# THE VISUAL SILENCE

Mia Engberg

To everyone who provided inspiration, support and guidance.
Without you, none of this would have been possible.

# 1

I went to Trouville to write and to see Marguerite Duras' house on the coast of Normandy. I had the notion that something would stir me there. Something vast and silent and fundamental. Maybe an insight into how a masterpiece evolves how Marguerite Duras wrote in the silence of that house. I had my ideas written down in a notebook. The book was full, but the story lacked structure. I needed solitude and time and something else, a third thing that I couldn't put into words.

The train to Trouville left from Paris Gare Saint-Lazare and the journey took two hours. Trouville is a resonant place for me. The opening scenes of Belleville Baby were composed from footage of that sea, and it was here that Marguerite Duras had written her best books. She had a small apartment in the big beachfront hotel from the mid-1800s, *Les Roches Noires*. Everything there had been preserved, and it was said that Marcel Proust had also written books there. It was here that she had met her beloved Yann Andréa, and this was also the house where she had drank so much she nearly died.

Trouville is a holiday destination where Parisians go over summer. It isn't modern and fashionable like the towns along the French Riviera, where tourists go to sunbathe and spend a lot of money. The climate here is British – rainy and windy – and everything feels dated and slightly dusty; the tennis courts, the carousels on the boardwalk, the hefty shuttered villas with their untended gardens on the hill. Perhaps the entire town has been preserved to retain the feeling of Marguerite Duras' time, or maybe this place rests on something older still, something that was important and grand at the beginning of last century, before the wars, when France was still a colonial power and a place where great literature and art were being created.

I wasn't expecting the town to be so deserted. Suddenly I understood why the apartment in Marguerite Duras' house had been available and cheap. Nobody comes to Trouville in April. Nobody but me. The beautiful apartment hotel that had been so full of life the last time I was here was now empty but for a caretaker , and the many windows that opened toward the sea were shuttered.
I waited in the foyer while the caretaker found my key. He smelled of liquor and loneliness. He stood holding my keys in his hand, so I had no choice but to stand and listen while he spoke. He had been a soldier in Algeria, he said, and now he had moved into this building to guard it. Alone. He had no contact with his children, he said, and he wondered if I had any friends in Sweden who might like to marry him. I laughed politely, the way I usually do even though I don't like it, but I wished he would disappear and not be there guarding this place that I had longed for so long. He frightened me.

He showed me to my apartment and insisted on carrying my bag, as French men do. We stood in the beautiful old elevator and I asked him about Duras and he said that her son owned her apartment now. The caretaker unfortunately didn't have the keys to that apartment. He did however, have keys to all the other apartments, should I have any desire to see them. I didn't, and I didn't want to think about the fact that maybe he had an extra set of keys to the apartment I'd be staying in. I was happy when he finally left me on my own.

I threw open the shutters that faced the sea and unlatched the window. I took pictures and footage of the window later, but none of the photos or films could convey the sound and feeling of that moment. The sea roared in a way I had never heard a sea roar before. My window was so high above the ground that I felt I was looking down at the sea and the coastline from the sky, and the few, very few people I could see on the sprawling seashore were like tiny dots plodding along against the wind. The beach was wide like a desert, maybe it was low tide, and I couldn't hear the children's voices.

I had imagined the feel of this house to be light and still. I had imagined that I would walk in my bare feet on the thick red carpets in the hallways and that the sunlight would stream in through the dusty windows the way it does when everything is quiet. Instead I had arrived in a haunted house with a lonely caretaker and a roar from the sea that never ceased, not even when I closed the window and the shutters. Not even when I lay in bed with a pillow over my head or shut myself in the bathroom. There was no silence anywhere. Marguerite Duras was nowhere to be found. It was just me, the caretaker and the roar.

I went down to the little town to eat. There was only one restaurant open and I ate there. When I came back, walking along the beach, I saw the caretaker's silhouette in one of the great arched windows on the ground floor. He stood looking at me the entire way back to the house. He was holding two melons in his hands that he wanted to give me. I didn't dare say no. I took the melons and went back to my room. When I got inside, I got it into my head that the caretaker had been in the apartment while I was away. My things weren't as I had left them. Maybe he had been sniffing my underwear, thumbing through my notebooks. I fastened the safety lock on the door. I felt like I was in a bad movie. Or was I just imagining things? Why was I so afraid? I didn't sleep that night. Instead I sat wrapped up in a blanket by the window and worked on my manuscript in a manic mixture of terror and inspiration. Sometimes I heard the sound of the elevator going up and down. Sometimes I thought I heard footsteps outside my door. A loose shutter slammed open and closed in the wind. The night felt endless.

Les Roches Noires, Trouville

The following day I wrote, and the following night too. I wrote feverishly, as if my life depended on it, as an invocation against the dark and the fear and the loneliness. Every now and then I tried to think about Duras, about how she had lived and written in this house, but she seemed distant and unreachable. The writing was in the moment, and it was intense, unexpected and not pleasant.

It took three nights and three days to write the manuscript. It was arduous and Duras had abandoned me, but I wrote. On the fourth day I was finished. I had rented the apartment for a whole week, but I didn't want to stay. I packed my things and rolled my bag across the beautiful red carpet in the hall. I took a few pictures of the high arched windows in the foyer and the magnificent view. It was here she had recorded the black film *L'homme atlantique*, it was here Yann Andréa had posed in front of the camera, but I didn't have time to contemplate that because I needed to get away before the caretaker discovered me and tried to offer me a melon or propose marriage. I left the keys on the front desk and walked out. The roar of the sea followed me all the way to the train station.


Marguerite Duras' door, Trouville

# 2

Marguerite Duras was born in French Indochina, now Vietnam, and she was the youngest of three children. Her mother was a teacher and for a while she ran an unsuccessful rice plantation that used up all of the family's assets. Marguerite's father had died when she was little. Above all Marguerite loved her little brother. He later died; according to Marguerite, it was a result of the older brother's tyranny. Although they were very poor, the mother tried to maintain some sort of dignity in the little French colony where they lived in Vietnam, and later in Cambodia. Marguerite went to a French school and wore her mother's old dresses that had been taken in and gold shoes when she crossed the river by boat to go to school, and later, to visit her Chinese lover. When Marguerite was 18, she left for Paris. She already knew she wanted to be a writer. She also knew what it meant to be the other. She was poor, born abroad into a dysfunctional family, and by 15 she had already sold her body to an older man. Perhaps there was some kind of love and reciprocity in the relationship, or perhaps it was just about financial vulnerability and family loyalty. Duras wrote a number of books about that time of her life, and the story changes in each tale. Throughout, the constant is the violence of her older brother, the lovelessness of her mother, and how Duras bore the trauma of her childhood throughout her entire life, a deep source of suffering and writing.

She wrote throughout her entire life, as if in a desperate gesture to write herself out of her traumas and losses, or to create a space where she could endure them. And still she could not. She drank and she smoked, so much that by the end of her life she had to breathe through a plastic valve in her throat. She was tiny and haggard and hoarse and an alcoholic. Despite aging prematurely, she lived a long life and wrote over 70 novels, plays and film manuscripts. She was a literary superstar, but she was also despised and criticized for her egocentric persona and her narcissistic style. She was friends with François Mitterand and Gérard Depardieu. She was part of the Resistance during the Second World War. In the final years of her life she had a very young lover, Yann Andréa, who was also her secretary.

I read her books when I was living in Paris and trying hard to learn French. Her thin volumes suited me well because they were written in pared down language with short sentences and a lot of repetition. I was 23 years old and living in a house in a suburb with a group of French «marginals»: squatters, potheads, activists and outlaws who lived more or less outside the society. I loved being there. Everything was big and dangerous and in many ways incomprehensible (since I didn't speak the language), but it was also light and full of opportunities (since I was not at home). I had ended up in this house by chance, connected by an acquaintance, and it was here I met Vincent, who later became the main character of my film *Belleville Baby*. My French friends did not read Duras, but they helped explain the words as I slowly sounded my way through her books: *hurler – to shout, désir – desire*.

Like many young women, I immediately felt at home in Marguerite Duras' universe. Although my poor French made the reading strenuous, the texts spoke to me directly. I wasn't from Indochina, but from Vällingby, Sweden, and I had no experience of colonialism or extreme poverty. Yet the female characters in the books – their 'I', she, Anne-Marie Stretter, Suzanne, Emily L, Marguerite Duras herself – they were all me. I knew what it meant to come from a dysfunctional family. I knew what alcoholism was. I also knew what it meant to inhabit the body of a young woman surrounded by the male gaze and potential violence of the outside world. Duras wrote about pain and longing in a way that made me feel less lonely.

Marguerite Duras wrote from the body and its vulnerability while directing her gaze at the world, at memories, at desire. She opened a window for me and through it I could see the world as a whole person, unreduced.

But it wasn't until later, when I first encountered her films, that it became truly intense. Many of Marguerite Duras' films are hard to find and they're no longer in distribution. Nowadays there are some on Youtube and on a few streaming sites, but back then you could only see the films on the rare occasions they were shown at the Cinematheque. I managed to find some of her short films on DVD. First I watched *Cesarée*. It's a story about the ancient city of Cesarée and a queen who was sent there in exile, and it's also an impossible love story. The imagery showed statues in Paris with no direct link to the narrative. I found the film strange and boring. But I also loved it. It wasn't a story that gave me insight into another person's world like films usually do; instead, it gave me insight into my own world. When it was over, I watched it again. Then I watched everything I could get my hands on: *India Song, Les mains négatives, Aurélia Steiner, La femme du Gange, Le camion*.

The films were all peculiar and boring on the surface they were repetitive and often used a narrative voice and relatively simple visual tactics. They were also so strange and intense *under* the surface that they bypassed the part of the intellect that usually processes films and spoke directly to the imagination. Sometimes I had the feeling they had been made just for me. That they were about me. That Marguerite Duras was me. Or maybe that her films and texts and her persona were a reflection of something in me that had never before been put into words anywhere else, ever. Maybe I'm exaggerating a little now; *Emil and the piglet* had a similar effect on me as a child, so it wasn't the very first time. But there was nonetheless something completely unprecedented about it, and there were times when I was unable to read anything but Marguerite Duras. I still return to her writings and films for comfort and guidance.

She showed me that everything that is taken from you can be reclaimed.

The film *India Song* opens with a single long shot of a sunset. On the audio track we hear the voice of a female beggar calling out by the Ganges. The rest of the film takes place in the French embassy in Calcutta, where Anne-Marie Stretter is dancing with her lovers. The film's characters are trapped in a world of privilege and old colonial traditions, isolated from the outside world, unfazed by the extreme poverty and leprosy that rages outside of the embassy gates. Life inside the gates continues as if time has stood still since colonial times, when France dominated over Indochina. The film is set in the 1930s, but the image of isolated people with privileges and the beggars' calls outside is a reflection of our time. Anne-Marie Stretter is the leading character, and she has a complicated sadomasochistic relationship to her secret lover, the vice-consul. A large part of the images in the film show them dancing or sitting stiffly in various tableaux among the heavy curtains and golden mirrors of the embassy. On the audio track, two voices talk about who they are. Anne-Marie Stretter is the magnetic field around which the story centers, yet the female beggar is the film's true protagonist. She cries and laments because she has lost her child, and she is confused and disoriented from hunger and exhaustion. Her desperation and vulnerability spread throughout the entire film like a resounding darkness. She screams out her loneliness as people often scream out their loneliness in Marguerite Duras' world.

Marguerite Duras wrote her own manuscripts and her films were often extensions of her books. They were not processed to «become films» in the way that manuscripts often are, instead, they continued being themselves in their capacity as literature. Film as a medium had to adapt and stretch its limits to accommodate the text and not the other way around. She thus expanded cinematic language and challenged the medium to become something MORE or something OTHER than conventional film. She never forced herself to adapt; her films were permeated by the same strong and unbridled energy as her books.

I studied her films carefully when I was making the film *Belleville Baby*. I wanted to understand how she had created that field of tension, that space, and I wanted to touch it. I wanted her to help me find a space beyond the screen where a new gaze was possible.

I noticed that her manuscripts were dense and without humor. They were built upon a well written text suitable for being read aloud. I noted that the combination of an audio track with one or several voice-over narrators and an image that corresponds only partially with the audio – if at all – created a place beyond the image where there was room for the spectator to bring in her own images or add her own narrative. It was at once an act of provocation and generosity. The film made demands on me as a spectator, insisting that I contribute something from my own imagination; it didn't provide everything in a visual stream like a «regular» film. If I didn't or couldn't watch the film actively, the story retracted, becoming harsh and inaccessible. It was like a magical door to which I had the key. It was like abstract art. Not because it was meant to resemble experimental film with a completely deconstructed narrative; there was always a narrative. There was always the voice of Marguerite Duras and her story.

When I was working with *Belleville Baby* I also studied other filmmakers, and I used both narrative voices and phone conversations, still shots and archival material. The final result was far more meandering than Duras' pure film poetry, but I strove continually to arrive at what I saw as the essence of her films: that place beyond the screen, the gap in which everything is possible.

It was a beginning.

When my film was finished it was screened at film festivals around the world and I traveled many places to talk to audiences. I met young people in Copenhagen, war veterans in Pristina, intellectuals in Torino, filmmakers in Paris. Many of them were moved by the love story in the film and saw themselves in it. Everywhere I went people shared their own stories with me, and they often began in the same way: You'll never believe it, but I have a similar story… It was both compelling and somewhat unexpected that people identified so strongly with the characters in the film.

There was also another dimension to these trips, the festivals, their dramaturgy and their machinery, that made me feel lonely and somehow closed off from the place I had been trying to access. The more I traveled, the farther afloat I drifted from Duras' dark universe where everything is possible.

Film festivals show films in different sections. The prestige-filled competition sections often screen films by established (male) directors with big budgets. The smaller sections present films regarded as «minor», experimental films, low-budget productions, documentaries. My film was often headlined as a «poetic documentary» or a «personal documentary», and sometimes it was screened in contexts that highlighted «female» directors. Noticeably often, the «feminine» and the «personal» became the focus when I was interviewed by journalists or moderators of panel discussions. They asked questions about my private life and the real love story behind the film. They asked me how I had met Vincent, who was a criminal, and how it felt to make a film about him. In France, a man from an audience even asked me how it felt to make a film about an old lover instead of being at home with my kids.

It was as if the film's subject matter and my persona were obstacles for the gaze to go beyond the surface and create new images. Why? Was it the narrative of the film or the format in which it was framed and shown, was it the journalists, the catalogues, the sections, the presentations or the marketing of the film? Or was it something else? Was it me? It felt as though my film was a package of milk, a consumable that

needed to be packaged and sold quickly, before it was time for the next product. There had to be simple and appetizing pictures on the package to attract the milk drinkers, and the milk had to be marketed as something recognizable and easy to swallow based on the dominant gaze.

I thought about Marguerite Duras and how she early on declared herself a genius, and how she – with a certain arrogance – created a place for herself where she and only she had the privilege of interpretation.

*Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*
Marguerite Duras &
Michelle Porte

> *Film that's made for entertainment, for distraction, that film... what should I call it, I'll call it the 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.*

As you read this now, you might think: a film director can't be that sensitive about the market that feeds her, and you might be right. But I saw it this way: I need to formulate strategies to protect myself and the space I am seeking to create.

The author and scholar Mara Lee opens her PhD dissertation *When Others Write* with a manifesto or a pretension of sorts: with the help of poetry, she aims to create theories that will open up new directions for writing. Not «to go back and conquer traditional male or white authorship positions», but to create something new. According to Mara Lee, those creating from the position of the other have to seek knowledge off the beaten paths. There is time, she writes, there is poetry.

I gave myself time.
I decided to study others.

The cinematic language of *Belleville Baby* was partially abstract, reflecting dreams, memories and a kind of reality that could be the viewer's or the film's own; a street in Marseille, a tree, a child, a black frame. The visuals were as much an emergency solution as a conscious cinematic aesthetic. The film's protagonist – called Vincent in the film – didn't want to appear on camera, and neither did I. *Belleville Baby* premiered at the Berlinale 2013.

# 3

Before what gaze do we create our images? At what point does the film's subject become an object?

The photographer and artist Francesca Woodman often depicted her own body in abandoned places, big dilapidated rooms with paint peeling off the walls. Sometimes her body lay naked in an awkward position or frozen in a magical movement and there was something else there: mirrors, dead animals, shards of glass, knives, threats to her body but also weapons against the gaze that could position her in a place that was not hers. Sometimes her body was immobile, the face turned away; sometimes it was in the midst of a movement like flying, her light skin contrasting with the rough surface of the walls. Sometimes the body became part of its surroundings, like when her arms were covered in bark and became one with a tree. In one series of images she was an angel, or perhaps a Jesus, or maybe both. In another she was bound with ropes and tape. Blurry, sharp, naked.

Woodman rejected biographical readings of her work. The pictures were not self-portraits, and not all of the bodies in them were hers. She often worked with models who resembled her.

One picture depicts a naked, sitting female leaning against a wall. It is a medium shot, cropped at the knees and the throat. The woman's face is outside the picture. Behind the body is a charcoal drawing of something indistinct. The woman is sitting with her legs wide apart, but instead of being drawn to the darkness between her thighs, our gaze is drawn to the shard of glass she holds before her. It looks dangerous. Her arms hold it tightly in front of her body, as if using it as a shield, but one corner points down at her sex and the other presses so hard against her breast it looks as if it will puncture her skin. The body is active. She isn't sitting there waiting for us to look – or maybe she is, though not to please, but to ask a question: What happens if I let this shard of glass cut my body? Will you keep looking?
Her arms look strong. The gesture is dramatic. But when I look again, the body seems relaxed, at ease. Maybe she's holding that piece of glass as a joke. Like that other picture with the eel ... maybe it wasn't going to penetrate her after all? I don't see her face, but at just that moment it feels like she's looking at me. Suddenly I become the object and the body in the image is the subject. Although it doesn't even have a face.

Woodman took the pictures with the body and the piece of glass – they are all called *Untitled* – Providence 1976. I don't know whether Woodman was influenced by the feminist theories of that time or if she worked instinctively with energy drawn from another source. Maybe she took her images from somewhere deep inside of her where it was pitch black and silent and where there was un unquestionable knowledge that everything can be reclaimed.

I noticed that she worked closely with other, older traditions, for example surrealism, and made them her own. I noticed that she worked hard and experimentally.

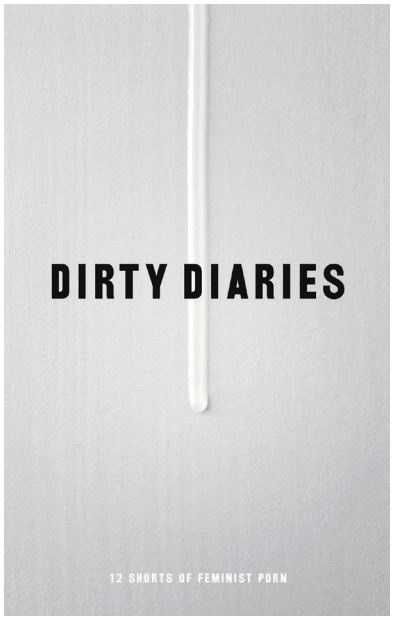
The first time I came in contact with Woodman's pictures was when I was producing the collection of short films *Dirty Diaries – 12 Shorts of Feminist Porn*. Tove Torbiörnsson, that was commisioner at the Swedish Film Institute at the time, gave me a book of Woodman's photographs to give me new ideas about language, the gaze, and the body.

*Dirty Diaries* was an artistic project where I invited filmmakers and queer activists to interpret feminist porn in a number of short films. The project was an attempt to challenge the male gaze and to redefine the term pornography. It was also an attempt to challenge ourselves. The feminist movement I had been a part

of in the 80s and early 90s had mainly focused on opposition to pornography, which was considered part of patriarchal repression. With Dirty Diaries, I wanted to question the idea that porn was something bad per se. I also wanted to challenge the idea that there is something fundamentally «masculine» or «feminine» and to open up for the notion that there could be other ways of relating to gender.

I had won a mobile phone in a short film competition. There were no smart phones yet back then and the phone I won was one of the first models with a built-in video camera. I lent the phone to a number of filmmakers and artists so they could use it to make short, feminist pornos. Each of them would interpret the term feminist porn themselves. Everyone involved had to be over 18 and no harm was to be inflicted during the shooting. Other than that, there were no rules.

I was the producer and curator, but each director had total artistic freedom over their contribution, and there was great diversity in the films. One artist filmed herself flashing in public in Paris, another created a fictive narrative about lesbian phone sex, and one director duo filmed a reflection on the eros of fruit. Some of the films were erotic, others were provocative or conceptual. *Dirty Diaries* was a queer vision of another world in which porn is free from commercialism and film is based on performativity rather than voyeurism. We wanted to portray how desire feels, *what it does*, not what it looks like.




The collection of short films was a success and sold in a lot of countries, including France, where it was screened in cinemas all over the nation. It came as something of a surprise to us because the films were mainly an experiment and never intended for a broad audience. The French distributer wasn't interested in the feminist aspect of the project but had an idea that Swedish women and erotica would sell in France. Naturally he was right about that, but the film's marketing in France ended up being so far removed from the project's fundamental values that it was almost funny.

In Sweden, and all of the other countries where the collection screened, the film poster was white with a drop running down from the upper edge. It read: *Dirty Diaries – 12 Shorts of Feminist Porn*. It was discreet and did not objectify. The French distributor chose to make a poster of its own; on it was a drawing of a woman who looked a little bit like Che Guevara, but instead of a red star, there was a Venus symbol on the front of her beret. She also had enormous bare breasts. The word «feminist» had been removed from the poster.


Before it premiered, I traveled to Paris with some of the directors to promote the films. There was a lot of media interest and we spent two full days giving interviews. The magazine Paris Match was interested in putting me on their cover. They wanted me to stand naked behind a bush in a park, with branches covering my most intimate body parts. They also wanted me to look surprised, as if I had been caught doing something illicit .

I explained that pictures like that conflicted with the fundamental idea of the project and suggested a different picture instead, where women of all shapes and sizes and ages and ethnicity stood naked, holding my blown-up passport picture in front of their faces. Paris Match wasn't interested in that idea, and ultimately there was no picture and no article at all. I didn't mind, but it was a shame about such

a good idea for a cover. I still think it's a good idea, and for a long time I thought it was my own. But when I saw the Francesca Woodman exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in the autumn of 2015 I realized that I got the idea from her. There was a picture entitled *About Being My Model*. It's a portrait of three naked women in a room. On the wall is a life-size headshot of Francesca Woodman (I believe). The three women are holding the same picture in front of their faces, so we don't see what they look like. All of them are her, the artist, and yet they aren't – they are only a picture of her, a representation. Her body is your body, and my body. Her picture is everyone's picture. We are all Francesca Woodman.

The term visual silence was formulated by Margaux Guillemard in the master's thesis *Beyond the Black Image. A liberating encounter between the spectator and sound.* In her study, she uses the term visual silence to refer to the black screen, the image without an image. Her study closely examines a number of films, including Marguerite Duras' *L'homme atlantique* – a film with almost no images – and my film *Belleville Baby*, which contains a number of black sequences. Margaux Guillemard's text formulated new ways of seeing and above all listening to film.

# 4

The filmmaker and academic Margaux Guillemard contacted me when *Belleville Baby* premiered at the Berlin Film Festival. She was working on her thesis *Beyond the Black Image* at the time and wanted to write about how I worked with black images in my film. I had to admit that I did not have a fully formed idea when I made *Belleville Baby*, that I worked in a flow, choosing images out of necessity and not as a deliberate aesthetic. We ended up talking about Marguerite Duras and Derek Jarman and other shared sources of inspiration, and we discovered that – despite our significant age difference and although Margaux's point of departure was theory and mine practice – we worked with similar ideas.

I had received some funding from the Swedish Film Institute to develop the script of the film *Lucky One*, and I was looking for someone who could work for me doing research in Paris. Margaux was studying in London at the time, but commuting to her home in Paris, where she taught film theory at Sorbonne. We started working together, developing the script and preparing for a film shoot. We worked together over several years and by the time the film was finished Margaux had held almost every possible role in the project: associate director, script supervisor, translator, script consultant, chauffeur, researcher, casting assistant, location manager, extras supervisor, production assistant and still photographer. Above all, she was motivated and inspired in her exploration of the aesthetic that we started to call *the visual silence*.

Margaux was making a short film of her own at the time – *26 rue Saint-Fargeau* – a documentary about people who lived in a high-rise building in Paris. In it, she was exploring some of the aesthetic ideas we had formulated in the project.

We didn't have any set rules about how to develop the project; the visual silence was more of a vision, a dream of a new way of seeing and making film, a space where the spectator could create her own imagery and perhaps more than anything, a place where we wanted to be.

One of the films that influenced the research was Marguerite Duras' *L'homme atlantique* – a film neither of us had seen. We knew that it had been one of her last films, and that it had been shot in her house by the seaside in Trouville. We also knew that it consisted almost exclusively of black images and Duras' own voice, narrating.

Marguerite Duras
*L'homme atlantique*

> *I wanted to tell you:*
> *The film believes it can capture what you are doing at this moment.*
> *But you, from where you are,*
> *wherever it may be,*
> *whether you have gone away still bonded to the sand, or the wind,*
> *or the sea, or the wall, or the bird, or the dog,*
> *you will realize that film cannot do that.*

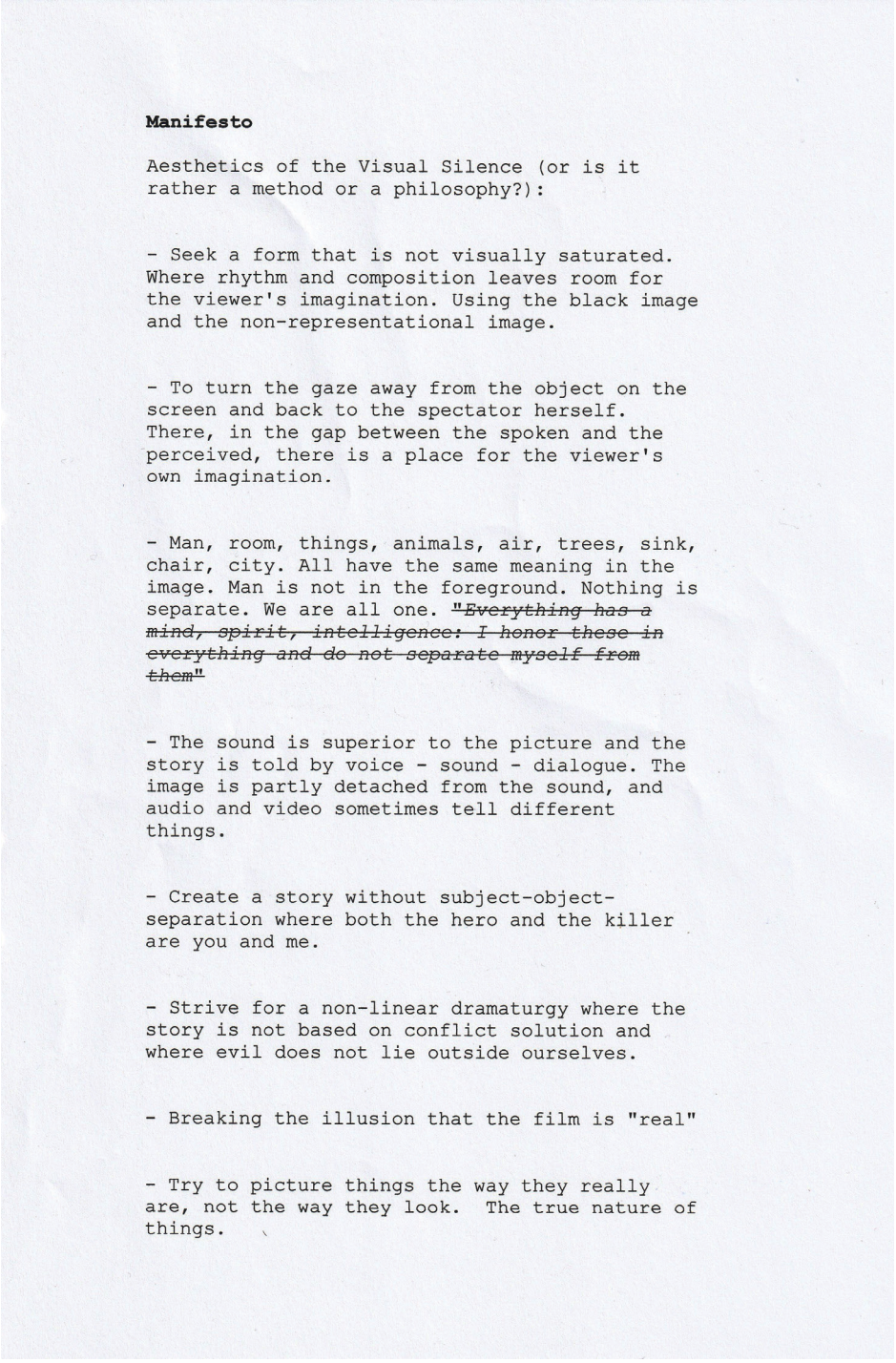
Marguerite Duras used to say that she wanted to murder cinema, *tuer le cinéma*. A pretentious and dramatic endeavor. I found that inspiring. I saw it as a way to take responsibility and make room for the new. I also wanted to kill cinema and make something other. Something new that would release the spectator from her role as consumer and allow her to create her own, interior images, the way literature or music do. There in the dark, I thought, something could perhaps awaken – something that could save us from ourselves.

I think about something that Sara Stridsberg said about her novel *The Faculty of Dreams*:

Interview in *Stridsbergland* by Anna Hylander

> *Writing the book was something like euphoria, like... taking everything apart. I tried to take apart the novel. To write a novel that expanded so much that it fell apart. It is no longer there. In the end, it becomes something other than a novel.*

That's how I wanted to make my film – by taking everything apart. Or maybe I didn't feel capable of doing just that, but that was what I believed Marguerite Duras had tried to do with her black film. I wanted to watch it and memorize it and try to steal all of the ideas that could be applied in my own film. So did Margaux.



**Manifesto**

Aesthetics of the Visual Silence (or is it rather a method or a philosophy?):

- Seek a form that is not visually saturated. Where rhythm and composition leaves room for the viewer's imagination. Using the black image and the non-representational image.

- To turn the gaze away from the object on the screen and back to the spectator herself. There, in the gap between the spoken and the perceived, there is a place for the viewer's own imagination.

- Man, room, things, animals, air, trees, sink, chair, city. All have the same meaning in the image. Man is not in the foreground. Nothing is separate. We are all one. ~~"Everything has a mind, spirit, intelligence: I honor these in everything and do not separate myself from them"~~

- The sound is superior to the picture and the story is told by voice - sound - dialogue. The image is partly detached from the sound, and audio and video sometimes tell different things.

- Create a story without subject-object-separation where both the hero and the killer are you and me.

- Strive for a non-linear dramaturgy where the story is not based on conflict solution and where evil does not lie outside ourselves.

- Breaking the illusion that the film is "real"

- Try to picture things the way they really are, not the way they look. The true nature of things.

We decided that we would use part of the money from the Swedish Film Institute to find and screen *L'homme atlantique*. After a tenacious and ambitious quest, Margaux ultimately discovered that there was no real distribution for the film, and there was only one screening copy, the rights to which were owned by Marguerite Duras' son Jean Mascolo. After negotiating with him, we were given permission to rent it and organize a private screening for an invited audience. Margaux arranged a screening at the Sorbonne. The film was only available as a 35mm copy so Margaux picked up the heavy box of film rolls from the archive and transported them back to the theater.

It was strange that this masterpiece, made by one of France's most radical filmmakers and one of the greatest authors of the 20th century, existed in just one copy in a dusty box in a warehouse in a Paris suburb. Even stranger was that when Margaux went to the warehouse to pick up the box, next to it on the shelf there was a stack of the French posters for *Dirty Diaries* – the one with the big breasts and the woman who looked like Che Guevara. We couldn't stop looking at the photo on Margaux's phone of those pink breasts peeking out under the edge of Marguerite Duras' shelf. We took it to mean that everything was as it should be, that we had a magical connection to Duras and the film *L'homme atlantique*.

Unfortunately I couldn't be involved in the screening because I had to go back to Sweden to attend the Guldbagge award ceremony, where *Belleville Baby* had several nominations. Instead, I had to use more of the grant money to send the box of film all the way to Stockholm, where I organized another screening for a small group of Duras fans at Filmhuset. The film had a huge impact on all of us and I will get back to that later.

Olivier Loustau and Lorette Nyssen. *Lucky One*.

*Lucky One* is a film about Vincent, who works in a crime syndicate in Paris. By night he collects debts and drives escorts to their clients, and by day he tries to be a good father to his teenage daughter Adina. The film is also about a young Ukrainian woman called Diana, who comes to Paris to work as an escort in the city's big hotels.

The script was based on an image I had stuck in my head of Vincent coming home to his daughter early one morning with a bloody hammer in a bag. It's a quiet image; the sun is streaming in through the kitchen window and they are about to eat breakfast. He has used the hammer to collect a debt for his boss.

For me, the scene was about how love and violence can co-exist in a single person. How some of us, especially if we have destructive or meaningless careers, are torn between duties that damage and the love we have for the people close to us.

# 5

To finance a film one usually seeks funding from the countries involved in a project. The Finnish photographer's salary is paid with Finnish funds, the Swedish costs are covered with Swedish money, and if the shooting is done in France, it's only natural that the costs are paid for by French financiers.

Since the film was set in Paris with French actresses and actors, we applied for a large part of our funding in France. There was still no conventional manuscript with stage directions to specify which images should be abstract or black or how the performers should appear in the picture. I wanted the method to be similar to the documentary method, where the shooting extends over time and is divided in several periods, and I wanted the manuscript to take shape as the work progressed. That would prove harder than we expected.

We worked with a French production company that had experience with small productions like ours. They were enthusiastic and intent on making it possible for us to make the film. They advised me to rewrite the script to adapt our application to the French funders; they said that in France, they are used to a lot of words. The language should be descriptive and embodying – incarné – so the people reading could see the film before them. My script was too thin, too rough. The producers suggested I write things like: her eyes sparkled and he looked at her and smiled, the sun shone in through the windowpane. Her brown hair was tied in a ponytail. My text was bare and quiet and laconic. It left room for the imagination and for many different interpretations. I guess it didn't resemble anything but itself. It also broke certain fundamental rules of how a film script should be. For example, scripts should consist of a specific number of pages so that every page corresponds to one minute in the final film. The French funding was important for us, so I tried to do as I had been told. It started going wrong right away.

Re-writing the script like that was difficult. It was at odds with the film's identity, and anyway it was far too early to say if the girl's eyes sparkled or if she had brown hair or not. I rewrote the scenes that were supposed to be black or abstract or different in some way and pretended that they were conventionally narrated scenes with actors going into and out of doors. Naturally I thought I would change it later; it was only an application.

Suddenly the superficial narrative came into focus – the father, the girl, the mafia, the prostitution – as if the story itself was the important thing, as if this was a film about prostitution and gangster life, when really it was a film about loneliness and darkness and silence. What propelled the film was texture, rhythm, what was left unsaid, the blackness and subtext.

Although Margaux and I had clearly defined aesthetic ideas, I didn't succeed in communicating them to the other people working with me. Why?

I didn't want to reveal the film's secret. I didn't want to talk too much about what was in the subtext of the film and would emerge through the process; I didn't want to ruin it. Or did I try to explain it? It is possible that I showed them *Belleville Baby* to explain the aesthetics I was after, and it is possible that someone said: «Of course, but now we're making a *fiction film*.» As if a fiction film was something singular, fundamentally different and magical that automatically guarantees or rather demands a particular aesthetic and method. A decision was made to try to conceal my ideas from the financiers. For some reason we weren't allowed to give them the impression that we were making a strange film.

I should have established a clear method from the beginning and stood by it.
I should have settled with less money.

Rewriting the script took many days. I added detailed descriptions of places and weather and people's facial expressions in every scene. I figured we could change the script later since the places and weather and faces conceivably wouldn't match up with what we wanted to do. But when the new version of the script was finished it became the one we reached for in rehearsals with actors and for planning with production managers. It worked better since the new French manuscript had the «right» number of pages – one for each minute of the final film – and it fit into a conventional shooting plan, and the more conventional the scene descriptions were, the easier it was for everyone to understand.

We had a Finnish photographer, a Norwegian scenographer, an assistant director from France, a production manager from Italy and a line producer from Denmark, a French casting team and a makeup artist from Tunisia and a total of four actors and actresses from the Ukraine, Sicily and France. Everyone wanted to work effectively, and everyone wanted to understand what had to be done. Everyone's intentions were nothing but good. But it was my first feature fiction film and a lot of the people working with me had been involved in many large productions before this one, so they knew better than I how things are usually done. I tried to explain, in three different languages, that we weren't going to do things the usual way, that we were aiming for visual silence, the images without content, the black, the rough and the incomprehensible, but it wasn't easy to make myself understood. Some of them mistook my vision for lack of knowledge, thinking that I didn't know how real films are made. Others tried to be accommodating, but ... it did say in the script that the scene would be shot the regular way, with sparkling eyes and all of that. Some of them understood what I meant, but they were afraid. How would the audience know who was talking if the person wasn't in the picture?

I think this is where I made my next mistake. I didn't want to be difficult. I wanted all of the collaborations to be smooth, without any friction. I figured I shouldn't make them nervous, but just shoot the scenes as they were in the script and reclaim the film later; when I was alone and could edit in peace and quiet I could cut the ugly images and superfluous noise and find the darkness and silence again. Besides, I thought, all of the scenes would need audio and I could just take away the images later.

It took a long time to get a response from the French funders. I was convinced they would like the idea and that they would understand my script. After all, Marguerite Duras had made her films in France. So had Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais, Robert Bresson and Chris Marker ... French film had been at the cutting edge when it came to expanding the cinematic language and challenging the conventions of film as a medium.

Later, when I had read more about Duras' work as a filmmaker, I understood that it had been hard for her to get funding for her films in France. While she was admired by many of the thinkers and intellectuals of her time – Cixous, Lacan, Deleuze – she was despised and mocked in the film world and heavily criticized because her films were considered unbearable and strange.

I was surprised when our applications were rejected, not by one, but by all of the French financiers. In France, rejections are accompanied by written explanations, and it was clear from them that I hadn't changed the script enough. Or maybe they had seen through to the core of the film, although I had tried to conceal it. My intention was after all – like Duras' – to kill cinema.

They wrote:

- *Weird film*
- *Interesting film*
- *Highly stylized, cold urban landscape*
- *The text is too bare, not «embodied» enough (incarné)*
- *The characters are only represented through dialogues. Weak.*
- *The film's potential is not fully exploited*
- *Unconvincing narrative voice, rewrite.*
- *The dialogues are repetitive.*
- *The visual treatment of violence is questionable, better to highlight the violence by showing it onscreen.*
- *The plot with the prostitute is predictable, develop further to avoid clichés.*
- *We'd like to see a less predictable final scene and more heartbreaking.*

Heartbreaking. *Déchirant*.

Another financier left the decision up to a committee. A member of that group shared with us that the women had been positive about the film, but the male participants had expressed uncertainty and a strong aversion to the film's form and content. One put it like this, in writing:

> *Vincent says things he could never say, had he stayed in character, while Mia comes across as a gentle but unpleasantly bossy person who will now rewrite Vincent's life. She seems to feel morally superior to Vincent and this makes her an unacceptable fake-Godlike creature. Vincent's feelings and motives are disregarded.*

What seemed to upset the male financiers most was that my narrative voice controlled the story and sometimes forced the male hero – Vincent – to take responsibility and do things against his will. They found that upsetting. I was also upset, but mainly disappointed by what I considered their conservative view of film. Maybe we should have stopped here, but we kept going. The film needed to be made.

Maybe I should have thought: I sold out, but I didn't get paid.
Now let's take a step back and do it right.
Nobody's eyes are sparkling.
Fuck you.

Making the film without French funding would be hard. We would be forced to cut our budget by half and in my fervor to carry out the project at all costs, I compromised my visions.

Our French collaborative partners had helped us put together a crew, get permits and insurance, find shooting locations in Paris, arrange casting and write contracts; they were extremely helpful and worked hard for peanuts, but they also had a pre-existing framework for how films should be made. It was effective, based on an old tradition in the film- and TV industry of working extenuatingly hard while the film is being shot, with long hours and performing great feats, like in an elite sport or a marathon.

During this time my producer, Tobias Janson, became a father, so he couldn't be in Paris for the film shoot. We decided to delegate some of his tasks to the French producers so he could stay in Sweden. Now I had to put my trust into people I had never worked with before.

Since Margaux Guillemard and I had developed the idea, it was natural that she should be my assistant director during the shooting, but the French produc-

tion company thought that she had too little experience, so it was decided that she would be the production assistant and help the production manager with simple tasks. I suddenly found myself without Tobias or Margaux, my two most important collaborators.

The French first assistant director was responsible for organizing the planning and taking care of practical matters. He had software that linked the script with the schedule for the day, the team lists, and inventories of equipment. That way, we could see how much everything cost every minute and who should be where at what time. The script became a highly detailed map that we had to follow every step we took.

I had put titles on all of my scenes that set the poetic/thematic tone for each scene; now I was being asked to rewrite the script a second time with new scene titles and numbers so they would fit into our computer program. I started rewriting the script again so it would fit into the mold, and somewhere around here, I lost control. Everything had become mathematics, technology and economy, and I was now part of a huge machine in which I was powerless. I was like a rat racing in a hamster wheel, all my energy went to satisfying the machine's demands regarding how everything should be organized. The machine also steered the content in a particular direction: toward convention. I lost contact with my idea. I no longer understood why I should make the film.

One night in June – during the preparation phase – I was laying on a hotel bed in Paris. I was dizzy and having heart palpitations. Something was wrong. I had been working ten days straight, 10-12 hours a day in 38°C, following a schedule that wasn't mine. I had rewritten my manuscript twice to adapt – first to the funders, then to a computer program. I had forgone a flexible schedule that allowed me time to think. I had sacrificed my vision of a production fragmented into several shoots, between which I could work with editing my material. I had given up my assistant director. I even had to surrender my wish for long rehearsal periods with the actors and for a small team that worked like a documentary film team. What was left was an inhumane schedule and no desire or drive to work.

It was four weeks to shooting. It was four weeks to shooting. I lay on the hotel bed and tried to think clearly. The sounds from the street seemed distant and distorted, like in a tunnel, and the ceiling was spinning. I felt sick. I had come to Paris to kill cinema and now cinema was killing me.

# 6

I returned to Stockholm to see a doctor. Or maybe I already had an appointment for a mammography at Södersjukhuset and I just went there for a routine checkup. Sometimes with hindsight it can be hard to remember the details of important things that happen in our lives, since those moments feel so unimportant and mundane at the time. It's only afterwards that we realize something irreversible has happened, something that will perpetually divide time into a before and an after. Why did I have an appointment? Why did they do an ultra sound immediately after the mammography? They don't usually do that at routine checkups. Did I already have a swollen gland in my armpit? If so, why wasn't I worried about it?
It was the middle of summer and Stockholm was hot. My family was out of town and I went to the hospital alone, walking through a city emptied of its usual inhabitants. Tourists from Germany and Dalarna were eating ice cream in the parks. People sat on picnic blankets on the grass, full of life and laughter. I thought about the film and the work that I still believed was ahead of me. There were two weeks until shooting.
After the mammography the doctor summoned me right away. I lay on the paper-covered examination table as he pulled the small device back and forth over my body, looking at his screen for ages without saying anything. It was cold. I thought about the film. After a long silence he said that there was something in my right breast, a lump, he said, and he asked the nurse to write that in my journal and send me to another part of the hospital for a biopsy. The biopsy turned out to be a sample taken with a long, thick needle, and it was surprisingly painful. Not even then did I really understand what was happening to me. I remember asking: What else could it be besides cancer? I think I asked more than once, but I don't remember any answer. Maybe there was no answer.

Marguerite Duras
*Writing*

> *One is never alone. One is never physically alone. Anywhere. One is always somewhere. One hears noises in the kitchen, noises from the television, or the radio, or the neighboring apartments, throughout the building. Especially when one has never demanded silence, as I always have.*

The test results revealed a malignant tumor in my right breast, and it would later turn out that I also had cancerous cells in my armpit. I met another doctor, a surgeon and the chief physician of the breast unit. She had red hair and radiated a kind of incontestable authority. At first I only thought about the film. I asked the incontestable if we could postpone the operation ten weeks so that I could shoot the film. She said we could, but that I might want to sleep on it. We booked an appointment for the following day.

I must have changed my mind that night. I could write that it was a long and lonely night, but to be honest I don't remember that night or the morning after, when I went back to the hospital. Did I talk to anyone? Did I tell my family? All memories are gone except that an operation was scheduled for just a few weeks later, on my daughter's birthday, and that the film shoot was postponed indefinitely.

I had not yet become afraid. The new silence had not reached me yet. On the contrary, I felt something that can best be described as relief. My new freedom filled me with a quiet joy. The only thing I could think was: *what a relief, I don't have to make the film*. I could escape from the shooting schedule and the new manuscript and all of those unfamiliar collaborators that I didn't know. I was free. Maybe I had become sick to get away from it. Or maybe it was cinema that was trying to kill me because it wanted to live?

I called my producer – a man of patience and creative solutions. He was calm despite the fact that we had been planning and funding the film for years. It was now his heavy responsibility to inform everyone that they had to cancel hotel reservations, car rentals, shooting locations, equipment, extras, contracts, insurance, schedules and flights. He was the one who had to renegotiate all of the employees' contracts and our Scandinavian production agreements. It all came to naught, but the new fact – cancer – loomed over everything with its magical darkness. *The most important thing is that you get well*, he said. *We'll make the film later when you're well.* I appreciated his confidence, but there was no longer any later for me. There was only now. A now that was sharp and bright and unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

A 'piece'-operation was scheduled – a procedure in which a small piece of one breast would be removed. On top of that I would be getting a high dose of radiation therapy as well as cytotoxins, since my breast cancer had already begun to spread. They also offered me a breast implant, which I declined.

From that day and the year that followed, I spent most of my waking hours at Södersjukhuset, surrounded by women in white coats with warm smiles and concerned eyes. There were periods of time when I was there every day, and I followed the changes of the seasons in the park outside the large complex through autumn, winter and spring. I had operations, I was medicated and radiated. I lost my hair and got it back, I got burns on my upper body that I dressed in chamomile compresses. I lay in many different beds and was given many different drugs and medications. At one point there were complications, and I had to be brought into the intensive care unit so heavily dazed on morphine that the trees spoke to me through the window. In the end I was sent to a resort with other women in my situation. We walked together silently, under the tall trees in the park of the sanctuary, wordlessly comprehending each others' fate.

The fear of death came to me one day and did since return regularly, like a new acquaintance. We slowly got to know each other. Anyone who has met the special presence of death knows that it is unlike anything else. Perhaps it can be described as a kind of vertigo, the kind of dizzy sensation one has when balancing of the edge of something high, sharp and steep. Or perhaps it is like swimming across a lake and suddenly sensing the black abyss below. There is nothing familiar or human or identifiable there; only an infinite and frigid silence.

I realized that in all of my life's adventures until then, I had only been splashing around on the shore of that lake, blissfully ignorant of the dizzying bottomless pit out there. I also realized that I would forever carry that black silence with me, as a new, solitary experience.

I thought about Ellen Ripley. In the movie *Aliens*, she travels to a foreign planet to save the human colony from a monster. She has been sent there by the Corporation, which secretly wants to use the monster's power to make biological weapons, but the creature is uncontrollable. Her kingdom cannot be colonized.

*Aliens* is a story about two warriors who meet in a battle to defend the future of their own race. One is a monster mother protecting her offspring, and the other is Ripley, a lone soldier grappling in the dark in a foreign place, trying to understand why she's there. The mother versus the murderer. Civilization against nature. *Aliens* is a story about confronting oneself and the fear of death, in the deepest depths of darkness.

In the magnificent final scenes of the film, Ripley rides down alone in a freight elevator to meet the monster, equipped with only her courage and her weapons. She is sweaty and scared but determined to meet her enemy and save the little girl, the only human to have survived on the planet. The elevator descends slowly to the underworld, floor by floor into the kingdom of death, while Ripley loads firearms and grenades. Rain falls ceaselessly. Everything is dark and horrendous, and she has only herself now, and besides that, in just a few minutes everything will

explode. In the farthest underground depths, she comes face to face with the monster mother laying her eggs. The monster is at once the primordial mother, death, and Ripley herself. The final battle is hard and protracted and every moment is spectacular, explosive and full of bodily fluids. In the final scene, Ripley succeeds in propelling the monster out into space through an airlock and leaves for home in her spaceship with the little girl.

In the sequel, *Alien 3*, we understand that Ripley never got rid of the monster, and in the films that follow, the monster slowly becomes a part of Ripley herself. She will forever carry in her some of the darkness she battled in the underworld.

After my convalescence I was tired and weak, but alive. I was grateful to have been born in a country with free, well functioning healthcare, and I looked forward to living a normal life again. But I also understood that I would never again be the same. In some way I would always be aware of the abyss I had swum over and I would carry it with me like a shadow, a secret, and from now on, *every day would count*.

There are lots of stories about journeys to the underworld. One of my favorites is the ancient myth of Persephone and the seasons. Persephone is the daughter of the Greek god Zeus and at the beginning of the story she is still a young woman living at home with her mother, Demeter. One day, Persephone is picking flowers with her friends when Hades, the king of the underworld, catches sight of her. He falls wildly in love and decides to abduct her. Despite her protests, he takes Persephone down to the underworld and makes her his wife.

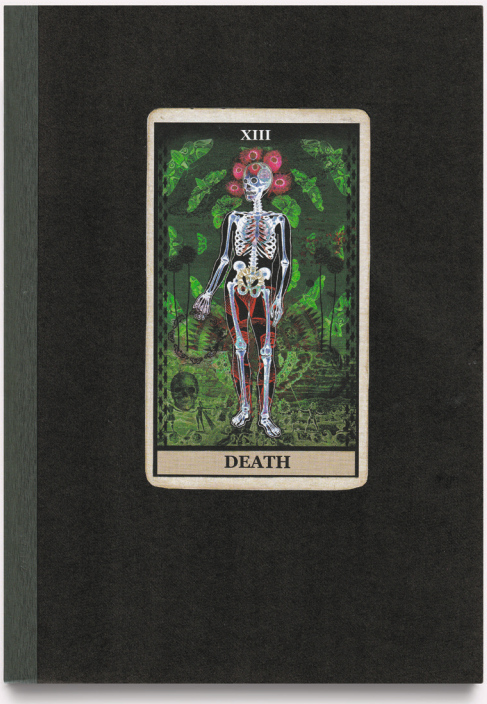
Her mother Demeter is desperate and roams the earth looking for her daughter. In her desperation she neglects her duties as the goddess of the harvest and fertility. All vegetation withers, animals and humans starve. When Zeus hears the humans' lament, he commands Hades to release Persephone and allow her to return to her mother. Hades consents, but on the way up from the underworld he tricks Persephone into eating a pomegranate, connecting her to him forever; those who have once tasted the fruit of the dead can never fully leave that kingdom behind.

Zeus tries to negotiate with Hades, suggesting that the number of pomegranate seeds Persephone has eaten should determine the number of months she is permitted to spend with her mother on earth. She has eaten nine seeds, and thus, for the rest of her life, Persephone will spend nine months of the year on earth and three in the underworld.

According to the ancient Greeks, this episode created the seasons. When Persephone returns to the earth, it is spring, and the fertile season of the year begins. But when she returns to the underworld in autumn, it turns dark and cold, and nature shrivels up and dies. The myth doesn't mention the wishes of the young woman Persephone herself. The story takes place in a patriarchal society where young women never had ownership over their own lives. Maybe Persephone was tired of her domineering mother and had fallen in love with the exciting older man from the underworld. She was just a young girl when she was abducted from the flowering meadow, and in the underworld she became queen of an entire kingdom. The story is about becoming an adult and gaining experience by leaving behind what is safe and familiar. It is also a story about encountering the darkness of the underworld and never being the same again. We don't know whether Persephone bore that darkness as a burden or a bounty, but we know that it was forever a part of her, just as death is a part of life. We all bear our own silence gathered from the places we have been.

My journey to the underworld was not as dramatic as Ripley's or Persephone's. One could say it was pretty insignificant in comparison, since I was carefully cared for by doctors, specialists and hospital personnel. Breast cancer affects more than every tenth woman in Sweden, and many make a full recovery. It was still too early to know whether the cancer would come back and make me more sick, but for the moment I was cured, and every hour had suddenly become valuable.

Maybe I'm already dead when you're reading this. Or maybe I am as alive as you are, and my time in the hospital will be no more than a pair of parentheses, fading like all of life's parentheses, and the everyday will once again be as mundane as ever. But at the time, everything was new and uncertain, and each day was a bonus day. I cherished the daylight, the breaths I took, the children's homework, my colds, the trees and the clouds and the sound of the neighbors watching TV. I no longer had the time to worry about little things. Whether or not I had time to make my film was still uncertain. Everyone was waiting for news. The producers were waiting, the actors and actresses were waiting, even the money was waiting for me to go back to work. I hesitated. The past year had brought me to a place that was mine alone. The silence inside Vincent's car in the Parisian night felt distant and vague. I didn't know how to bring together the new darkness in me and the darkness of the story of Vincent and his daughter.



# 7

The English filmmaker, author and artist Derek Jarman made his final film, *Blue*, in 1993. He was dying of AIDS and slowly going blind. The film consists of a single monochrome blue image and an audio track with four voices. It is an homage to the artist Yves Klein and his well-known blue paintings which gave rise to the hue IKL - International Klein Blue. In many ways, *Blue* is Jarman's most radical film; in that it completely forgoes the use of images, yet claims its place in the cinema instead of a gallery space.

The blue image reflects how the artist's own field of vision is slowly being reduced to a membrane of blue, a requiem for a world of images that he will never again be part of. The film is also an act of resistance against the media and the objectifying and stigmatizing depiction of gays dying of AIDS at the time, when an entire generation of homosexuals was devastated, shamed and cast out of society.

Perhaps the blue film was also a final concatenation of all the images Jarman had ever seen or made in his long life as a radical and innovative artist – all condensed into one single blue infinity. A film of films. A blue adieu.

In Jarman's manuscript, 'the image' symbolizes the information we receive every day about the state of the world. It embodies oppressive, restrictive and conventional ways of representing the world and AIDS in particular.

Abstaining from representation and replacing the representative image with black, like Duras, or blue, like Jarman, is not merely a way of reducing. For the artist Yves Klein, it was an expression of a megalomaniacal urge to create something more, something even bigger. With his blue paintings he challenged the conventional way of looking at art. He wanted to «de-objectify» art, and he saw his paintings as a living presence – not as material things. Throughout his working life, Klein tried to go beyond and annihilate representation itself in favor of the immaterial, of emptiness. At twenty, he had already put his signature on the sky as his own work.

Klein saw the blue hue as a potential realm, an extra dimension, a possibility for humans and their surroundings. In much the same way, Jarman's *Blue* challenged the cinema audience to be something more than passive recipients of images. The color and the absence of representation opened a new realm in the beholder – and in the cinema theatre.

Derek Jarman
*Blue*

*To be an astronaut of the void,*
*leave the comfortable house*
*that imprisons with reassurance.*

Sound is a more intimate medium than image. The image, or rather the gaze, is what allows us to remain detached from the film (or the other) and to objectify. We can also choose to close our eyes at any time if we don't want to see any more. Sound is different. It's harder to shut out, and it gives us the instant possibility to create our own images within ourselves. In *Blue*, the narrative shifts to inside the spectator, and besides the endless blue realm before her, the image consists of her own images, created in her own inner darkness. The separation between the spectator and the film is erased, and the film takes place inside the audience rather than in front of it. We sit in the cinema, enlightened and tinged blue by the light. We have become part of the performance itself.

The story told in *Blue* is touching. The text is read by four voices (Nigel Terry, John Quentin, Tilda Swinton, and Derek Jarman himself) and the story moves between

various layers and narratives. Dry, explicit reports from waiting rooms and on deteriorating states of health, medications, side effects and physical symptoms as the virus slowly spreads and breaks down the body of the filmmaker. Some texts are full of humor and speak directly to the spectator. Others are poetic, erotic or philosophical.

*Blue* is at once an ode to the transience of everything and a declaration of love to everyone in Jarman's generation who died a premature death of AIDS, forced into invisibility by society, renounced by their families and by the whole of the heteronormative, conservative Thatcher state.

Derek Jarman
*Blue*

*Our name will be forgotten in time*
*No one will remember our work*
*Our life will pass like the traces of a cloud*
*And be scattered like*
*Mist that is chased by the Rays of the sun*
*For our time is the passing of a shadow*
*And our lives will run like*
*Sparks through the stubble*
*I place a delphinium, blue, upon your grave*

There were also political reasons for Jarman to avoid creating a visual representation of a gay man with AIDS. It was the early 90s and the first generation of homosexuals had started dying of AIDS. Antiretroviral medicines hadn't been developed yet and the general public and the media had limited knowledge about the disease. The people getting sick were homosexuals, sex workers and drug addicts – groups that were already marginalized and stigmatized by society. There are countless stories of men who weren't allowed to attend their partners' funerals because of families who denied that the deceased had been gay, and even denied the cause of his death.

From early on in the AIDS epidemic, the portrayal of an AIDS-stricken man became a genre of its own; a person sick with AIDS was portrayed as weak, alone in a hospital bed. Never with their partners or at work. The depictions were objectifying and stereotypical.

Douglas Crimp
*Melancholia and Moralism*

*Objectification of the other through pity.*
*Pity is not solidarity.*

By dispensing with the image and abstaining from objectifying those suffering from AIDS, Jarman shifts the question from the private to the political realm. In the absence of the image, we are not permitted to separate ourselves from the infirm. We are not supposed to feel pity for the other; instead, the intimate nearness of the audio gives us the possibility for empathy that is deeper still. It isn't Him or even You who has AIDS. It's me.

In a purely formal sense, *Blue* is an exclamation mark, the culmination of everything that Derek Jarman's radical life's work stood for. Jarman chose to picture his own death with no images at all to liberate himself, as well as the spectator. It was an act of courage and generosity.

The film premiered in September 1993, just a few months before Derek Jarman's death.

Derek Jarman
*Blue*

*From the bottom of your heart*
*pray to be released from image.*
*The image is the prison of the soul.*

# 8

Why do we tell stories? From what source do we draw the will to do that? I thought about Francesca Woodman's body and the glass and the eel. And I thought about Vincent's body during the long nights in the car, while the hammer was laying under the seat and it was raining in the darkness outside the windshield. I thought about that body's loneliness, and about my own. Could I tell this story? How should I do it?

During my treatment, I experienced something … I'm looking for an appropriate word, but the only word I can find is 'strange', which seems vague here. After a series of health issues and an unsuccessful spinal tap, I had a brain bleed. It was very small, nothing life-threatening, but since my body had been weakened by radiation and chemotherapy, I was having a hard time recovering so I had to stay in the intensive care unit at Södersjukhuset for observation. After a few days I was moved to a brain injury unit in the hospital's west wing. It was completely silent there and I got a room of my own overlooking a small park. Outside my window there were a number of trees. They must have been there as long as the hospital itself because they were old and their crowns reached all the way up to the fifth floor. Their branches touched my window and when the sun was shining, the shadows of the foliage danced on the wall above my bed.

I don't remember how long I stayed in that room; maybe a week, maybe longer. My head hurt so much I couldn't read or watch films. The only thing I could do was look at the branches of the trees and the shadows on the wall. I was given morphine at regular intervals and it made me feel like my room was floating above the hospital, above the small park. The dense silence intensified the feeling of surrealness.

One morning something unexpected happened. Not that I was expecting anything in particular to happen, but still. As I lay there in bed, I could suddenly hear the trees outside my window. I don't know if I should say they were breathing or talking, but I could *hear* them. I could hear how they articulated. And I could *be* them. I could sense nutrients and fluids being drawn up from the ground through their bodies and out into their branches. I experienced the intensive processes within their green leaves, and I felt how their roots reverberated in the soil in contact with each other. All of the trees were at once one and the same tree, and I was also the tree. We were connected to each other and to everything living and dead in this world.

It is impossible to describe the experience in a way that sounds real; words get in the way. Language can describe me being high on morphine and confused by headache and fear and exhaustion. That is one truth. But there are other truths. Something happened at that moment that changed the way I saw the world. From that moment, I will always have a sense of what it is like to be a tree. (Is that an arrogant thing to say?) I will also always be connected to the reality that everything living is connected. I am a tree. And so are you.

What does this have to do with Vincent's story? I think what I am trying to say is this: to tell a story about someone else is to put yourself in her body and give others the possibility to put themselves in that body. A movement outward from the prison of the self to something greater, to the other, to the bodies of the trees, to the bodies of the murderers and the sex workers and the children. Toward the core of every story.

I wanted to tell a story of the darkness in the car during the long hours before dawn, when the street cleaners are picking up trash from the sidewalks and people working nightshifts are getting ready to go home. In that story, darkness was about loneliness and silence. But now the darkness had become something else, something more dense and oppressive. And I thought about the silence I had sought in

Marguerite Duras' house by the sea in Normandy. Maybe darkness was not silence, but a black roar – the deafening noise of violent movement as we stand balancing on the edge of the abyss and gaze into its depths. I reread the first version of the manuscript, the bare original text from before I had rewritten it twice for the sake of others, and I saw the film before me once again. The story was darker and even more sparse than I had realized earlier. In a way it scared me, but I had promised myself to never base my actions on fear. For a moment I thought about my mother, who would be disappointed since she had always dreamed that I would reach a broader audience. And then I stopped thinking about that.

I contemplated the idea of a revised script and a new film shoot, but there was another aspect that made me hesitant – my body. That is, my human body. The treatments had made me weak and vulnerable to infections. How would I handle a film shoot in Paris? The tempo and the workload had been hard even before I got sick. Maybe it was even the work that had made me sick. How could I handle the fast pace and the long hours?

But then I thought: why should film shoots be so physically demanding? Why does the work have to be set up in a way that is unsuitable for people who are physically fragile or need to pick up their kids from daycare or aren't used to or comfortable working in hierarchies?

My specific experience was not insignificant. My experience belonged to more people than just me. I thought that my fragility and my proximity to death could be my strength, and the film could be based on lack, imperfection, and absence. The absence of the image, the absence of health, strength and resources. The method would be founded on everything I lack and everything I cannot do.

# 9

Ousmane Sembène's first film *Borom Sarret* takes place in Dakar 1963 and was produced with almost no budget. It is about a man who works as a cart driver. He drives through the city with his horse and cart, and in the film in the film he encounters a number of different people throughout the day. He takes a woman in labor to the hospital and a man with a dead baby to the cemetery. Everyone we meet is as poor as the cart driver himself, and many of the clients cannot pay for their journeys. In the end the police confiscate his cart; a client had convinced him to drive to the wealthy part of town where horses and carts are forbidden. He returns to his family with no money and no means to continue his work.

The film shares many features with Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, made in Italy some 15 years earlier. Both take place among the poor people of a big city, and both were shot in existing environments, with authentic street life as the narrative's background. Above all, both bear a common and universal message: poverty begets poverty, and it is a prison from which one cannot escape.

Ousmane Sembène
*Borom Sarret*

> *It's this modern life that has reduced me to a working slave from a noble man like my ancestors [...]. It's a prison. That's what it is this modern life.*

Borom Sarret was the first film made by an African director in Senegal after liberation from the French. All of the roles were played by black Africans. Under French colonial rule, the Senegalese were forbidden from making films, and only French films were shown in the cinemas of Dakar. Sembène wanted to show African life through the eyes of an African. Instead of the naturalistic narrative style of French films, where people spoke their lines onscreen, Sembène used a narrator and traditional Senegalese music. There is no sync sound – i.e. audio recorded while shooting – instead all of the lines are read by Sembène himself. Much of the dialogue in the film is made up of the protagonist's inner monologue, where he reflects on his clients and the difficulties of their everyday lives, but the director also reads some of the verbal exchanges himself.

While there was probably an economic explanation for using that technique – it was cheaper to record the sound afterward than to have audio equipment on location – the result was an elevating effect that gave the film a unique character. By using a narrator, Sembène followed African storytelling tradition and created an alternative aesthetic that was unlike the cinematic language of the colonial power.

Sembène later did larger productions with more resources and other narrative techniques, but I find his first short film to be his most inspiring one. It shows how great films can be created with small means, and that emergency solutions can sometimes be the bedrock of innovation. Emergency solutions created the aesthetics. Perhaps the work lives in its imperfections. Perhaps it is in the absence and the void that truly interesting things can take shape.

I rewrote the script scene by scene. The story was the same, but this time I made it an «audiofilm», a narrative consisting only of voices, sounds and music. I wrote the text in such a way that it would work as a cohesive narrative even if there were no images at all; a kind of audiobook for the cinema. That way the image could be liberated from the audio, and the film shoot could be cheaper, simpler and more fun.

In order to get a clearer sense of the film, I edited a 75-minute black film that followed the script. I used the test recordings we had made during rehearsals and script development. I read the newly written monologues and texts myself. The technical quality was poor and the acting was unrefined, but the recordings worked as raw material.

Now I could listen to the film and hold it in my hands. I find it easier to work with material in the editing room than with a text on paper. The black audiofilm ended up being the raw material we used throughout the rest of the work. The temporary recordings were successively replaced with real scenes, and when we had shot them, the film was «filled» with images until it was finished. I rewrote and recorded and rewrote again. There were some scenes and voices – especially my own narrative voice – that I kept working on and re-recording, even during post-production.

This time, we would carry the project out according to the original idea that was never realized: splitting up production into multiple parts so we could edit material between film shoots. It would give us time to think and to let the story grow at its own pace.

The planning would be flexible and the editing work would determine the artistic and practical choices made as the project progressed. We would work cheaply with a small team; that way we could control the planning and be free to develop the expression the way we wanted to. The script wasn't meant as a manual to be followed to the letter, the project should be guided by its own rhythm.

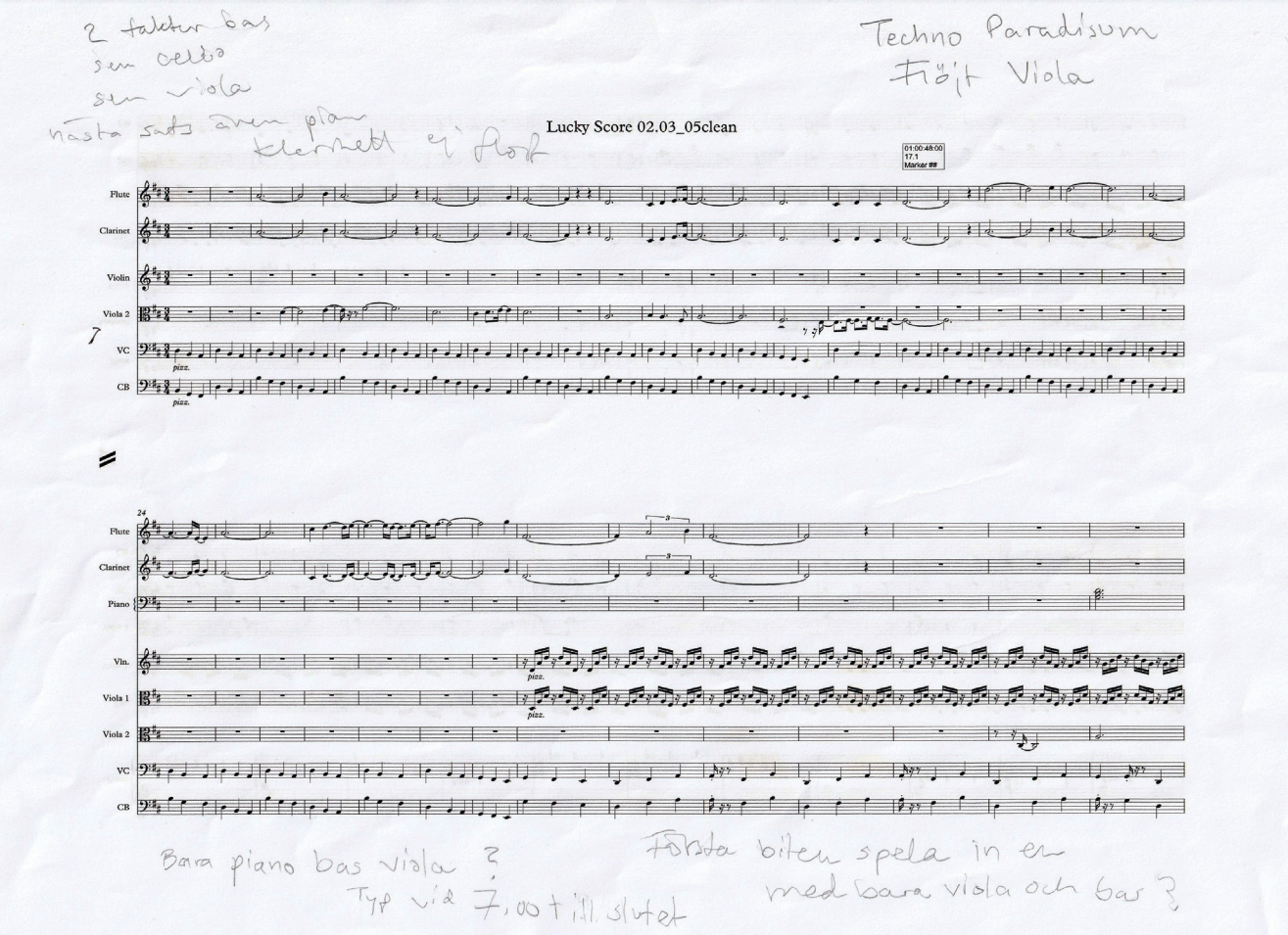
Elements that are usually separate in a linear production process with clearly delineated stages –funding, script development, research, filming, editing and post-production – were now taking place simultaneously in a single, spiral shaped movement. Some of the film was edited after shooting, then new ideas emerged before the next shoot, more research was done, dialogues were rewritten, new scenes were shot, and the manuscript developed continuously. The final scenes were shot and edited when the rest of the film was already mixed – so we also did the post-production in multiple rounds.

We put together a small team of people who were interested in working in an explorative way. I chose to work with the film photographer Daniel Takács; I had seen and been inspired by his images earlier. He contributed many valuable resources and ideas. Among other things, he introduced me to the films of the Hungarian director Béla Tarr.

The first film shoot would be dedicated to images of the city. Daniel and I watched films by Chantal Akerman and Tarkovsky. We talked about the city as a landscape where everything had been created by humans, and we wondered how to depict an archetypal version of a place that renders its time and space indeterminable. I remember referring to the view from my apartment in Stockholm at the time, which was reminiscent of the film *Seven* – you could never see the sky and it was always raining.

Our working idea was that the entire sequence of images should take place in a single night while Vincent was out working. All of the images would be shot from his perspective and convey loneliness. If possible, it should be raining. The sun should go up in the final images of the film.
The entire initial filming period would be dedicated to that sequence. We went to Paris for a week in November, when the nights were long and the weather terrible. Margaux had chosen a number of locations ahead of time, places we thought that Vincent could drive through in his car in one night: down the hill from Belleville toward Place de la République, the neighborhood under the subway bridge in Barbès, Quai de Valmy, rue de Rivoli and the fashionable hotel district near Place Vendôme.

We had a small camera and a tripod that Daniel had built in the car so the picture would be stable. We even made our own rain machine with a water pump purchased from Clas Ohlson and a perforated hose. We attached it to the upper edge of the front windshield so the water drops would run down over the glass, but we didn't need to use it, since it rained the whole time.




In the film's final scene, a children's choir sings Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem* in a cathedral. I wanted the music in the film to connect to that piece in some way. The composer Michel Wenzer suggested we use the sixth movement, Libera me, as a point of departure. It's about longing for release. In it, the concert reaches its crescendo, delivered in a vibrating tenor solo: «Free me Lord, from death eternal on that day of dread». Michel wrote several pieces with the same harmonic progression as *Libera Me* in arrangements for viola, cello, piano and clarinet. The music was recorded on two occasions with musicians from Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra.

# 10

In the summer of 1973 Marguerite Duras shoots her sixth movie, *India Song*. She is 59 years old, an established writer, and a controversial figure in France. She is drinking a lot and smokes volumes of cigarettes. She is a communist. She has not yet written her most successful novel, *The Lover*.

It is the first day of the shoot and the actors Michael Lonsdale and Delphine Seyrig are rehearsing the scene where they dance in front of a large mirror. The scene is set in the French embassy in Calcutta but filmed in an apartment in the 16th arrondissement in Paris. The film's soundtrack is playing on the speakers – a slow piano piece by Carlos d'Alessio – and the actors are dancing. When it is time to shoot and the actors are about to speak their lines, the sound technician interrupts the scene. He points out to Duras that he cannot record the lines while the music is playing; it will drown out the actors' voices and make it hard to edit the audio afterward. Duras asks him how they can solve the problem. He suggests the actors say their lines in silence, and that the music be added in post-production. Marguerite Duras considers this for thirty seconds, then says: E*h bien, ils ne parleront pas – Well, then they won't speak at all*.

*India Song* ends up a film where no one speaks on camera. All voices are voice overs, and the actors' physical actions consist of silent gestures where they sit and gaze out into the room or dance slowly. The cinematic language born here will be one that Duras continues to develop in the years to follow, and ultimately result in *L'homme atlantique*, where only her voice and a black screen remain.

Rather than compromise, Duras used her imagination. That was actually all I needed to know.

Two years had passed since I had lain in that hotel bed in Paris and had the feeling that cinema was killing me. Now it was spring again, and we gathered to film scenes with the actors. This time, everything was different. There was an air of anticipation and giddiness. It felt like we were working on a film project instead of in a factory.

The actors were still in the project, despite the long hiatus. Olivier Loustau, who played Vincent, had directed and premiered a feature film of his own; Lorette Nyssen, who played the young girl, had started high school, and Diana Rudychenko, who played Diana, had had a child. I had managed to drop my laptop on my foot and break my pinky toe, so I had to walk with a cane, to everyone's great amusement. It became a running joke in the team to guess which catastrophe would strike me next – and whether I would make it through the project alive. We were all happy to see each other again.

While the tech team did preparations in the house, Margaux and I met with the actors to go through the script and rehearse the scenes. Although two years had passed since the last time we had met, it felt like the knowledge and energy from the earlier rehearsals was still there, and they found their way back to their roles surprisingly quickly.

Since the actors would be onscreen part of the time, we would now be working with a bigger team consisting of a director of photography, camera assistants, grips, an electrician, two sound engineers, a costume assistant, a production manager and a location manager. The shoot would be like a traditional film process in many ways, and it was important to define clear methods of working from the very beginning so we didn't fall back into conventional solutions again.

The most important element was time: carving time in the schedule for reflection, improvisation, and rest. But how should we do it? We still had a limited budget, so we couldn't afford many days of filming. To resolve this, we decided to cut a number of scenes from the schedule from the very beginning. Those scenes would be

black, audio scenes without images, and they were put aside to be recorded later. That freed up days for the scenes that would be filmed with images.
We chose the scenes with images according to a simple principle: they all took place at the same location: the girl's home. That way we didn't have to spend time on relocations, and we could set up in the house and work there in peace, almost as if it were a rehearsal room or someone's home. We chose a house in Bagnolet, a suburb of Paris. The house was old and worn, with the typical grimy charm of the Parisian suburbs. The house was big enough to rest, take coffee breaks, find solitude and store things. It even had a small backyard where the sun shone in and birds chirped in the ivy.

Each workday started at nine a.m. and finished at four p.m. We did just two scenes per day, and each scene was shot with one single camera setting. One scene in the morning. One scene in the afternoon. This light schedule gave us room for repetition and reflection and improvisation. The scenes in black gave us freedom.

Since we were aiming to keep our team small, some of us had several simultaneous roles. Margaux was both associate producer and script supervisor, and the location manager Anne Rivière was organizing transportation and catering, kept the costumes in order and made coffee. She was even a grip a few times when we did travelling shots. The cameraman Daniel Takács had to do some of his assistant work himself, and the first assistant cameraperson Louise Legaye also shifted into the electrician. Line producer Malin Hüber planned with increasing flexibility and came to our aid as assistant director when we needed an extra set of hands. I was often tired and had to go home to rest. On those occasions, Margaux became the director. We were flexible and we trusted each other.

One of the fundamental concepts of Zen Buddhism is *beginner's mind*. It's the notion of an original state similar to the open, curious mindset of childhood, where everything is possible and there are no rules of acquired knowledge standing in the way of true creativity. It could also be an expression of art's absolute essence, its core, where everything unnecessary and mediocre has been peeled off.
I wondered how I would be able to convey beginner's mind to the others on the team. A lot of my colleagues had years of experience in the film industry and were skilled professionals. How could I get my team to forget everything they knew and start over from the beginning?

T.S Elliot
*Four Quartets*

> *And the end of all our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*

I suggested that we start each day with a fairly long, seated meditation. Every daily meditation had a special theme – for example darkness, light, or liberation. I guided the meditations in English, and a long part of the meditation consisted of us sitting together in silence.

In the beginning, sitting on the floor together and being quiet felt uncomfortable. Some people from the tech crew thought the meditation was unnecessary and didn't have anything to do with their work. I also found it hard, almost embarrassing. I've never practiced yoga or meditation in a group and generally speaking I'm not a fan of doing exercises in a formless group dynamic where one's personal integrity is tested and encroached upon in various ways. But the resistance was interesting. Starting the day with something unusual was a challenge, something new to supersede the old. Our bodies got to do something that didn't give the signal of shooting a film.

The impatience and awkwardness of the first few days gradually gave way to a sort of lightness. For a few moments, we had access to a shared and boundless realm. The rest of the day was colored by that sense of stillness and simplicity. A

reminder that there is always something universal and greater than what we perceive as reality. I believe that it made us calmer, more friendly and less bound by hierarchy.

The final filming phase was in Gothenburg. That may seem strange since the film takes place in Paris, but we had received a grant from the regional film fund Film i Väst, and we were expected to do some of the work in western Sweden. Filming somewhere other than Paris was challenging, but also liberating. We found a dense forest just outside the city where we filmed some dark scenes with the camera swaying between the trees. We also filmed some complementary scenes with Lorette dancing alone in an apartment. The apartment was old and rundown and worked well as a pseudo-extension of the house in Bagnolet where the scene was supposed to take place. I could write more here about the images we tried to create and the special late summer darkness in Gothenburg, which was different from the grey skies of Paris. I could write about the girl's hamster and her dreams and the link between the forest and the city, but I won't – I think the film should be allowed some of its secrets.


From the shooting of *Lucky One*, Paris.

# 11

In Chantal Akerman's 1971 film *Hotel Monterey*, we find ourselves in a rundown Manhattan hotel. The film consists of several very long shots from inside the hotel, and it's hard to say who the subject of the film is or whose gaze is depicting what we see. The images are static and show the hotel's interiors: a corridor, an elevator, a lobby, a room. The images are composed in such a way that all of the objects contained in it have the same importance. There are people – in some shots – but there are also columns, carpets, sinks and walls. They are all depicted with the same interest, or disinterest. There is no real plot in the film and no dialogue – it is completely silent. Who is this film's subject? Is it the hotel itself, whose floors and ceilings and walls are watching the guests come and go? Or is it a depiction of time itself as it passes? The film opens in the evening on the hotel's ground floor and ends on its roof at dawn, when we see the sun rising.
Time is also palpable in every single image. The silence of slowness. The shots are so long that I have time to think many thoughts of my own before the film moves on. Akerman says:

Interview in *Nothing Happens* by Ivone Margulies

> *When you look at a picture, if you look just one second you get the information, 'that's a corridor.' But after a while you forget it's a corridor, you just see that it's yellow, red, lines; and then it comes back as a corridor.*

*Hotel Monterey* is a boring film. Nothing happens. I doze off when I watch it. I have time to think many thoughts of my own. I think about hotels I've stayed in and persons I have made love to in them. I think about the cockroaches I shared an apartment with in New York and I think about Clarice Lispector's story about her encounter with a cockroach.

Clarice Lispector *The passion according to G.H*

> *I looked at it, at the roach: I hated it so much that I was going over to its side, feeling solidarity with it, since I couldn't stand being left alone with my aggression.*

Maybe, I think, we are seeing *Hotel Monterey* from the perspective of a cockroach sitting in a crevice between the wallpaper and the wall. Maybe its perception of time bores us, or maybe we feel provoked by its disinterested gaze on humans?
One could say that the film offers the opposite of escapism. Instead of fleeing reality, I'm given a chance to see reality in a new way – *frenzy*.

Interview in *Nothing Happens* by Ivone Margulies

> *I haven't tried to find a compromise between myself and others. I have thought that the more particular I am the more I address the general.*

After the final shoot in Gothenburg came many months of editing. To get an overview, I extracted stills from the filmed material and put them up with magnets on a big whiteboard. I placed small, different colored slips of paper under the pictures to represent the voices that were audible. The dark blue slips stood for my Swedish narration, which framed the story and positioned it in time. The Swedish narrator also addressed a «You». The dialogues between the main character and the narrator were a light blue shade. Music was marked with red paper that contrasted with the others. That way it was possible to see the frequency of music in the film and whether it threatened to become overly dominant compared to the voices and audio. Dialogue between Vincent and Adina was pink. Diana's monologues were orange. There was just one word on each slip of paper, often the title of the scene or the theme – for example Airport, Red Shoes or Morning.

The whole whiteboard was filled with pictures and slips of paper and made a giant collage, a sort of map. This let me stand and look at the whole film with its web of voices, music and pictures and see their graphic relationship to one another. It was like a big puzzle where the red and light blue slips weren't allowed to follow in a long succession – that made it static – and the dark blue narrator's slips shouldn't be too sparse, because then the film would lose contact with its «You».

Now I could see the dramaturgy of the film in front of me and work with its structure without relying on the spoken word (because I was alone) or the text (I wasn't working from the script). I often stood in front of the whiteboard without thinking. I just saw the different colors as a pattern and a rhythm.

Listening was also important. I edited with headphones and concentrated on musicality. Since none of the dialogue was visible on the screen I could edit each voice with no limitations to achieve a precisely balanced rhythm in every scene. I cut some readings into hundreds of pieces, a sentence could be made up of words from multiple takes. The important thing was getting the exact amount of silence, between every word, between every scene.

I regularly showed the material to a group of dependable people I'd also worked with when I was editing *Belleville Baby*; my mentor Kalle Boman, the producer Tobias Janson, and the composer and filmmaker Michel Wenzer. Sometimes accepting their feedback in the middle of the process was uncomfortable (I always want praise and not criticism) and sometimes we disagreed, but our conversations kept the work moving forward and helped me see the material from other perspectives than my own.

The first of the editing periods were effortless and the work progressed without resistance, but the more scenes were finished, the more laborious it became to shape the huge clump of material in my hands. The closer it drew to becoming a finished film, the greater the consequences of every aesthetic choice, and the editing grew ever slower. Sometimes it nearly came to a halt.

It felt as though I was trying to invent a new genre, and that I had no rules to hold on to in the process. It was hard, the hardest film I've made. I was torn between wanting to perform my experiment and being afraid that no one would understand. When the fear of failure or the will to please grew too large and I stood in my own way with conventional thinking or cowardly actions, I used the mantra I usually use to force myself to move forward: *It doesn't need to be good, it only needs to be finished. The only important thing is to carry out the idea*.

After many months of editing I realized that my energy and my ideas weren't enough to finish the film. I took the help of a young filmmaker called Neil Wigardt. Primarily a director, he had a strong sense of rhythm and form. Neil also had a lot of ideas of his own and was naturally playful and a positive thinker. When I suggested something he often replied – That's *najs*. I wasn't always sure what that meant, but our collaboration was productive and moved the project forward.

When Neil joined the project, the main structure was already set and there weren't many changes to it during our collaboration. Instead we worked with details and rhythm, and toward the end we were working with very small details so the film would flow steadily. Images were moved forward or backward. Dialogues were lengthened and shortened and small adjustments were made to the music. We arrived at a point when we had smoothed the details so much that the film lost its dynamic; then we had to put back some of the rough edges we had taken away. Up until the very end I was writing and recording voice-overs so that the narrator's voice would be balanced with the dialogues.

The biggest challenge was choosing images to accompany the dialogues between father and daughter. They were filmed naturalistically, in real settings, and they had originally been written to be shown on-screen. It was difficult to create a dynamic between the visual and the audio when the characters weren't represented in the images. Diana's monologues, my narrative voice and Vincent's and Mia's phone call were all voice-overs; that is, voices that were written to be off-screen, so it was easier to connect them with images. Vincent's and Adina's dialogues were written as conventional «scenes» that take place between two people, and it was hard to find a visual language that didn't give rise to a static sense that something was missing. Whatever we did, there was something of a «radio theater» feel to it. It was original, but not exactly dynamic. Maybe the editing process was long and complicated because there were too many different ideas for just one film. The film would have probably benefitted from concentrating on certain choices – for example the narrator's relationship to the audience – and toning down others – for example the lengthy dialogues between father and daughter. We chose to carry out the idea as it had originally been conceived, with all of the different narrative levels preserved – compressed, like a sweater knitted a little too tightly. The result can perhaps be described as a film that is at once empty and very dense.


Sometimes the situation felt absurd and claustrophobic. We sat holed up in the editing room for weeks on end, and on some days it was hard to tell if we were moving forward or backward. I think that Neil thought I was a perfectionist, obsessed by various miniscule details of color and audio transitions, but I couldn't give up before the film was complete. And then one day it was. Not because I was certain that it was «good», but because it was finished. There was nothing more that could be done.

I did my best. I longed for silence.


Jag jobbar
MUSIK
En historia
FACE BOOK
Ser man inte mig?
MUSIK...
Barnet sover...
GIFTA SIG
BREAKTAST
VACKER MAN
MUSIK
LUCKY
THE RED SHOES
Jag vill sluta
SCHOOL YARD
Säga förlåt
STONER
TAKE AWAY
hammaren
GÖRAN
VINTERN
En vanlig man
FIRST TIME
KROPPEN
KARIM X ISMAEL
FLYKTEN
Din historia
Vince Buren
MUSIK
CONCERT
AFTER CONCERT

# 12

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. After that she went back to writing and left cinema behind her. The audio is made up of just two elements: the sound of the sea coming and going, and Marguerite Duras' voice reading a text. Her voice is rough and calm and 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 does in some way or another), of time and life that disappear into 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 for the camera. The voice comments on the film itself and the audience watching the film.

Marguerite Duras
*L'Homme Atlantique*

> *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.*

The relationship between the narrator and the listener is also the relationship between the creator and the human, 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 a potent, omniscient narrator. And a voice off screen is a voice without a body. *A subject impossible to objectify.*

I could say: in this darkness, voyeurism has ceased and the traditional separation between the film and the audience has been suspended. But maybe it isn't that simple.

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. By then, Yann Andréa and Marguerite Duras were public figures in France, and their scandalous love affair featured in gossip columns as well as in Duras' own books. Yann Andréa (whose name was actually Yann Lemée, but Duras renamed him 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, making the film complex and complicating a unilateral feminist reading.

Each and every time I watch the film, new worlds open up for me. I think it's because it offers an empty space. 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 that gap that I create my own images. I see new images every time, and in that way the film is an infinite number of films. The images leave the screen and enter me as I sit watching. I am transformed from a passive consumer of the film 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* parallels the term *l'écriture féminin* formulated by the philosopher and author Hélène Cixous around the same time. She believed that language upheld and sustained the power of the 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. For her, the black film *L'homme atlantique* was the final murder of le cinéma. 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 all texts at once.

Afterward, she made only a few films before returning to literature forever. For her, the word was the most important thing. More important than the image, more important than the film, more important than life itself. In *L'homme atlantique* she says:

Marguerite Duras
*L'Homme Atlantique*

*Détournez-vous*
*Passez*
*Oubliez*
*Eloignez-vous de ce détail, le cinéma.*

*Turn around*
*Go on.*
*Forget*
*Leave this trivial thing, cinema.*

Duras created from a perspective of her own. Through her films and texts, she conquered a place that opens to all of us. We can choose to do what we want with it. In the black image, a cinematic narrative is shaped and meets the spectator – or should we say listener – on her own terms, beyond the limits of the screen, beyond the conventions of cinema history, beyond the market's demands for salability, beyond the desire of the dominant gaze, beyond one's own desire to please.

You don't see me. But I am here.

*Lucky One* premiered in Swedish cinemas in the spring of 2019. The reception was mixed. It was described as hypnotic, poetic, boring, challenging, beautiful and unique. The film received the Eurimages Audentia Award for audacious and innovative storytelling. The jury's motivation was this: *Our winner is a labyrinth of a film. It tells its story from multiple directions, innovating with image and sound and challenging the audience. Like a Russian doll, it is multi-layered. Its director makes us see cinema and life in new ways.*

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*Belleville Baby* (Mia Engberg, 2013)

*Blue* (Derek Jarman, 1993)

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*Hotel Monterey* (Chantal Akerman, 1973)

*India Song* (Marguerite Duras, 1975)

*Les mains negatives* (Marguerite Duras, 1979)

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From the shooting of *Lucky One*, Paris.

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Music sheet, *Lucky One* soundtrack.
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Lorette Nyssen. From *Lucky One*.
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