paul Budra and Betty A. Schellenberg, introduction to *Port Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, ed. Budra and Schellenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); and Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal, introduction to *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*, ed. Horton and McDougal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For "aberrations of memory," see Peter Krapp, *Deja Vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> In her synopsis of *Hiroshima mon amour* Marguerite Duras characterizes the protagonists' opening conversation in terms of impossibility: "Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do

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is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima.” The couple’s impossible love is thus an allegorical analogue for the impossibility of representation that Duras identifies at the film’s core. see Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour: Text by Marguerite Duras for the Film by Alain Resnais*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler discusses subjectivation in relation to Althusserian interpellation, a moment of being hailed and thus formed as a juridical and social subject by a reprimand that “initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject.” Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Amir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 381. 5. David Wills, “The French Remark: Breathless and Cinematic Citationality,” in Horton and McDougal, 148-49.

<sup>5</sup> David Wills, “The French Remark: Breathless and Cinematic Citationality,” in Horton and McDougal, 148-149.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 175.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” trans. Phil Patton, *Artforum*, February 1977, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Phone conversation with the author, October 17, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha. with Isaac Julien and Laura Mulvey, “‘Who Is Speaking?’ Of Nation, Community, and First Person Interviews,” in *Framer Framed: Film Scripts and Interviews* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 207.