

Marguerite Duras and the dark room by Mia Engberg

The film *L'Homme Atlantique* consists almost entirely of black images. Marguerite Duras made it in Trouville in 1981, and it was one of her last films. Afterward she went back to writing and left film behind her. The audio is made up of two elements: the sound of the sea as it comes and goes, and Duras' voice reading a text. Her voice is rough and calm as she speaks of loss, a love story that comes to an end, something that dies. The text has many layers; maybe she is talking about the loss of a passion, a lover (as she always is in some way or another), of time and life that disappears in the blackness before our eyes. In a way, Duras' love affair with film as a medium also comes to an end with this black film.

In the film's few images, we see her lover Yann Andrea posing in front of the tall windows of the house by the sea in Trouville. We hear the narrator giving him instructions on how to behave in front of the camera. The voice comments on both the film itself and the audience watching the film.

You will look at all the people in the audience, one by one, each one in particular. Remember this, very clearly: the movie-theatre is in itself, like yourself, the entire world, you are the entire world, you, you alone Never forget that. Don't be afraid.¹

The relationship between the narrator and the listener is also the relationship between the creator and the man, the woman and the lover, the author and the work. She speaks to him as a You and the audience has become Them, as if the camera has been turned on those watching.

It is tempting to interpret the film from a feminist perspective. Using a female narrative voice positions the woman not only as the subject, but also as the potent, omniscient narrator. The cinematic equivalent of God. Furthermore, a voice off screen is a *voice without a body*. *A subject that cannot be objectified*.

I could say that: In this darkness, voyeurism has ceased and the traditional separation between the film and the audience has been suspended. But it wouldn't be entirely true.

In an alternative reading, the narrator can be seen as a dominatrix who objectifies her protagonist by commanding him. That interpretation could – if so desired – be accentuated by the reality that preceded the film. Yann Andrea and Marguerite Duras were both public figures in France at the time, and their scandalous love affair was a feature in gossip pages as well as in Duras' own books. Yann Andrea (whose real name was Yann Lemée, but who was dubbed thus by Duras after one of her literary characters) was not only Duras' lover and secretary; he was also homosexual and 38 years her junior. In a way, both of them were *the other*, which renders the film more complex and complicates the singularly feminist perspective.

Each and every time I watch the film, it opens up for new readings. Perhaps this is because it offers an empty space, a gap? There is a space between the image and the

sound, between what is said and what is understood, between me and the black, and it is in the gap that I create my own images. I see new images every time, and the film becomes an infinite number of films. The images leave the screen and enter me as I sit there watching. I am transformed from a passive consumer to an active co-creator.

Marguerite Duras called it *écriture filmique*, more or less the written image, or cinematic writing. In many ways, *L'écriture filmique* runs parallel to the term *écriture féminine* formulated around the same time by the philosopher and author Hélène Cixous in the essay *Le Rire de la Méduse* in 1976. Cixous believed that language was upholding and sustaining the power of patriarchy, and she explored ways to deconstruct language to make way for something new.

Marguerite Duras challenged and deconstructed conventional cinematic language by shifting the narrative from the image to the voice. She said and wrote many times that she wanted to kill cinema, but using the black image is not only a destructive action; destroying something also makes room for something new. For Duras, it was a way to recreate the original darkness from which writing emerges and where all passion is possible. The black image contains every image and every text all at once.

The film that I make, I make it in the same place as I make my books. It's the place I call the place of passion, where one is deaf and blind. Ultimately, I try to stay there as long as possible. Film that's made for entertainment, for distraction, the film ... what should I call it, I'll call it Saturday film, or consumerist society film, is made where the spectator is and it follows very exact formulas, for entertainment, to keep the spectator engaged for the duration of the spectacle. Once the show is over, the film leaves nothing – nothing. It is a film that disappears as soon as it is over. And I have the feeling that mine begins the following day, like with a reading.²

The place Duras describes as the place of passion, where books and films are born, can also be described as a moment. Hélène Cixous calls this moment the *coming to writing*.³ It is the fleeting moment during the writing process when the author is inspired.⁴ That is the moment where a work comes to be; the silent darkness where anything is possible.

1. From the film *L'Homme Atlantique* by Marguerite Duras (Paris 1981). Marguerite Duras,

2. Marguerite Duras & Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (Éditions de Minuit, 1978) Trans. Justina Bartoli.

3. Cixous, Hélène. *La Rire de Méduse* (Éditions Galilée, 1975)

4. *In the Dark Room – Marguerite Duras and Cinema*, Rosanna Maule (ed.) and Julie Beaulieu (Peter Lang 2009) (p. 159)