

Journalism after mass death

Memory, mediation, and decentering in John Hersey's 'Hiroshima' (1946)

Marie Cronqvist

What can possibly be said or written after mass death? How can a collective trauma of such magnitude be narrated and made sense of? These questions have been debated in intellectual circles for at least half a century. Representations of mass atrocities and mutilated bodies are most often found in Holocaust literature and poetry, which gradually became a genre of its own in the post-war period. The experience of the Holocaust found its way into artistic expression before any factual representation was possible—and quite contrary to Theodor Adorno's famous statement that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Many times, the unfathomable horror was most grippingly captured in the austere works of Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Elie Wiesel and others, who all described the everyday art of surviving in the concentration camps by using a plain, even understated, prose.

Whereas art, drama, and poetry have their ways of expressing horror, grief, and memory, collective and individual traumas present some different challenges to the practice of journalistic documentation. But there are also common traits. The American journalist Martha Gellhorn, an experienced war correspondent who was among the first to report the Allied Forces' liberation of Dachau on 7 May 1945, commented on what she saw with the following words, painful and distressing in their attention to detail and plainness of style: 'Behind the barbed wire and the electric fence, the skeletons sat in the sun and searched themselves for lice'.¹

Indeed, the best journalistic accounts of war deaths are precisely

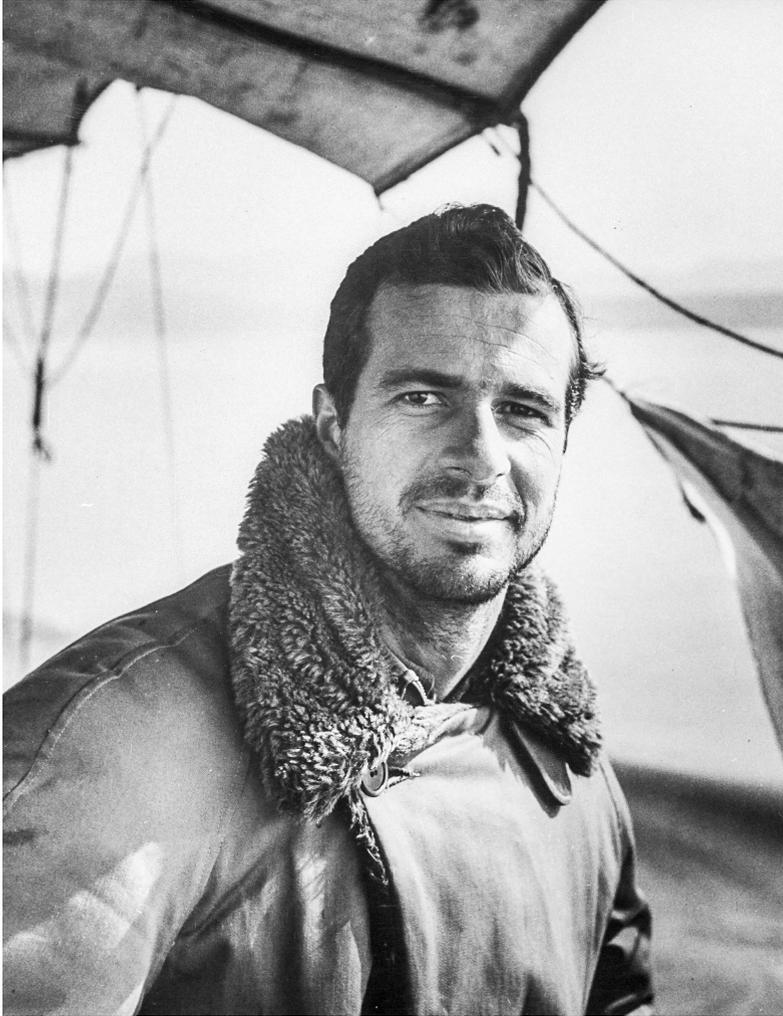
the naked, almost blunt, pieces that resist all temptation to descend into sentimentality or sensationalism. Gellhorn's brief dispatch from Dachau is one of them, and it has much in common with the narrative style of the most influential Holocaust fiction writers.

Another important journalistic account after mass suffering and death is John Hersey's pivotal and much-celebrated reportage 'Hiroshima' (1946), which is the work considered in this chapter. It tells the well-known story of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, estimated to have killed 140,000 people in the blast, and then, over a period of several decades due to the lingering effects of radiation sickness, the death toll rose to a quarter of a million.² The shattering attacks on Hiroshima and its sister city Nagasaki three days later are both intellectually incomprehensible in the magnitude of their destructive force, and psychologically numbing in the realization of their effects on humanity. The journalist John Hersey was one of the very few journalists who tried to make sense out of the senseless.

Taking 'Hiroshima' as my point of departure, I will address the question of journalistic mediation in two ways, moving beyond the points raised in earlier research on Hersey's literary journalism. First, I will argue that Hersey's choice of representation is an example of what Géraldine Muhlmann has called a decentring journalism, one that transcends and challenges any attempt to construct the world in terms of 'us' and 'them', and in which the position of the journalist is primarily characterized by discomfort and displacement. Second, I will connect this reading of 'Hiroshima' to the emergent field of research on journalism and memory, a scholarly inquiry that has risen at least partly out of the debris of the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. I mean to suggest that there are some key lessons to be learnt from 'Hiroshima' when we as citizens take upon ourselves the task of reporting and commenting with dignity and credibility on the victims of global terrorism and mass atrocity in our own time.

The story of the reportage

John Hersey's 'Hiroshima' has an unassailable position in the history of American journalism, and is invariably listed among the most influential pieces of writing in the twentieth century.³ It has been hailed



John Hersey traveling on assignment in the Far East, 1946. Photo: Dmitri Kessel, The LIFE Picture Collection, Getty Images.

as an early prototype or precursor of the so-called ‘new journalism’ movement of the sixties and seventies, and *Time Magazine* has called it ‘the most celebrated piece of journalism to come out of World War II.’⁴ In an American context, its contemporary importance cannot be overestimated. In a review of the subsequent book edition, the *New York Times* stated, for example, ‘nothing that can be said about this

book can equal what the book has to say. It speaks for itself, and in an unforgettable way, for humanity.⁵ Suddenly, a year after the atomic bombing of Japan, the mainstream jingoistic patriotism of early post-war reporting in the US was challenged by a different story. Historian John Toland has concluded, upon the impact of ‘Hiroshima’, that ‘those of us who had hated the Japanese for five years realized that Mr Hersey’s six protagonists were fellow human beings.’⁶

‘Hiroshima’ filled an entire issue of the magazine the *New Yorker* on 31 August 1946, and very soon after, the 31,000-word article came out in hardcover and was also read to the American public in a radio adaptation.⁷ The publication was an instant success, partly due to the unconventional and unprecedented decision of the *New Yorker* to devote an entire issue to one piece, and partly because the magazine was previously associated primarily with other types of content—cartoons and humorous pieces mixed with a cultural New York city guide, short stories, reportage, and art criticism. Undoubtedly, the publication of Hersey’s graphic description of the horrors of Hiroshima was designed to shock, especially in a medium such as the *New Yorker*. The cover of the 31 August issue certainly did not give much away: the picture collage of summer activities including tennis, croquet, and swimming presented the starkest possible contrast to what awaited readers inside.⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that literary journalism of the kind that Hersey and others produced, from the early twentieth century onwards, had generally found an outlet not in daily newspapers but in weekly magazines such as the *New Yorker*, because of the rapid advance of objectivity as a professional norm in news journalism.⁹

In the summer of 1946, 32-year-old John Hersey (1914–1993) was a correspondent quite familiar with the Far East, having been born and raised in Tientsin, China, the son of missionaries. According to him, this upbringing created a sense of dislocation and unrest that came to mark his life, even though he had already moved back to New York with his parents by the mid 1920s. He went on to public schools and then to Yale, where he combined his interest for American football with writing for the college newspaper.¹⁰ At the age of 25, firmly set on becoming a journalist, he seized an opportunity when Japan invaded China in 1937 to go to Asia in order to report on the war for *Time*, *Life*, and the *New Yorker*. While serving as a war correspondent, he

published several books, among them *A Bell for Adano* (1944), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize.

Even before Hiroshima, Hersey had developed an interest in the impact of war and catastrophe on the psyche of the survivor. Two decades before the Vietnam War and its emblematic journalistic accounts of traumatized soldiers by, for example, Michael Herr and John Sack, Hersey wrote about returning American soldiers' post-traumatic stress disorder, their psychological displacement and emotional numbing, in for example the *Life* article 'Experience by battle' in 1943.¹¹ His approach was more novel than it may seem from our perspective. And one year after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, American readers had already had a fair number of reports about the bombings, though nearly all of them had placed their focus on material damage—the physical devastation of cities, landscapes, and buildings. The human sacrifice was overshadowed by American triumphalism in combination with a fascination with the bomb's destructive power. President Harry Truman's conclusion that the bombing of Hiroshima had saved lives was in August 1946 still largely unquestioned, and mainstream US journalism had also increasingly begun to universalize Hiroshima and Nagasaki, seeing in events a necessary rebirth of a new, humble, and reconciliatory Japan.¹² As Paul Boyer notes in his classic history, *By the bomb's early light*, 'the statistics of devastation and death were simply recited as prefatory to a plea for international control, civil defense, or some other cause', while accounts of human death and suffering were conspicuously absent.¹³ Contrary to this, Hersey's ambition—strongly encouraged by the *New Yorker's* managing editor William Shawn—was to shed light on what actually happened in Hiroshima, and not to buildings, but to human beings.¹⁴

Before taking a closer look at the reportage and how it was written, Hersey's inspiration for his choice of narrative representation is worth mentioning. Allegedly, on a previous assignment for the *New Yorker* in the Pacific, he had come across the 1927 Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder, a story about five people who were all killed when an Inca rope suspension bridge in Peru gave way. The individual paths which eventually led the five to that bridge at that particular moment were the core of Wilder's novel, creating a drama with deep existential undertones. 'That seemed to

me to be a possible way of dealing with this very complex story of Hiroshima,' Hersey later recalled in an interview, 'to take a number of people—half a dozen, as it turned out in the end—whose paths crossed, bringing them to this moment of shared disaster.'¹⁵

Following Wilder's formula, which can be related to the thirties' literary tradition in which many authors explored the impact of the Great Depression by focusing on specific individuals,¹⁶ 'Hiroshima' tells the story of six residents on different paths through life, all of whom survived the blast at 8.15 a.m. on 6 August 1945. The six protagonists are Miss Toshiko Sasaki, an office clerk; Dr Masakazu Fujii, a medical doctor; Mrs Hatsuyo Nakamura, a widow with three children; Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a German Jesuit missionary; Dr Terufumi Sasaki, a Red Cross surgeon; and Mr Kiyoshi Tanimoto, a Methodist minister.

'Hiroshima' is the before, during, and after of these six individuals, based on a series of long interviews undertaken in the summer of 1946. The first section ('A noiseless flash') introduces the main characters and what they were doing the minutes before and after the bomb fell; the second section ('The fire') deals with events in the immediate hours following the blast; the third section ('Details are being investigated') covers the first week, and finally the fourth section ('Panic grass and feverfew') follows the main characters from about twelve days after the bomb to a year later. And although the story moves on chronologically, different themes are raised in each of the sections. Shock is the theme of first, while horror and realization is dealt with the second. Ethical reflection and political response is the main theme of the third section, and the fourth deals with the reconstruction and rebuilding of everyday life.

Representation and narrative techniques

Already convinced that journalism could be enlivened by the use of devices from fiction, Hersey deliberately adopted a plain style with dispassionate words and a restrained tone when writing his reportage. The text is remarkably devoid of any kind of sentimentality, and despite this—or perhaps precisely because of it—it remains an emotionally engaging read. The flat and naked prose contains a number of narrative tools and techniques such as a very conscious use of scene-by-scene

construction, dialectical oppositions, dialogue, third-person point of view, suspense, symbolism, and even elements of fine irony and understatement.

Careful and detailed descriptions of scenes, often combined with dialectical opposition, are key to the unfolding of 'Hiroshima'. One moving example is the initial few lines of the story, which instantly captures the dramatic collision of everyday life and atomic catastrophe:

At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiki Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department of the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk.¹⁷

Immediately, Hersey here introduces an element of suspense, which is repeated many times throughout the text in the conscious building-up of events to a moment of crisis, then shifting to another scene, thereby creating an expectation from the reader who wants to know what happens next. Miss Sasaki's story, like the other five protagonists', is told in episodes. Each is presented from their viewpoint without further commentary, in a flat, matter-of-fact style, which means that their states of mind are presented not by their thoughts but by their actions. The dramatic tension between global event and mundane activity is ever present in the small, almost unconscious, actions of each individual—tiny actions which in a mysterious way saved them from hellfire and instant death on that first day of the atomic age. And as a whole, 'Hiroshima' retells the story of human struggle for normalcy under the most horrid circumstances. It is not a story describing the heroism of ordinary people anchored in a local setting, however. In one way it is quite the contrary—a story about a number of helpless individuals adrift in a universal script. The reader is invited to share their confusion, their loss of direction, and their endeavours to stay sane as each gradually realizes the extent of the disaster. It is clear that survival in Hiroshima was a matter of pure coincidence, creating among some of the survivors a sense of guilt for being alive—not least in the stories of the two physicians, Dr Masakazu Fujii and Dr Terufumi

Sasaki, in their endless and futile struggle to aid their fellow citizens.

Apart from his consistent use of point of view, Hersey also employs the narrative technique of dwelling on certain details of the characters' stories in order to make symbolic points. Details in general are of utmost importance: vegetables cooked in the ground, human eyes melted, blood spattered on walls and floors, vomit and tiny pieces of glass on the street, shapes of flowers that had been the pattern of kimonos but after the blast were burned into the skin, and faces of corpses lying in Asano Park.

Hersey also uses fine irony combined with understatement, such as when Mr Tanimoto describes the morning of the bombing as 'perfectly clear and so warm that the day promised to be uncomfortable', or when the story presents Mrs Nakamura as someone who 'seemed to fly into the next room over the raised sleeping platform, pursued by parts of her house'.¹⁸ In the morning of 6 August, Ms Sasaki had started her working day by planning a funeral scheduled for ten o'clock. A number of the characters said that they had been relieved to hear the all-clear only fifteen minutes before the noiseless blast, the signal that the city had survived the night and that it was safe to go outside.

Some passages in 'Hiroshima' are highly symbolic. The most vivid is when Ms Sasaki's office building is destroyed and she finds herself trapped under a fallen bookshelf. Hersey recounts the crumbling state of science and knowledge, represented by shelves of books, with the words: 'There, in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books.'¹⁹ The symbolism in this passage reveals an underlying message from Hersey about human warfare and its relation to science and technology. 'Hiroshima' is thus not only a story about victims in a vaporized city, and not only a story about what happened in Japan, but a story of man-made catastrophe in general. And it certainly relates to a discussion underway in 1946 in the science community about the atomic bomb, which resulted in the book *One world or none: A report to the public on the full meaning of the atomic bomb*, published in conjunction with the Federation of American Scientists and with contributions by the likes of J. Robert Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein.²⁰

Mediation and the politics of decentring

Hersey's consistent use of literary techniques and storytelling in 'Hiroshima' was not unique. It followed a tradition of literary reporting going back at least half a century. In journalism research, the literary reportage has been described as a twentieth-century counter movement, an alternative genre of writing in opposition to the cult of objectivity in mainstream news journalism. This split in journalistic representation ran parallel to the development in academia, the historian John C. Hartsock has argued. Hartsock points to the simultaneity of the literary reportage and the so-called crisis of the humanities and its attempts to resist positivism. The literary reportage, he writes, strives for something beyond 'objective reporting'; it indicates the existence of other truths and alternative stories to be told by the journalist—stories other than the hegemonic narratives of power elites. In its subjectivist approach, the literary reportage therefore has a subversive potential.²¹ In the choice of key texts for his anthology of the 'new journalism' of the sixties and seventies, the author Tom Wolfe pointed to this liberating potential of literary journalism. The need for subjectivity, creativity, and expression was a call to arms against the kind of traditional reporting which, according to Wolfe, consistently failed to represent and articulate the transformations of social life and public reality in the sixties, with its countercultures, war protests, and revolutions.²²

As we all know, subjectivism does not necessarily imply the fabrication of facts and stories. And the use of fiction devices in journalism does not automatically mean the absence of truth or credibility. Hersey's answer to this seems to have been to adopt an ethical stance. In one of the rare interviews he ever gave, for the *Paris Review* in 1986, he developed his thoughts on the very deliberate choice of representation in 'Hiroshima':

My choice was to be deliberately quiet in the piece, because I thought that if the horror could be presented as directly as possible, it would allow the reader to identify with the characters in a direct way. I've thought quite a lot about the issue of fiction and journalism as two possible ways of presenting realities of life, particularly such harsh ones as we've encountered in my lifetime. Fiction is the more attractive to me, because if a novelist succeeds, he can enable the reader

to identify with the characters of the story, to *become* the characters of the story, almost, in reading. Whereas in journalism, the writer is always mediating between the material and the reader; the reader is conscious of the journalist presenting material to him.²³

What Hersey points to here is the fact that the traditional journalist is always the narrator, the medium, between the material and the reader. This means that (s)he is present *in* the work, not merely *behind* it, which unavoidably erects a wall between the reader and the reality portrayed. Hersey himself spoke about fiction as a means to overcome and perhaps even eliminate this type of active mediation on behalf of the journalist. ‘This was one of the reasons why I had experimented with the devices of fiction in doing journalism,’ he said, ‘in the hopes that my mediation would, ideally, disappear.’²⁴ He had a clear aim—to get the reader to enter into the minds of his protagonists just enough to suffer at least some of their pain, fear, and agony. And in this process of direct encounter with the characters, and perhaps only then, would the reader be able to at least begin to realize, internalize, and understand the global, political, and moral implications of an event such as the bombing of Hiroshima. The fiction mode would, in other words, unlock history and make it emotionally accessible to the reader. Thus, it seems that any use of a simple fact–fiction dichotomy is an obstacle to understanding Hersey’s epistemological mission in ‘Hiroshima.’ He himself argued there is no contradiction between factual claims and literary style.²⁵

Ultimately, then, ‘Hiroshima’ addresses mediation not only as an ethical question, but also as a political question. In laying bare the human cost of Hiroshima and giving voice to the victims’ stories in a long, graphic reportage, quite unexpected in an American weekly magazine, a political statement was made, although Hersey somehow declined to make it. His refusal to actively mediate forces the reader to encounter the victim as him- or herself, and in this process, the American ‘we’ is set in motion—and perhaps even questioned. In her seminal work on the political history of journalism, Géraldine Muhlmann differentiates between two different forms: unifying journalism, and decentring journalism. The latter, according to Muhlmann, is one that is able to free itself from the unifying tendencies that bring

people together and create an 'us'. Such tendencies are most visible in twentieth-century journalism's main concern about delivering the truth and facts to the public—unquestionable truths and facts that are acceptable to 'all of us'. Hence, there seem to be a connection between objectivist ideology and the unifying workings of mainstream journalism over the century, Muhlmann argues. In her work, she sets out to identify processes and journalisms of resistance and decentering alongside those of unification and centring—those that are daring, questioning, othering.²⁶

In unifying journalism, which Muhlmann traces back to the so-called penny press of the 1880s, an ideal type of journalist which she calls 'the witness-ambassador' reigns supreme. In the shape of the witness, the journalist's body is essential to establishing the truthfulness of the story: 'I was there', 'I saw it'. In the shape of the ambassador, the journalist brings people together around her- or himself, turning 'our' attention to a specific time and place, and thereby centring the 'we' around the ethos of the journalist.

The counter-type is the decentred journalist, who is condemned to a deeply unsettling position and whose main state of mind is unease, dissonance, and separation. (S)he is an individual, as Muhlmann puts it, 'inconceivable except in a perpetual state of crisis'.²⁷ This journalist 'wants to make us, the public, see something that is "other" to us, and to do it in such a way as to cause this otherness to have an effect on us, question us, and change us; this requires that, by one means or another, a connection is established between it and us'.²⁸ Muhlmann exemplifies this with George Orwell's writing of exile and solitude, always positioning himself outside, always trying to remain nomadic, alienated, and unfixed in relation to his study object—be it the tramp, the slum, or the unemployed.²⁹

Hersey's journalistic writing can be seen as decentering in that it questions the 'we' and establishes the perhaps painful connection between this destabilized 'we' and the other, although this is done differently in earlier reportages by, for example, Orwell. In one way, Orwell has more in common with the new journalism writers of the 1960s; he is writing the story of himself and his own endeavours, though constantly turning them around, destabilizing and questioning his own position. Hersey, in contrast to such an approach, is deliberately absent from his pieces.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, it is usually ‘Hiroshima’ along with other books and journalistic articles by John Hersey that were hailed as forerunners to the experimental journalism of, for example, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, and Hunter Thompson. The devices of fiction—point-of-view, suspense, dialectic oppositions, and others mentioned earlier—were already present in his work in the mid 1940s.

Hersey himself was, however, deeply critical of the so-called ‘new journalists’, because he thought they were fabricators. Invention polluted journalism, he argued, in the sense that the fiction *methods* used tempted writers to create fiction *content*. The substantial fallacy here, according to him, was that in this process where facts were made out of fiction, the fictional voice of the journalist ultimately became more important than the events being written about. The journalist as mediator was exposed, revealing a distasteful and, according to Hersey, unforgivable self-centredness.³⁰

Decentring memories

In the spring of 1985, Hersey returned to Hiroshima in order to write a follow-up to his 1946 piece, and he then met with four of the six people whose stories he had previously told (Father Kleinsorge and Dr Fuiji had died in the 1970s). The article, ‘Hiroshima: The Aftermath’, originally published in the *New Yorker* in July 1985, was later incorporated into the original story in several new editions of the book. ‘The Aftermath’ differs from the four other sections in both style and tone. It follows each person’s forty-year story, and through their accounts, different aspects of Japanese post-war life are outlined: Mr Tanimoto dedicates his life to peace activism; Mrs Nakamura initially falls into poverty and struggles for many years to support her family because, due to her stigmatization as an A-bomb victim, she has a hard time getting a job; Dr Sasaki continues to work at the Red Cross Hospital and eventually sets up his own clinic devoted to helping fellow citizens who are sick from radiation diseases; and Miss Sasaki makes a decision to become a Catholic nun.

One main theme of ‘The Aftermath’ is not only the element of contemporary history, but also memory. How will Hiroshima be remembered, and how do experiences of 6 August 1945 continue to

affect the lives of the protagonists? How does the memory of Hiroshima continue to affect us all? In fact, Hersey argued, the role and significance of factual, historical research in the writing of fiction is memory, and it is therefore essential to make the past as concrete and specific as possible.³¹ Fiction can both be a substitute for and a supplement to memory.

The theme of memory also has to do with the protagonists themselves and how their own memory of what happened in 1945 was shaped and altered in different ways over the course of the forty years that had passed. In Japan, the memory of the bomb was forever inscribed in public life as well as in the lives of the so-called *hibakusha*, defined by the government as people directly affected by the bomb and who were therefore entitled to financial and medical support.³² At the same time, post-war Japan was marked not by hostility, but by reconciliation with the US, and it is this reconciliatory process the reader encounters in 'The Aftermath'. But it is also problematized. For example, in the fifties, in order to raise money for his Japanese centre for peace, Mr Tanimoto travels to the US where he, ironically and despite his outspoken pro-American attitude, is met with considerable suspicion; in a country in the throes of a red scare, every stranger who openly propagates pacifism had to be a communist.

The Cold War and its nuclear build-up is also interwoven into the story of Mr Tanimoto, and through this, Hersey introduces not only memory, but also forgetting (a necessary prerequisite of memory) as a general theme of his postscript in 1985. By the end, it is not clear who remembers what anymore—or even who has the obligation to remember what happened in Hiroshima. In the last few lines of 'The Aftermath', Hersey concludes that Mr Tanimoto's own memory, 'like the world's, was getting spotty.'³³ In 1985, who remembered Hiroshima anymore, when all the world's attention is directed to a future nuclear war and its apocalyptic visions of nuclear winter? What is the function of history and memory? And for what purpose should the world tell the story of Hiroshima? The fact that our memory is 'getting spotty' and requires us to actively remember is also a key element in the narrative structure of Alain Resnais' film *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), based on a screenplay by Marguerite Duras.³⁴ Memory is not something that comes to us unbidden—it requires a decisive act of remembering.

However, the deliberate choice Hersey made was to stay as unemotional, quiet, and calm as possible in his prose, filling the pages of his reportage with detailed and mundane accounts of his protagonists when they tried to cope with disaster. He himself refused to mediate or interpret; in fact, he refused to actively condemn warfare or advocate pacifism. And it was precisely this choice that came up in some critical reviews of his original reportage in 1946 (although negative reviews were few and far between). In the words of one such reviewer, ‘naturalism is no longer adequate, either aesthetically or morally, to cope with the modern horrors’, claiming that Hersey’s attitude and his unwillingness to spell out a pacifist message in his reportage was deeply unethical.³⁵

And yes, it is true that the original ‘Hiroshima’ reportage, the first four sections, in this respect were hardly a call to arms against atomic weapons. In the late 1940s, it seems it simply did not spur activism and readers’ political engagement. The historian Michael J. Yavenditti, who has investigated the contemporary reception of the reportage in the immediate post-war period, concludes that although widely read and highly acclaimed, it did not in fact lead its readers to reconsider the legitimacy of the American decision to drop the bomb.³⁶ But is this really the main task of journalism after mass death? I would argue that taken together, ‘Hiroshima’ was as disturbing to the American ‘we’ than any reportage explicitly debating US policy. The decentring publication context—the relaxed and fun summer activities on the magazine cover on 31 August 1946—made this even stronger; it established a link between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and problematized the former in the most distressing way. Hersey’s journalistic gaze seems to look beyond political statements and positions to address the more fundamental issues of humanity and the need to document events *as they were*—not by saying that the descriptions constitute a perfect mirror of what really happened, but by giving a voice to somebody who suffered through these events.

Hiroshima, journalism, and memory

John Hersey’s account of the disaster in Hiroshima and the human suffering that ensued was a remarkable piece of literary journalism to come out of the Second World War, and one that resonated

throughout the post-war era. Not only did it lay the foundation for the new journalism movement of the sixties and seventies, it also became emblematic of reports of violence and mass death in the Cold War era, and in particular the Vietnam War. Without conveying any explicit political message, it encouraged—or even required—readers to take a moral stance in the atomic age. But by emphasizing the dignity of individuals in the face of horror, Hersey's own moral and political stance became visible.

But what then is the task of the journalist after mass death? In the last decade or so, there has been a vibrant discussion on journalism, media, and memory.³⁷ As Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume argue in their book *Journalism in a Culture of Grief*, journalism's preoccupation, especially with the commemorative practices and processes of public mourning in today's Western societies, urges us all to revise Philippe Ariès's claim that death has become taboo in collective life.³⁸ Even today, journalism is in fact constantly engaged in rituals of redemption and consolation.

Are such rituals of consolation unifying or decentering? Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan argue in the introduction to their book *Journalism after September 11*, that in the face of such horrors as 9/11, journalists need to serve 'simultaneously as conveyor, translator, mediator and meaning-maker.'³⁹ This could (although perhaps not necessarily) indicate a very active, interpretative role for any journalist reporting on mass death; indeed, this memory work may imply a unifying journalism, one that explains what this horrible event might mean to 'us,' and how 'we' could possibly deal with the pain. A question raised by Hersey's classical reportage, then, is whether a decentering journalism of consolation and reconciliation is even possible.

As a reportage, 'Hiroshima' may not have had a therapeutic aim or function, but through its decentering approach to the journalist as well as to the historical event, it contributed in an essential way to an opening up of history and memory with regards to atomic weapons. In the postscript 'The Aftermath,' it becomes even clearer that Hersey's main concern was war casualties in general. His field of vision was global, and as a journalist he wanted to tell the story of Hiroshima in order to support historical and cultural memory. 'I think that what has kept the world safe from the bomb since 1945,' he said in the *Paris*

Review interview in 1986, ‘has not been deterrence, in the sense of fear of specific weapons, so much as it’s been memory.’⁴⁰ But now, the memory is ‘getting spotty’, and therefore he felt it was more urgent to write ‘The Aftermath’. And fiction, he continued,

should have the kind of relationship to the writer’s memory that dreams may have. The dream material doesn’t often seem to have any direct source in the person’s life, but it must have been constructed from what the writer remembers. So I think a measure of the power of a work lies in the depth of the memory that is drawn on to fabricate the surface of the work.⁴¹

Incomprehensible acts of violence and terror may spark great works of fiction, because fiction often has the means to make some sense out of the meaningless. In the field of journalistic reporting, Hersey’s ambition to win the reader’s sympathy for his six survivors in 1946 was one of these sense-making endeavours, using literary journalism as a tool to mediate between the victims and the readers. Not least because in the stories of these six survivors lay the stories of the hundreds of thousands who perished. And in our own time, through such voices of the other, by means of a journalism that decentres instead of unifies, it is my belief that the pervasive and destructive media discourse of fear, the curse of contemporary journalism on mass atrocities, can be challenged. After all, reporting on horror and fear ought to be something quite different from any deliberate act designed to evoke such feelings in the audience.

Notes

- 1 Martha Gellhorn, *The face of war* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988), 179 (first pub. 1959).
- 2 James L. McClain, *Japan: A modern history* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 513–514; Michael J. Hogan (ed.), *Hiroshima in history and memory* (New York: CUP, 1996).
- 3 John C. Hartsock, *A history of American literary journalism: The emergence of a modern narrative form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); David Sanders, *John Hersey revisited* (Boston: Twayne, 1991); Nancy Lyman Huse, *John Hersey and James Agee: a reference guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978). In 1999, a panel at New York University selected ‘Hiroshima’ as the twentieth century’s finest

- piece of journalism, ahead of such seminal works as Rachel Carson's *Silent spring*, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Bob Woodward's and Carl Bernstein's Watergate reportages, and W. E. B. Du Bois' *The souls of black folk*.
- 4 'Books: Awakening the Sleeping Giant the Call', *Time Magazine*, 6 May 1985; see also Felicity Barringer, 'Journalism's greatest hits: Two lists of a century's top stories', *New York Times*, 1 Mar. 1999.
 - 5 Cited in Paul Boyer, *By the bomb's early light: American thought and culture at the dawn of the atomic age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 205.
 - 6 Kevin Kerrane & Ben Yagoda, *The art of fact: A historical anthology of literary journalism* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 111.
 - 7 Citations in this chapter are from the Penguin edition of 2001: John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (London: Penguin, 2001) (first pub. 1946).
 - 8 See Boyer 1994, 203–204.
 - 9 Hartsock, 2000.
 - 10 'The art of fiction No 92', *Paris Review*, 100 (1986).
 - 11 Dan Gerstle, 'John Hersey and Hiroshima', *Dissent*, 59/2 (2012), 90–4.
 - 12 According to a Gallup poll on 16 August 1945 cited in Michael J. Yavenditti, 'John Hersey and the American conscience: The reception of "Hiroshima"', *Pacific Historical Review* 43/1 (1974), 25, 31, fully 90 per cent of the Americans surveyed were either in approval of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or had no opinion on it.
 - 13 Boyer 1994, 207. According to another interpretation, Hersey's style of writing was inspired by T. S. Eliot's *The waste land* from 1922; Patrick Sharp, *Savage perils: Racial frontiers and nuclear apocalypse in American culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).
 - 14 Robert J. Lifton & Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: 50 years of denial* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1995), 86–7. See also K. R. Forde, 'Profit and public interest: A publication history of John Hersey's "Hiroshima"', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 88/3 (2011), 562–79.
 - 15 'The art of fiction' 1986.
 - 16 Some examples are novels by John dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and James Agee.
 - 17 Hersey 2001, 3.
 - 18 *Ibid.* 7, 13.
 - 19 *Ibid.* 23.
 - 20 Dexter Masters & Katharine Way (eds.), *One world or none: A report to the public on the full meaning of the atomic bomb* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1946).
 - 21 John C. Hartsock, *A history of American literary journalism: The emergence of a modern narrative form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); see also Kevin Kerrane & Ben Yagoda (eds.), *The art of fact: A historical anthology of literary journalism* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).
 - 22 Tom Wolfe, *The new journalism* (London: Pan Books, 1996) (first pub. 1973); see also Kerrane & Yagoda 1997, 18; and Marc Weingarten, *The gang that wouldn't write straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and the new journalism revolution* (New York: Random House, 2005).

- 23 'The art of fiction' 1986.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 For a lengthy discussion of the misleading fact–fiction dichotomy in literary journalism, see Anna Jungstrand, *Det litterära med reportaget: om litteraritet som journalistisk strategi och etik* (Lund: Ellerströms, 2013).
- 26 Géraldine Muhlmann, *A political history of journalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).
- 27 Ibid. 227.
- 28 Ibid. 226.
- 29 Ibid. 195–225. One example of Orwell's writing in this vein is the famous *Down and out in Paris and London* (1933).
- 30 'The art of fiction' 1986.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 John W. Dower, 'The bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese memory', in Michael J. Hogan (ed.), *Hiroshima in history and memory* (New York: CUP, 1996), 116–42.
- 33 Hersey 2001, 196.
- 34 *Hiroshima, mon amour*, 1959, dir. Alain Resnais.
- 35 Boyer 1994, 206.
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- 37 Barbie Zelizer & Stuart Allan, *Journalism after September 11* (London: Routledge, 2002); Carolyn Kitch & Janice Hume, *Journalism in a culture of grief* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Barbie Zelizer & Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt (eds.), *Journalism and memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Marita Sturken, *Tourists of history: Memory, kitsch, and consumerism from Oklaholma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 38 Kitch & Hume 2008.
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