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Paris Memories

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Paris Memories* (2022), directed by Alice Winocour.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



Paris Memories (Revoir Paris) (2022), dir. Alice Winocour
Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-u6Kt6waJ4U>

The French title of Alice Winocour’s beautiful new film is *Revoir Paris*. Although a bit awkward on the tongue in English, “Re-seeing Paris” more accurately describes the sober and grace-filled journey of the movie’s heroine Mia, a translator and survivor of a terrorist attack at a restaurant in Paris, who is trying to recover or “re-see” the events that took place. Inspired by the terrorist attacks which took place on November 13, 2015 in and near cafes, restaurants, sports venues and the Bataclan concert hall in Paris, the movie nonetheless fictionalizes a restaurant location and removes any other contextual references that might make it look like a documentary. The attack is never located or explained in terms of people or motives. Winocour wants us to understand that surviving such a violent assault is not related in any way to political or social narratives. Mia doesn’t want to understand the motive of the killers. She wants to know who held her hand during the darkest hours of the siege, and helped her survive.

In this way, Winocour brilliantly situates her story at the heart of human connections. Mia's memory of what happened is shattered, except for the image of a hand clutching hers. As she joins a support group and begins to piece things together, her own journey starts to intersect with those of other survivors. Her long-time partner, who left their meal together before the incident took place, tries to cross the gulf that now exists between them. At one point someone tells Mia that relationships can never survive this kind of a crisis. Mia doesn't attempt to argue or deny it: her pursuit of truth becomes her all-consuming passion. She distances herself from her partner and he in turn is unable to tame his own sense of guilt and impatience. When the two break up, we are not in any way surprised.

Through the support group, Mia meets Thomas, whose legs have been shattered by gunfire but whose memory is largely intact. He tells her that they had noticed each other across the restaurant in the few moments prior to the attack. Mia doesn't remember but is drawn to his clarity. The two find an oasis of comfort in the midst of the internal chaos and soon become lovers. The love scene interweaves their caresses around the injured places of their bodies, tenderly allowing them and us to see how they might begin to reclaim those bodies for themselves. Despite its comfort, however, the liaison is not enough by itself, for Mia to be resolved in her quest.

The film allows brief glimpses into the world of other survivors. Besides Thomas, we meet a woman who accuses Mia of locking herself into a bathroom preventing others from finding safety. Mia is unable to defend herself without knowing the truth, and the possibility haunts her. A young girl fastens onto Mia in her desire to lay to rest the memory of her parents. Nastya Golubeva Carax (daughter of French filmmaker Leos Carax) offers a sensitive performance as someone who had taken those they love for granted. Her visit to the Monet water lilies at the Musée Jeu de Plume helps her to connect with where her parents had just been prior to the attack. This simple

and elegiac scene offers us a taste of the emotion that Mia is unable to access, even as she looks on.

One of the quiet strengths of *Paris Memories* is that it doesn't attempt to be a detective story, other than to follow the clues that Mia develops as she looks for the one who had supported her during the attack. In learning that he was a chef, she enters into a whole other level of the aftermath, when she discovers that the restaurant's undocumented workers had been let go immediately after the incident. From here we enter another world within Paris, in which communities of immigrants struggle to get by, sometimes forming family-like attachments out of need. Mia seeks out each connection with hope, becoming drawn into potentially dangerous scenarios. Since violence is now within her vocabulary, she is not surprised when she witnesses it. Still her resolve remains strong.

As in Winocour's last film, *Proxima*, the characters sometimes make decisions that don't always make logistical sense. Dots are connected conveniently in other moments, but it doesn't seem to matter. The accidental symmetries and coincidences seem like the least the universe can offer in response to such horrendous violence.

The film gently knits together a visual subtext of food and flowers. The lush meals of the restaurant patrons, Mia's own robust plate of food in the first restaurant with her partner, find a lean parallel in the half-empty yogurt cup that sits alone on a refrigerator shelf later in the story. The flowers laid in sympathy outside the restaurant find their match in the Monet water lilies, which unfold on white walls like a baptism and redemption. The filmmaker has said that the film is an attempt to depict how courageously people seek healing.

“Really the movie is about resilience,” Winocour says in an interview at Cannes where the film had its world premiere before coming to TIFF. “She is following a path of resilience but not really knowing it.”¹

Winocour’s own brother was at the Bataclan concert hall the night of the Paris terrorist attacks. Talking with him and with other survivors offered her important images and insights. After hearing how many had stories of holding hands with strangers, Winocour consulted with a psychiatrist who told her that holding hands releases a hormone that is also present when a mother gives breast to a child. It is a profound and unique feeling of comfort. Winocour knew it had to be at the heart of her film. “You can’t really heal by yourself,” she says referring to post-traumatic experience. “[It’s about] a whole community healing together.”

Ultimately the film’s focus is on memory and its sacred and terrifying corners. The film wisely avoids flashback reconstructions, except in the smallest glimpses and flashes. Mia learns that some aspects of her memory may never return in full. At one point, Thomas suggests to her that even remembering may not help her to heal. He implies that he himself would prefer to forget.

When Mia finally finds her mystery chef, he is hawking souvenir light-up Eiffel Towers to tourists at night by the famed tourist hotspot. The towers flashing in his hand momentarily resemble the flickering of a gun. But we know that this time it will be different: here is the life-giving encourager that she’s been looking for. The moment of reconnection, like the moment of the violence itself, takes us by surprise, but the lingering legacy this time is grace instead of grief. Mia’s real recovery has begun, in a friendship borne out of a clasped hand.

¹ Deadline Hollywood, “Paris Memories — Deadline Studio at Cannes 2022”, June 3, 2022. Youtube video, 5:26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DNtydiWLOI>