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**DESIRE IN DURAS:**

**The Poetics of Desire in the Films by**

**Marguerite Duras**

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis will research the ways Marguerite Duras, one of the most controversial and fruitful female writers and filmmakers of the twentieth century, employs certain elements of film language in order to expose complex inner landscape of her female characters, creating a distinctive film poetics that mirror her writing style. Deriving from *nouveau roman*, a movement in the French literature that questioned traditional modes of literary realism, Duras approached film medium in her own courageous way, deconstructing plot, fragmenting time through total separation of audio and image, using silence, repetition and absence as particular poetic elements. Comparing films Duras wrote and directed herself to the adaptations of her work done by male directors, the thesis will demonstrate in which way was the experimentation in film language crucial to succeed in portraying the elusiveness of desire that was such a principal preoccupation of Marguerite Duras. Heavily under the influence of her earliest love affair, Duras moulded her autobiography into the tissue of her work, blurring the line between fiction and reality, presence and memory, love and longing. Capturing the ineffable on screen by extending the boundaries of cinema as visual medium, Duras exposed desire in its rawest form, purely feminine. This thesis will argue that by doing so, Duras empowered women as writers, authors, subjects, and created space for a sincere dialogue about love and sex.

Tato práce zkoumá způsoby, jakými Marguerite Durasová, jedna z nejkontroverznějších a nejplodnějších spisovatelek a filmařek dvacátého století, využívá prvky filmového jazyka k odhalování komplexnosti vnitřní krajiny ženských postav, na jejímž základě buduje specifickou poetiku svých děl. Durasová vycházela při svém přístupu k filmovému médiu z nového románu, francouzského literárního hnutí, které zpochybňovalo tradiční způsoby literárního realismu. Elementy, na nichž stavěla svou typickou poetiku zahrnují destrukci tradičních dramaturgických principů, fragmentaci času, oddělení zvuku a obrazu nebo repetitivnost. Na základě srovnání filmů, u nichž byla Durasová autorkou předlohy a zároveň režisérkou s těmi, kde režii převzal některý z jejích mužských kolegů, demonstruje má práce, jak zásadní je vzhledem k vyobrazení prchavosti touhy, která je jedním z klíčových témat Durasové, využití experimentálních postupů. Silně ovlivněna svou první láskou, používala Durasová autobiografické prvky jak meritum jejího díla, přičemž došlo k rozmazání linie mezi fikcí a realitou, přítomností a pamětí, láskou a touhou. Zachycením nepopsatelného skrze extenzi hranic filmu jako vizuálního média, obnažila Durasová ženskou touhu v její nejčistší podobě, čistě feminní. Má práce vychází z předpokladu, že Durasová tímto způsobem posilovala ženy jako autorky a tvůrkyně a vytvářela prostor pro upřímný dialog o lásce a sexu.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The words emerge from her body without her realizing it, as if she were being visited by the memory of a language long forsaken.

– Marguerite Duras in *La Pluie d'été (Summer Rain)*<sup>1</sup>

Desire is a thematic constant in the films and literature of Marguerite Duras, the most translated French female writer of the twentieth century; screenwriter, playwright and film director, whose courageous exploration of human sexuality and pain stirred up many controversies. According to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, desire is a constant denial of closure,<sup>2</sup> and writing about desire thus becomes both the cause and consequence of pain, a masochistic endeavour to catch the elusive and to speak about the unspeakable. On screen, Duras captured the elusive, the ineffable, by resorting to an unconventional film language, the poetics that refuses the norms of the classical Hollywood cinema, demonstrating Duras's modern artistic tendencies stemming from her zeitgeist. Desire in Duras is treated both thematically and aesthetically, through fragmentation of narrative, stylised mise-en-scène, elliptical writing and editing, desynchronisation of sound and image, and the repetitiveness of themes, situations, words and visual motifs. Alienation, triangular situations, emotional or physical estrangements and attempts to relive the past by constant returns to memory are recurring plot concerns in her narrative, revealing disjunction within her characters and the perennial lack as the result of their abandonment.

From the moment she started writing, Marguerite Duras wrote about desire, death, madness and violence. She vigorously kept a diary from her early age, wrote in secrecy not to be discovered by her mother, but from 1942, she started publishing her writings as a journalist. She first gained public recognition with her

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<sup>1</sup> M. Duras, *Summer Rain*, trans. B. Bray, New York: Scribner, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> J. Derrida in C. J. Murphy, *New Narrative Regions: the Role of Desire in the Films and Novels of Marguerite Duras*, *Literature/Film Quarterly* vol. 12, no. 2, 1984, p. 123.

1950 semi-autobiographical novel *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (*The Sea Wall*). After the publications of novels *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (*The Sailor of Gibraltar*, 1952), *Moderato cantabile* (1958), *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (*The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, 1964), *Le Vice-consul* (*The Vice-consul*, 1965) and *L'Amour* (1971), she encountered the writing crisis that would last for ten years, during which she immersed herself into cinema and theatre, experimenting and polemicizing, but at the same time suffering addiction, an intense creativity that only alcohol could tolerate. She regarded film to be "not an adaptation of a text, but rather its maturation, its prolonged life, and in certain ways, its closure",<sup>3</sup> thus developing a cine-roman, the hybrid text that is at the same time a novel, a theatre play and a film. This approach to intertextuality and self-reflectivity associated Duras with the *nouveau roman* literary and cinematic movement that occurred during the 1950s in France, a period during which Duras achieved many fruitful film collaborations, most notably with Alain Resnais for the film *Hiroshima mon amour* (*Hiroshima, My Love*, 1959). Dissatisfied with the way other directors – all men, not to be omitted – had adapted her novels and texts for cinema, Duras decided to direct her own films, thus beginning a twenty-years-long filmmaking career marked by experimentation and radical disjunction of image and sound.

In 1980, healed from alcoholism, Duras returned to writing fiction, reaching the creative peak on her seventieth birthday in 1984 when she received the prestigious Prix Goncourt award for *L'Amant* (*The Lover*). Until then, Duras's textual virility gave way in some critical camps to ferocious misogyny, a sort of hatred which continued to pursue her until her old age, often discouraging her and forcing her into even fiercer solitude and addiction. The criticism was by all means concerned with the fact she was a female writer. Like Simone de Beauvoir, Duras

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<sup>3</sup> M. Duras in W. F. Van Wert, *The Film Career of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, New York: Redgrave, 1977, p. 10.



wrote readily accessible political pieces, but in fiction she refused the transparency of the engaged literature and socialist realism, which provided much of the criticism of her work from both radical feminists and conservative readers.<sup>4</sup> In the lieu of Beauvoir's definition of a woman as social construct, Duras was vastly criticized precisely for her essentialist view on femininity. She herself stated in the interview with the American critic Susan Husserl-Kapit: "I think feminine literature is an organic, translated writing, translated from blackness, from darkness. Women have been in darkness for centuries...and when women write, they translate this darkness. Men don't translate. They begin from a theoretical platform, already elaborated."<sup>5</sup> Hence, Duras did not provide any theoretical framework for her art; she grounded her narrative voice in her biological sex and feminine intuition, which is the main fabric of her poetics and the toehold of my analysis. To clarify, Duras's art did not imply the sexual revolution announced by Beauvoir, but rather suggested an acceptance of own intuitive femininity as a part of the general humanity. Apropos, in 1961, the French critic Jacques Guicharnaud wrote: "The novels of Duras, a woman writer, are especially refreshing in that the heroines have no need to become soldiers, intellectuals, social workers or lesbians in order to live or love or suffer."<sup>6</sup> Her female protagonists are thus stripped of any social engagement or ideological statement, thus freeing the path to their essential truth. Sharing with Duras the same essentialist view on femininity, my research in the thesis will opt out from analysing the ideological background of her films, assuming the standpoint that is neither feminist nor conservative. I will argue that Duras's poetics of desire stems from *the feminine territories* as the French writer

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<sup>4</sup> J. Winston, *Forever Feminine: Marguerite Duras and Her French Critics*, *New Literary History*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1993, p. 470.

<sup>5</sup> S. Husserl-Kapit, *An Interview with Marguerite Duras*, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1975, p. 423.

<sup>6</sup> J. Guicharnaud in Winston, 1993, p. 472.

Marcelle Marini puts it;<sup>7</sup> from *pure* femininity, free from political, socially constructed, cultural and ideological colours, which subsequently differentiates Duras from her fellow male filmmakers and contemporaries. In the thesis, therefore, I will attempt to demonstrate that Duras's unique film language stems precisely from the "dark, feminine" place, from a mysterious realm of intuition and synchronicity that paves the way for poetry about love and desire.

"I invented my own discourse because I had no other references," Duras herself stated, becoming thus the organic spokeswoman for the European literary current preoccupied with the correlation between writing and libido.<sup>8</sup> Through the paradoxical allegation of intellect and sensuality, an ontological opposition emerged within her work, which professor Ingrid Šafranek, the seminal Croatian translator of Duras's work, refers to as *the poetics of desire*.<sup>9</sup> Such poetics presupposes inscription of the sensual, feminine into the text, thus becoming liminal, residing in some dark place between what is intelligible and rational. Poetics is defined as the set of techniques used in poetry and literature, which I here apply to cinema equivalently with the term the film language. The poetics as a literary term is appropriate when discussing Duras's cinema work, since her cinema derives directly from her writing and her approach towards literature as the thesis will attempt to demonstrate. For instance, in the same manner as she replaced sentences with single nouns in her novels, she used steady single shots and long takes in her films; pauses, blanks and gaps in her literary texts are transposed to films through silences and the use of black screen which will be thoroughly discussed in the thesis. So the term poetics of desire directs the analysis to these particular motifs that are inscribed, rather than described in the

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<sup>7</sup> M. Marini in Winston, 1993, p. 478.

<sup>8</sup> M. Duras in A. Zlatar, *Tekst, tijelo, trauma: ogledi o suvremenoj ženskoj književnosti*, Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2004, p. 210. My translation.

<sup>9</sup> I. Šafranek in Zlatar, 2004. p. 210.

films, most notably in *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Détruire, dit-elle* (*Destroy, She Said*, 1969), *La Femme du Gange* (*The Woman of the Ganges*, 1973), *India Song* (1975), *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (*Agatha and the Limitless Readings*, 1981) and *L'Homme atlantique* (*The Atlantic Man*, 1981). These films will therefore be the subjects of my research.

In these passionate and melancholic films, love is always the crucial event, the impossible love, overshadowed by melancholy. Duras insisted that love as the first principle of philosophy is the most powerful force in dealing with anxiety and death, and that love and sexual energy are the strongest in human beings. She also, strongly believing that men and women are different not only biologically but also on an emotional level, endorsed the authenticity of desire and its emotional and physical truth in her female protagonists. In this way, her women become the subject of their own, rather than someone else's, male's desire, and since in most of her work the protagonists are women, the thesis will explore the treatment of female desire in the aforementioned films. One of the key research questions is precisely the link between one's femininity and its cinematic expression – did Duras attempt to construct a feminine film language or she exceeded the boundaries of gender when accessing desire, reaching in depths of human condition in love and longing? What formal, stylistic and thematic markers point towards a female authorial presence, especially when portraying sexuality and romance on screen – and is the *female* component relevant when accessing the nature of desire? These are the questions guiding my analysis.

Lastly, a particular theoretical angle has to be kept in mind when discussing desire in Duras's films: sorrow as the focal point of her eroticism. Expressing an impossible pleasure, the unfulfilled desire, this sorrow turns into the agonizing sign

of frigidity, the prison in which a woman mourns for her lost lover.<sup>10</sup> The source of sadness is abandonment, a lack, a trauma inflicted by the discovery of solitude. Although Duras herself strongly refused to be related to any theoretical concept, for the sake of understanding certain artistic choices she made in her films, namely her aesthetic treatment of absence, we have to mention the poststructuralist notion of desire as *lack*, deriving mainly from the writings and lectures of the French philosopher and post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. His concept of desire contrasted the leading Freudian pleasure principle theory, suggesting that desire does not stem from a human instinct to seek pleasure and avoid pain, as Freud thought, but rather it comes from the absence of the desired object, as the result of a lack. Unlike need, which can be satisfied, desire can never be satisfied: it is constant in its pressure and eternal.<sup>11</sup> The attainment of desire does not consist in its fulfilment but in its reproduction, which Duras connected very much with the essence and reasons of writing. Desire to love and desire to write, according to her, stem from the same place – the inner void that can never be fulfilled, the void that signifies the lack or loss of love. This directly refers to Lacan's idea of the unattainable object of desire, where this object is not the aim towards which desire tends, a person for example, but rather the very cause of desire. Desire is thus not a relation to an object but to a lack, absence, void.<sup>12</sup> Such view on desire found in Duras encouraged the French feminists to adopt her as the representative of the so-called feminine writing, *écriture féminine*,<sup>13</sup> presupposing

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<sup>10</sup> J. Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. L. S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> J. Lacan, *The Signification of the Phallus in Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Écriture féminine* is a term coined by Hélène Cixous in her manifesto *Le Rire de la Méduse* (*The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1976), literally meaning "feminine writing." Using Freud's psychoanalytic concept that woman is constituted by and as "lack", referring to the lack of a penis, Cixous argued that consequently the female unconscious is less repressed and less radically separated from the consciousness, and that a woman has always been in a position of otherness, decentred, therefore freer to move and create. The idea of *écriture féminine* comes from Freud's notion that women are incomprehensible, less moral,

that "a woman should write herself, write about women, and bring women to writing."<sup>14</sup> The woman at the centre of the Duras's narrative is the woman seen as absence, who has lost the power of self-definition, which is why Duras employs narrative and aesthetic tools that prevent any possibility of identification and definition of her female characters.<sup>15</sup> Her women are abandoned by their lovers: the female protagonist in *Hiroshima mon amour* lost her first love, the German soldier in Nevers; the title heroine from *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is publicly abandoned by Michael Richardson, who then causes suffering in the life of Anne-Marie Stretter in *Le Vice-consul* and *India Song*; Elisabeth Alione loses her stillborn child and her lover attempts suicide in *Détruire, dit-elle*; and finally, the young French girl in *L'Amant* knows her liaison with the older Chinese lover is impossible and inevitably condemned. The void that desolates the sanity of Duras's female protagonists generates the desire for the lost object, the absence in which the woman wanders aimlessly, trapped in her own memory. As the thesis will attempt to demonstrate, the absence is the key to Duras's poetics, treated visually, aurally and thematically.

In the following, I will therefore examine the way Duras employs the elements of film language in order to expose the nature of desire. I will seek to answer how and why Duras came to the creation of distinctive film poetics, with the feminine intuition in the tissue of her oeuvre, and in which way she offered the unique vision of established modes of narration, blurring the boundaries between cinema and literature. My research is focused on the plot of female desire and its

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less rational than men; "the dark continent," as Freud called women. Cixous used this as a metaphor to celebrate the lack of control possible over a woman. I find this undoubtedly present in Duras's work; the notion of female as the dark, mysterious and irrational is perfectly embodied in the protagonist of *India Song*, Anne-Marie Stretter. See further in M. Klages, *Poststructuralist Feminist Theory*, Boulder: University of Colorado, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> H. Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, p. 875.

<sup>15</sup> J. M. Plessis, *Femininity and Authorship: Deren, Duras and Von Trotta*, doctoral dissertation, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1995, p. 90.

distinctive poetics that pushed her cinema beyond the realms of feminist film theory and at the same time distinguished her from her fellow *nouveau roman* filmmakers. I will finally argue that the creation of the unconventional film language was necessary to expose the nature of desire as something mysterious, melancholic and feminine.

The thesis is structured in three chapters, starting with the sources and inspirations for Duras's filmmaking career, with the emphasis on her romantic experiences during her formative years in Saigon, followed by her later link with the intellectual and artistic current in France. The second chapter explores her most significant screenwriting achievement – *Hiroshima mon amour* – that marks the conception of her filmmaking style, and her solo directorial debut *Détruire, dit-elle*, which was the first manifestation of her fully explored film poetics. In the third, most expanded chapter, I will examine her mature film language in the India cycle, mostly focusing on the relation between sound and image. I will conclude my analysis by examining her last films, *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* and *L'Homme atlantique*, where she radically deconstructed the film medium. The research is based on the comparative analysis of primary sources, Duras's novels, interviews and films, and the secondary sources, vastly written by film theorists, French literature scholars and film critics. It is necessary to note that due to Duras's immense body of work, I limit myself to the exploration of only aforementioned films where I found desire to be treated cinematically in the most innovative manner.

## II. SOURCES OF DURAS'S POETICS, AND DESIRE

This chapter will explore two main influences that, combined together, gave birth to much of Duras's thematic preoccupations and aesthetic choices: her memories from Indochina from her formative years, and the French intellectual and artistic climate of her adulthood.

### A. Memories from Saigon

I saw Calcutta once, but I was seventeen years old. I spent a day there, when the boat stopped, and then I never forgot it. And leprosy, I saw it at Singapore, on the customs dock at Singapore. I never forgot it. But I think one must go further than Calcutta and Singapore. One must go to the rice fields of the south, in Indochina, where I was born.

— Marguerite Duras in *Les Parleuses (Woman to Woman)*<sup>16</sup>

Inconsistencies, uncertainties and gaps exist in the autobiographical accounts of Marguerite Duras, and these ought to be observed as the result of a calculated strategy designed to undermine any attempt to use autobiography to account for her writing. What binds her literary work and her films together is that both expose people and events from her life, but even though she transformed her experience into her art, she did not simply tell the story of her life, as she did not think that the chaos of memory could be subjected to the contrived order of a linear and logically structured narrative.<sup>17</sup> Duras's retellings of her early stories describe a network of complex and ambivalent relationships most often dramatized in the form of a series of superimposed scenes, which, like any other screen memory, become detached from any narrative sequence.<sup>18</sup> Her life, thus, becomes a fragmented narration in itself.

Some facts, however, remain intact. Duras was born Marguerite Donnadiou<sup>19</sup> on April 4, 1914 in the small town of Gia-Dinh near Saigon, at the

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<sup>16</sup> X. Gauthier and M. Duras, *Woman to Woman*, trans. K. A. Jensen, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> R. Gunther, *Marguerite Duras*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> L. Hill, *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> The pseudonym Duras was taken from the name of the small town of Duras in the Lot-et-Garonne where her father died.

time part of the Union of French Indochina. She was the youngest of three children. Her representation of marginalization and colonization in many of her works is often linked to this period of her life.<sup>20</sup> Her father, a mathematics teacher, died of amoebic dysentery in 1919, leaving her mother, also a teacher, with four-years-old Marguerite and her two brothers, Pierre (9) and Paulo (7) to survive in much reduced circumstances. The family was also marginalised by the white colonial bourgeoisie who perceived them as a part of the underclass in their social order. The marginalization Duras experienced during this time stayed with her in her adult life as well, when she still claimed that she was a "Creole," a child of Vietnam and of mixed origins, who grew up speaking Vietnamese.<sup>21</sup> In 1921, the Donnadiou family experienced a tragedy that would be told and retold later by Duras in many various forms, starting with the novel *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) about her mother's misfortunes in Indochina. To clarify, Duras's mother bought a piece of land to be farmed, which was flooded for six months every year by the China Sea. Discouraged after trying to build dams to make the land arable, she soon returned to Vinh-Long and remained poor for several years. The humiliating experience led Duras's mother to mental instability and economic hardships, and it naturally had psychological effects on her three children as well.<sup>22</sup> Seeing herself as an outsider, different from other white girls in the colony, Duras found her refuge in the Eden Cinema in Saigon, where she was amazed by silent films, particularly Charlie Chaplin's.<sup>23</sup>

In numerous interviews, fictional and autobiographical texts, Duras recounts the intensity of her experiences of those early years, her mother's fluctuating bipolar disorder and Pierre's violence against her and *le petit frère* Paulo. What is

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Plessis, 1995, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>23</sup> Gunther, 1990, p. 3.



crucial to examine further, bearing in mind her vision of desire as a constant, eternal force that can never be satisfied, is precisely Duras's tender, nearly romantic rapport with Paulo. While her mother directed all of her maternal feelings towards the older brother, Duras was close to Paulo, so close that she has insinuated in her autobiographical works that they had an incestuous relationship.<sup>24</sup> Desire in Duras, as *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, *India Song*, *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* or *L'Amant* show, is by nature errant; its course continually takes it beyond the closed arena of the couple, and the reasons for this are precisely related to the implicit theme of incest that colours much of her work.<sup>25</sup> Incest posits at the origin of desire both allegation and separation, radical familiarity and untouchability, generating a powerful fantasy that in Duras's case served as the seed of her life-long vision of desire as the companion of melancholy. Deriving from Georges Bataille's philosophy, French theorist Leslie Hill argues that prohibition is what reinforces desire, and desire itself is dependent on the separation that the taboo effects.<sup>26</sup> The more unattainable the object of love, the more powerful the desire to merge with it. As traced in Duras's novel *Le Vice-consul* and 1981 film *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, which revolves around the implicitly incestuous love between brother and sister, the culmination of desire is not what provokes satisfaction, but rather the realisation of the necessary impossibility of satisfaction, which relates to the aforementioned Lacanian theory. The object of desire is not fixed, but assumes different shapes, names and personal histories in each of her work, which leads us to another significant relationship from her formative years, the one famously captured in her best-selling 1984 novel *L'Amant*.

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<sup>24</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 41; Plessis, 1995, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1930, fifteen-year-old Marguerite Duras met a Chinese millionaire twelve years her senior, while crossing the Mekong River on a ferry. At the time her family struggled with financial difficulties and, according to her autobiographical writings and consistent retellings of the affair, maintaining a sexual relationship with the Chinese man was financially profitable for Duras. She supported her entire family with the lover's money, which made young Marguerite become the provider of the family, independent of her mother. Duras wrote about this morally dubious but empowering experience of sexual pleasure, ravishing desire and economic exploitation already in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, but it was not until 1984 and the publication of *L'Amant* that the details of the affair were revealed. The novel is perceived by readers as confessional literature more than autobiography, as "revelations about the scandalous interracial adolescent affair of a famous woman writer."<sup>27</sup> Duras's story speaks of a forbidden, obsessive affair and its representation in memory, similar to the story she wrote in *Hiroshima mon amour*. Interestingly, in both works, the lover's name remains unknown, and by designating the male lover in the title of the work, Duras creates a woman's memory of him, generalizing, as if suggesting that every woman has "the lover", embodying the face of her sexual renaissance. After its publication, Duras wrote in her essay *Les Hommes (Men)*: "The couple in *L'Amant* fills most men with an unexpected desire, the one that rises up from the depths of time and humanity – the desire for incest and rape."<sup>28</sup>

The third most significant memory from her formative years that influenced her vision of femininity and desire was the encounter with Elisabeth Striedter, a wealthy Swiss woman married to a diplomatic administrator, who was Duras's

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<sup>27</sup> M. R. Schuster, *Marguerite Duras Revisited*, Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1993, p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> M. Duras, *Stvarni život*, trans. N. Bojić, Sarajevo: Biblioteka Feniks Svjetlost, 1987, p. 41. My translation.

inspiration for Anne-Marie Stretter, the mythical heroine of her 1975 film *India Song*. This female protagonist plays such a crucial role in the work of Duras that it is necessary to examine the reasons of her prominence in Duras's novels and films.

In the 1920s, the Striedters moved to Vinh-Long on the Mekong river where Duras's family was living, and it was there that young Marguerite first encountered Elisabeth, stunned by her beauty and elegance. Faced with a mentally unstable mother with whom she had an ambivalent, conflictive relationship, Duras saw in Elisabeth a fantasised escape from her own family and a desired maternal and feminine role-model.<sup>29</sup> An episode from Elisabeth's life that profoundly affected Duras occurred shortly after Elisabeth's arrival to Vinh-Long, when a young man committed suicide out of love for her. Elisabeth's elusiveness and inaccessibility transformed her into an ideal object of desire, desired by Duras herself, who in order to liberate herself from this enchantment had to kill her in her own fiction, which explains the suicide by drowning of Anne-Marie Stretter in *India Song*.<sup>30</sup> Duras herself admitted: "I was madly in love with this woman, and I kept making the same films, the same books, when I said to myself, 'she has to die'."<sup>31</sup> The real-life Elisabeth was evidence of the conjuncture of desire and death, the impossibility of fulfilment of desire and the effects of its deprivation. Likewise, the character of Anne-Marie Stretter serves as the embodiment of this dance of Eros and Thanatos, which will be of great relevance later in the thesis when discussing the India cycle.

To summarize, Duras's early testimonies of the detrimental effects desire can have on human lives and mental health are undeniably interwoven in the tissue of her oeuvre, whose hallmark is exactly the repetition with variations of the same

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<sup>29</sup> Gunther, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> S. Lamy and R. André, *Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, Montreal: Spirale, 1981, p. 33.

core material. Her creative enterprise, argues Gunther, was shaped by the memories from Saigon, but her involvement in the political and cultural history of France, contemporary philosophical streams and artistic movements such as *nouveau roman* and the Left Bank cinema, played an equally important part in the formation of her distinctive film poetics.<sup>32</sup>

#### B. French Milieu

When she was eighteen, Duras left Indochina to study first mathematics, then political sciences and law at the Sorbonne University. Subsequently, while working for the French Colonial Office as a researcher and archivist, she married Robert Antelme, also a writer. In 1940, she offered her first novel to the well-known publisher Gallimard and was refused, until 1943 when the novel was published under the title *Les Impudents*, signed under the pseudonym Marguerite Duras. The same year, two major events occurred in her life; she lost her first child, a son, who was stillborn, and seven months later, her younger brother died in Indochina. The tragedy of losing a child heavily influenced the formulation of Duras's vision of femininity that is embedded in motherhood, which during the 1970s would differentiate her from the French feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir who rejected Duras's essentialist view on femininity.<sup>33</sup> The character of a woman who lost her child due to miscarriage will appear in Duras's hybrid text and film *Détruire, dit-elle* in 1969, discussed in the following chapter at greater length.

These two personal tragedies took place against the backdrop of the World War II, and the same year Duras joined the Resistance movement with Antelme

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<sup>32</sup> Gunther, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> On one hand, Duras's fiction claims in her essentialist mode that women are essentially different from men, that women do not write from the same place as men, and that women's writing is a translation of the absent, but true, origin of feminine desire; on the other hand, her journalism in particular was reading femininity as a social and cultural construct that fluctuates, depending on its specific context. See further in J. Galop, *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elisabeth Abel, New York: Cornell University, 1983, p. 289.

and her lover Dionys Mascolo. The three of them shortly lived in an unconventional symbiosis, as Duras was at the same time maintaining a relationship with both men. Soon, Antelme was taken away to the Dachau concentration camp and upon his return, once his health was stabilized, Duras and Antelme divorced and her affair with Mascolo produced a son, Jean, born in 1947. Duras apparently had affairs with several men from the leftist intellectual group centred around her Saint-Germain-des-Prés apartment, including philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and film director Gérard Jarlot. Duras's personal life and attitude towards romantic relationships is very much reflected in her work: love relationships are not limited by conventional parameters, nor do they abruptly begin and end; rather, they drift into new passions and alliances, with a certain love triangle constantly at presence. She writes about this fluidity and intertwining of desire between couples in her 1950s novels *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia* (*The Little Horses of Tarquinia*, 1953) and *Moderato cantabile*, and transcribes it to film in *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Détruire, dit-elle* and *India Song*, among many others.

Duras brought to her writing these complicated, unique, intimate experiences of a young woman from the dominant class who felt oppressed by her family and by a society that treated her as the colonizer, and during the 1940s and 1950s, she continued to establish her reputation as a virile writer in the fruitful French artistic and intellectual climate.<sup>34</sup> However, in the same manner as she opposed to be linked to the French feminism and the *écriture féminine* during the 1970s, Duras also refused to adhere to a conventional writing or filming style and did not associate herself with other writers of her milieu, such were most notably the ones attached to the literary movement *nouveau roman*. Nevertheless, her fiction reflects the modernist literary and cinematic trends of the time, and Duras

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<sup>34</sup> Schuster, 1993, p. 35.

has rightly so been hailed as a *nouveau romancier* and an auteur filmmaker.<sup>35</sup> In order to understand the creation and evolution of her cinematic vision, it is important to look closer into the stylistic inspirations and artistic influences she was exposed to while living in Paris. I will limit the analyses to the authors that Duras herself explicitly appreciated.

The connections between *nouveau roman* and the modern cinema are manifold. The two main representatives, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Duras, not only consciously applied the methods developed in their literary works to their filmmaking practice, but have also extensively written for modernist directors, most significantly for Alain Resnais.<sup>36</sup> Although these writers have encouraged the use of narrative tools like voice-over and flashbacks by emphasising the importance of textuality and by inscribing rhythm, the symbolic and meta-textual references in the text, the relationship between modern cinema and *nouveau roman* can be approached from an opposite angle as well, meaning it can be argued that the narrative conception of *nouveau roman* was originally influenced by cinema itself. The non-linearity, dismantling of conventional narrative storytelling, fragmented mental representations and the use of text to expose rather than describe the inner landscape of the characters are the typical traits of *nouveau roman* both in literature and cinema, but the fragmented nature of seeing might derive from the very rise of cinema as an art form that relies on montage and the craft of editing. Montage destroyed the monopoly of classical linear storytelling and became the point of reference for modern authors in various art forms, namely literature, since it efficiently establishes temporal and spatial boundaries of *diegesis*, and invites the viewer to participate actively in the

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Resnais's first three films were based upon literary material written by prominent *nouveau roman* writers: alongside Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* was written by Alain Robbe-Grillet, and *Muriel* by Jean Cayrol, who together with Chris Marker also co-wrote the screenplay for Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard*.

construction of the meaning, as opposed to describing the intention or morale of the story.<sup>37</sup> While the realist writers, in order to establish reality in their fiction, had to resort to lengthy descriptions, the modern writer, employing the principles of montage, depicts the reality through fragments. Duras herself called this way of writing *écriture courante*, writing in streams, which I perceive analogous to "writing with light," meaning with a camera.<sup>38</sup> The importance of rhythm, density and the principle of association rather than chronology are the montage features transposed to the literature of *nouveau roman*, that is to the writing style and syntax associated with Duras.

The most significant characteristic of modernism, seen perhaps most obviously in cubism, is fragmentation, and the deepest sense of modernism's fragmented character is the structure's disconnectedness from reality, meaning the absence of psychological depth.<sup>39</sup> The fragmented nature of seeing in the modernist cinema is directly manifested through the disjunction of content and form, temporal fragmentations and the existence of the duality of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>40</sup> The idea of continuity is thus conceived in two dimensions of the film: the continuity of narrative and the continuity of form. Deriving from post-structuralism, the prominent philosophy of Duras's contemporaneity, form and content are not binary, separate unities that merely correspond to each other; they are fluid, overlapping, but independent of each other at the same time. One of the primary examples demonstrating this in the modernist cinema, a film with discontinuous narrative but emphasized continuous visuals, is Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year in Marienbad*, 1961). In contrast, films with

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<sup>37</sup> J. Musabegović, *Pogovor: Od eksperimenta do dokumenta in Bol* by M. Duras, Sarajevo: Feniks Svjetlost, 1985, p. 194. My translation.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> A. Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 134.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

continuous narrative but discontinuous visual texture are the early films of Jean-Luc Godard, who, unlike Resnais, is not attached to the *nouveau roman* filmmaking trend, the Left Bank (*rive gauche*) cinema. Duras felt strong affinity to Godard and certain aspects of his editing technique, like the use of jump-cuts and ellipsis, are traced to her films.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Godard's decomposition of shots into isolated gestures and movements through the use of slow motion can be associated with extremely slow rhythm and the regular use of fixed frames typical of many of Duras's films.

Another French director apart from the *nouveau roman* filmmakers that influenced Duras is Robert Bresson, for whom she explicitly stated "that he is the greatest of all" and that every one of his films had a profound effect on her.<sup>42</sup> The influence of Bresson can be traced in particular to the use of narrative ellipsis, empty spaces and automatic gestures in Duras's early films like *Détruire, dit-elle* and *Nathalie Granger* (1972), especially through close-ups of hands in the latter.<sup>43</sup> Actually, Gilles Deleuze draws explicit connections between Bresson and Duras when discussing the affection-image: following his analysis of tactile space in Bresson's *Pickpocket*, Deleuze describes Duras's *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* as a 'slow celebration of the affect'.<sup>44</sup> Like Bresson, Duras uses anti-representational strategies of privileging affect and senses over mere visual description, with a particular interest in the sense of touch. This will be discussed in the thesis in greater length when analysing *mise-en-scène* in the India cycle.

However, Duras is chiefly associated with the Left Bank filmmakers, the modernist auteurs deriving from the *nouveau roman*, whose manipulation of

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<sup>41</sup> Gunther, 1990, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> *Marguerite Duras on Robert Bresson* [online video], 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWwUoDI3jws> (accessed 16 May 2019).

<sup>43</sup> L. McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis*, London: Legenda, 2012, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> G. Deleuze in McMahon, 2012, p. 91.



temporal and spatial continuity affected Duras's cinematic formation in the most immediate manner. For the sake of clarifying, it is important to distinguish two trends in manipulating narrative time in modernist cinema, both achieving radical narrative continuity: the wandering films and the mental journey genre. The first one is represented by the continuous movements of the characters disconnected from their environment, a continuous form of travel which has its origins in the classical neorealist wandering film. It is characterised by the use of long takes, very slow development of the plot and extensive representation of scenes that precede the action, the scenes where "nothing happens", in other words, *temps morts*.<sup>45</sup> Antonioni, Akerman, Garrel and Wenders are associated with this trend. The second trend – the mental journey – is directly influenced by the *nouveau roman* and represented by the films of Resnais, Robbe-Grillet and Chris Marker. It merges different mental and temporal dimensions so that the transition from one to the other becomes imperceptible.<sup>46</sup> Both trends thus create a film of a complex mental structure where experiencing time is not subjected to the logic of the unfolding of the plot, and in both, the film itself becomes the ultimate temporal experience. Duras is associated with both of the trends; the mental journey genre is explored in *Hiroshima mon amour* and *India Song*, and the wandering film characteristics are found in *La Femme du Gange*, *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* and *L'Homme atlantique*. Duras's work is thus marked by the dualistic nature of continuity typical for the modernist art cinema, by the two contrasting principles in action: thematic continuity, based on the principle of repetition, and formal, stylistic discontinuity, based on fragmentation. Her films are thematically and narratively continuous, all built on the same premise – the impossibility of love and the persistence of memory – deriving from her intimate experiences as seen

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<sup>45</sup> Bálint Kovács, 2007, p. 134.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

earlier. On the other hand, what characterises each of them separately is discontinuity within form and style, fragmentation, through which Duras exposes the destructive nature of desire.

Duras was not an exception in the way she used discontinuity as a narrative principle. Alain Robbe-Grillet, often compared to Duras for similar interests in erotic, subversive themes and intertextuality, demonstrated the principles of *nouveau roman* – rejection of plot, psychology and linearity – in his early films *L'Immortelle* (*The Immortal*, 1963), *Trans-Europ-Express* (1966) and *L'Homme qui ment* (*The Man Who Lies*, 1968). Known for their alliance, mutual admiration, friendship and literal rivalry, both auteurs believed that “story is nothing, narration is everything” and have therefore destroyed the main principles of traditional storytelling: the coherence of time and space, the causal order of events and the clear identity of characters. For instance, Robbe-Grillet's collection of short stories *Instantanes* (1962) reflects stylistically, generically and thematically Duras's earlier collection *Des Journées entières dans les arbres* (*Entire Days in the Trees*, 1954); similarly, her novel *Dix heures et demie du soir en été* (*Ten-Thirty on a Summer Night*, 1960) can be seen as exemplifying the *nouveau roman's* stylistic practices of suggestion and ellipsis, with the majority of action taking place off-stage, construed by the reader through dialogue and minimal description.<sup>47</sup> Still, her affiliation with Lacanian psychoanalysis and adoption by the feminist movement slowly detached her from her “literary sibling”;<sup>48</sup> her increased emphasis on the authenticity of desire through female protagonists in her fiction, which had previously remained unrecognized in her socio-political and artistic milieu, represented a corrective deviance from Robbe-Grillet.

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<sup>47</sup> J. Waters, *Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet: A 'Reading in Pairs'*, doctoral dissertation, Oxford University, 1997, p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Moreover, what distinguishes Duras from other fellow writers and filmmakers is her understanding of inner female landscape as detached from the socio-political context. While other female auteurs in her proximity like Chantal Akerman and Agnès Varda discussed femininity and desire from social and political standpoints, exposing female protagonists within their oppressive settings like Varda in *Le Bonheur (Happiness, 1965)* or Akerman in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975)*, Duras was not interested in using film language to show the disjunction between the female individual and patriarchal society; rather, she used the film poetics deriving from *nouveau roman* to show the disjunction *within* a woman.

To conclude, the fragmentation of text and film narrative typical for Duras's oeuvre stems from her *zeitgeist* and the modernist tendencies to blur the temporal boundaries in literature and cinema. Duras's use of radical continuity, as a sign of eternity, never-ending melancholy and circulation of desire, derives from the collective artistic preoccupation with mental images, reflections and aimless journeys. The desire to repeat, to discuss the inner personal landscapes, to transpose her own literature into film and to resort to intertextuality hints to the overall state of mind of the post-War fifties: the compulsion to repeat and fragment reality in order to understand it better might come from the fear of forgetting the horrors lived out in the previous decade. It does not come as a surprise then that the theme of mental journey became a genre within the modernist art cinema, with its great momentum being precisely *Hiroshima mon amour* in 1959, where memory and fantasy were not just auxiliary elements to a linear plot, but became the central narrative motifs. In *Screening Modernism*, Kovács lists *Hiroshima mon amour*, together with Francois Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups (The 400 Blows, 1959)*, as the films marking the conception of the modernist cinema.<sup>49</sup> Duras

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<sup>49</sup> Bálint Kovács, 2007, p. 415.

therefore should be perceived as one of the pioneers of radical film poetics, who absorbed through her work crucial cinematic dictates of her contemporaneity: fragmentation, negation of temporal linearity, paradox as the foundation of deconstructed reality, and self-reflectivity.

### III. DESIRE TO WRITE: EARLY WORKS

The troubled consciousness imposed by the World War II and the individual melancholy due to biological, familial and interpersonal calamities have influenced Duras's writing during the 1950s, leading, as Julia Kristeva puts it, to "the aesthetics of awkwardness and non-catharsis".<sup>50</sup> By asking how the truth of pain can be spoken when the available rhetoric always seems festive,<sup>51</sup> Kristeva offers an interesting argument that Duras devised a new approach towards the ancient themes of pain and desire by combining her feminine intuition with the modernist stylistic unconventionality, discussed in the previous chapter. In 1959, Duras's innate understanding of romantic complexities, deriving from her own life, and her brilliant minimalist *nouveau roman* writing met with Alain Resnais's progressive modernist mind-set. The combination gave birth to *Hiroshima mon amour*. Following the critical success of Duras's novel *Moderato cantabile* the previous year, the collaboration with Resnais was the benchmark for her professional reputation, marking the shift in her artistic interest from literature to film. It is her first and most acclaimed screenplay that ensured her the nomination for the Academy Award in 1960. This chapter will firstly examine how this film was constructed both through her collaboration with Resnais and through her own aesthetic strategies. I will then proceed with the analysis of another film that marks the birth of Duras's film poetics, her directorial debut *Détruire, dit-elle*.

#### A. *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959)

That he is dead doesn't keep her from desiring him. She wants him so badly she can't bear it any longer, and he is dead. An exhausted body, breathing heavily. Her mouth is moist. Her pose is that of a lustful woman, immodest to the point of vulgarity. More immodest than anywhere else. Disgusting. She desires a dead man.

— Marguerite Duras in *Hiroshima mon amour*<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Kristeva, 1992, p. 140.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> M. Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour*, trans. R. Seaver, New York: Grove, 1960, p. 96.

David Bordwell argues that "*Hiroshima mon amour* is one of the most important films ever made, summing up many tendencies of modern cinema, but also indicating new directions for later filmmakers."<sup>53</sup> The film was a creative departure for both Duras, at that time already an established novelist, and Resnais, until then primarily a documentary filmmaker. "The new directions" that Bordwell refers to might come from the fact that the film was indeed the new direction for both of the auteurs, who have been so open and novelty-seeking in their collaboration perhaps precisely due to their relative inexperience.

### 1. The Collaboration with Alain Resnais

In 1958, after reading *Moderato cantabile*, Resnais approached Duras to write the fictional screenplay for the film that was firstly intended to be a documentary about Hiroshima. Resnais and Duras shared a view that the events of Hiroshima could not be represented through realistic film techniques, since direct forms of representation often fail to adequately account for certain human emotions. In her script for *Hiroshima mon amour*, Duras famously wrote: "It is impossible to speak about Hiroshima. All one can do is to speak of the impossibility of speaking about Hiroshima".<sup>54</sup> In her early literary works, Duras is generally sceptical towards language and its tendency to solidify memories that might better remain fluid, and she is uncertain that language can succeed to represent profound tragic experiences that go beyond the rational. It reveals an interesting question how can a rational category as language is manage to pay a full tribute to something irrational, inexpressible and intuitive as memory is. Resnais shared this view and trusted Duras when she suggested to tell the story about memory through an intimate rapport between two nameless lovers in Hiroshima, a visiting

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<sup>53</sup> D. Bordwell, On the Criterion Channel: Five reasons why HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR still matters, *Observations on film art* [website], 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HDbPcx> (accessed 26 May 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Duras, 1960, p. 15.

French actress and a local Japanese architect. The film thus became a love story that lies in between rational and irrational, political and personal; an exploration of memory and desire that surpasses the limits of any genre, especially the conventional melodrama, and best falls into the category of a mental journey film, the genre mentioned in the previous chapter. Taking the film as an early predecessor of *India Song*, regarded as Duras's most mature film, Duras's screenplay for *Hiroshima mon amour* can be seen as an audio-visual experiment that opposed the dominant style of the classical Hollywood cinema, which relies on rationality and logic: continuity editing, temporal linearity, causality of plot and characters defined by their goals and psychology.<sup>55</sup>

In order to understand the extent of Duras's contribution to the film, one has to bear in mind the unique nature of her collaboration with Resnais. Their collaboration had three main stages. The first stage was the Japanese shooting in spring 1958, for which Duras wrote the initial scenario and the characters' profiles. The second stage was the letter correspondence between Duras and Resnais. While in France, Duras was writing the scenes for the Tokyo shooting, recording herself reading the dialogues and then sending the tapes to Resnais, who was constructing the scenes with the actors with the help of Duras's recordings. He wanted to reproduce, in the visual sequence, the same rhythm as produced by Duras's voice, through performance and later editing.<sup>56</sup> The third stage was the French shooting, for which Duras wrote additional notes for the scenes taking place in Nevers. Throughout the entire production, Duras provided detailed descriptions and stage directions, attempting to anchor control of the film in the written text. For instance, the opening scene of the film is written in a very detailed manner, specified by Duras to be the image of the "infamous mushroom of bikini," followed by the

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<sup>55</sup> D. Bordwell, J. Staiger and K. Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production*, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> L. Adler, *Marguerite Duras: a life*, trans. A. Glasheen, London: Gollancz, 2000, p. 107.

second image of two torsos in the embrace, "drenched with ashes, rain, dew or sweat."<sup>57</sup> Duras then gives specific instructions about the emotional effect that the scene should produce, which points towards a very individual and unique collaboration between a writer and a director.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the screenplay incorporates a great deal of the material absent from the film but integral to the text: auxiliary dialogues that are designated to be eliminated from the film, a synopsis, a foreword, footnotes which describe the ways in which the film should differ from the text, lengthy didascalia and appendices. So, more than simply describing the shots, Duras expands the film's universe by adding descriptions and characters' perspectives, some even written in the first person singular.<sup>59</sup>

The principal narrative interest in Duras's screenplay is the equivalence between the Frenchwoman's suffering and the historical trauma in Hiroshima, efficiently shown in the opening sequence. The film begins with a woman's body embracing the Japanese architect, superimposed on a scene that is the body of the city of Hiroshima. Desire that these images provoke, specified by Duras in the script, is in fact the desire to see, to identify the objects from the woman's memory. As the images and the accompanying voice-over of the opening scene – "*You saw nothing in Hiroshima.*" – suggest, the woman attempts to reassess the past, both her own and the past of the city, through other people, distant witnesses. Resnais underlines this desubjectification of her look by showing us images depicting what she claims to have seen – the hospital, the memorial museum etc. – but these are not point-of-view shots nor do they incorporate any notion of her perspective. As Kaja Silverman, American art historian and critical theorist, argues in her essay *The Cure by Love, Hiroshima mon amour* is essentially

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<sup>57</sup> Duras, 1960, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> R. Davies, Screenwriting strategies in Marguerite Duras's script for 'Hiroshima, Mon Amour', *Journal of Screenwriting*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 152-153.

<sup>59</sup> S. D. Cohen, *Women and Discourse in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p. 65.



a film about a woman's failure to see, equating seeing with remembering.<sup>60</sup> The frequent use of tight close-ups of the face and the character's eyes throughout the film underline this argument. So, right from the beginning of the film, the audience is left disoriented, entering the mental realms of the characters whose voices they hear, instead of rationally being guided into the plot. The opening Hiroshima sequence is an example of unconventional flashback, meaning it does not represent the memory of the narrator whose voice we hear, but the witnesses' memory, the memory of someone off-screen. This is the first example of the disjunction of sound and image that will become the principle characteristic of Duras's cinema. It is therefore important to remember it as one of the elements that entered Duras's film language during her creative marriage with Resnais.

Let us discuss further then the most important perk of their collaboration, the disjunction between sound and image. Their choice to separate the visuals from the narrative voice tells us that their intention was not to translate basic diegetic information. Rather, the contradiction, the paradoxical merging of sound and image, evokes an affective situation that demands the active contribution of the viewer in the construction of the meaning. This choice of the unconventional flashback that separates images from the voice succeeds to express something irrational, elusive, which cannot be attained in its totality – a memory, that keeps changing and reshaping as time is passing. Resnais's use of the anthropomorphised voice speaking without a body, which Michel Chion, French film theorist and composer, names *acousmêtre*, suggests a separation of what is seen and what is said.<sup>61</sup> This choice destabilises us, confuses us, in the same manner as our memories and past loves confuse us. This is evident in the opening lines when the woman says that she has seen everything in Hiroshima, and the

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<sup>60</sup> K. Silverman, *The Cure by Love*, *Public*, no. 32: Urban Interventions, 2005, p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> M. Chion in K. Cohen, *Hiroshima mon amour: a monument to the pleasurable pangs of memory and desire*, *Discursos*, vol. 11, no. 12, 1995, p. 165.

Japanese lover negates it, saying she has seen nothing. We do not see who is saying these meaningful, contrasting sentences; rather, we see tight close-ups of the two shiny bodies entangled in a passionate embrace.<sup>62</sup> We fail to identify the people, the faces, but we identify with the feeling, the irrationality expressed.

Right from the start, the film introduces everything typical of Duras: "suffering, death, love, and their explosive merging in the mad melancholy of a woman," as Julia Kristeva puts it.<sup>63</sup> These thematic concerns are not described through an explanatory dialogue or melodramatic music, but rather inscribed in the aesthetics of Duras's overall screenplay and Resnais's mise-en-scène and non-linear editing choices, most significantly present in their collaborative disjunction of sound and image. The reason to destabilize the relation between sound and image lies in the theme of the film, trauma and desire as its consequence. The Frenchwoman's voice-over reveals how her repressed feelings emerge into her consciousness, how her memories, narrated by the voice, evoke the images which the viewer sees on screen. On this point, it is interesting to note that this kind of repressed desire is in psychoanalysis called a governing fantasy, the cause of dreams and neurotic symptoms. It involves the "hidden parameters of desire" that determine the range of possible emotional or behavioural deviations within a person.<sup>64</sup> These "hidden parameters of desire" appear precisely in the aural realm, through voice: the constellation of unconscious memories emerges into consciousness while speaking. This link of voice with memory therefore highlights the reason of using voice-over in *Hiroshima mon amour*, and in all Duras's subsequent films, as a matter of fact: desire resides in the realm of memory, synonymous to longing and melancholia, and that which inhabits our deep unconsciousness goes out on the surface through voice, excavating our desires

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<sup>62</sup> *Hiroshima mon amour*, dir. A. Resnais, France-Japan, Argo Films, 1959, min. 3:32.

<sup>63</sup> Kristeva, 1992, p. 143.

<sup>64</sup> Silverman, 2005, p. 39.

through spoken words. Thus, the choice of voice-over can be seen not as a positive force pushing the narrative and characters' motivation forward, but a negative one throwing them in the jaws of the past and breaking the temporal linearity of the plot.

The memories emerge and constitute something new, new relationships, and as Silverman puts it, a new language of desire.<sup>65</sup> This might be the key explanation why Duras and Resnais used the unconventional flashbacks and destabilizing voice-overs: to mirror the inner state of the female protagonist, full of memory gaps, fractures, repetitive and compulsive quests, paradoxes and dualities, thus creating a new language that imitates the nature of desire. I consequently argue that the principles of Duras's film poetics, conceived with Resnais in this project, derive from the "hidden parameters of desire", in other words, the inner workings of desire as the lack. I refer to them as the structural principles, and classify them as absence, repetition, disjunction of sound and image and paradox. These structural principles guided their choices, aiming to capture the raging irrationality of desire, and can be traced to the modernist genre of mental journey, mentioned earlier. It presupposes the use of flashbacks and framed homodiegetic voice-over in order to achieve radical continuity, temporal disorder and the sense of narrator's absence; in other words, to destabilise the audience and subsequently bring us closer to the state of desiring. Hence, we can rightly so argue that these film techniques came in Duras's work through her collaboration with Resnais and the proximity to the modernist filmmakers. However, they were not imposed from the outside onto her thinking, as a form of a trend or filmmaking fashion, so to say. The dramatization of absence, paradox and disjunction within the female protagonist is instead conditioned by the nature of desire as Duras's umbilical thematic concern. Duras resorted to these

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

scriptwriting choices – the use of voice-over and the unconventional flashbacks – in order to show the paradox of talking about the impossible, using paradox as the backbone of her screenplay. The way she constructed the screenplay, using specific narrative strategies and film elements, made the pain and desire of the female protagonist tangible and comprehensible to any viewer, without resorting to explanations, descriptions, straightforward narrative and objective imagery. Instead, she captured the irrational longing, and in continuation, let us examine how she succeeded in doing that. We will therefore look closer into the narrative strategies she chose when writing the film: the use of dialogue, voice-over and the disjunction of sound and image established through her written stage directions.

## 2. Duras's Narrative Strategies

To start with, absence is perhaps something vague and too broad to determine as a narrative and poetic principle; it is more of a fundamental fabric in the patchwork of Duras's poetics. However, it is necessary to attempt to understand the significance of absence when analysing the discourse of desire in Duras. The question is how to represent absence through film, through its construction of narrative, when absence implies something missing? Absence is the void, the space of darkness, the realm from which memory looms from, but also, as Duras shows consistently through her work, it is the place where femininity comes from. Duras thus relies on absence as a structuring principle to show the woman's emptiness, her desire for the lost lover, which is why her writing of dialogue, voice-over and stage descriptions includes silences, gaps and blanks, ellipses to suggest that the reconstruction of memory and truth is always incomplete,<sup>66</sup> that there are fragments from our mental mosaic always missing. Her choice to use pauses and gaps in sentences mirrors the nature of memory and

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<sup>66</sup> S. French, *From History to Memory: Alain Resnais' and Marguerite Duras' Hiroshima mon amour*, *emaj: online journal of art*, no. 3, 2008, p. 2.

desire as something perforated, incomplete, haphazard and defective. This fragmentation of voice comes into her scriptwriting strategies through her literary style, *nouveau roman*. Absence thus correlates to silence, both terms being the key modernist concerns that are relevant not only in cinema and literature, but also in music, painting and architecture.<sup>67</sup> More importantly, absence also correlates to ignorance, as Durassian scholar Susan Cohen puts it, to the frequent impossibility of knowing.<sup>68</sup> This ignorance leads away from catharsis and opens multiple textual and discursive possibilities, which is why Duras's films are perceived by Kristeva as anti-cathartic. The circle cannot be closed and therefore the liberation cannot follow, since the circle is always incomplete. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, however, Duras offers a sense of closure in a form of inner personal epiphany, much like Guido Anselmi's acceptance of life's contradictions in Federico Fellini's *8 ½* (1963) and Isak Borg's reconciliation with his past in Ingmar Bergman's *Smultronstället* (*Wild Strawberries*, 1957).<sup>69</sup> Consequently, dialogue becomes not a struggle for domination, a narrative tool that conventionally best serves to demonstrate a conflict, but rather it becomes a collaborative effort. The characters accept their ignorance as the foundation of their relationship, trying to fill each other voids, lacks and cognitive gaps, almost as in a psychoanalytical session. This is later found throughout Duras's filmography, in *India Song*, *La Femme du Gange*, *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, *Baxter*, *Vera Baxter* etc.

"Ignorance" thus brings us to the analysis of dialogue as one of Duras's key scriptwriting strategies. Typical of Duras, desire in *Hiroshima mon amour* rests on

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<sup>67</sup> Dreyer, Bresson, Tati, Fellini, Bergman and Antonioni, for instance, have all been concerned with silence and presence in their films, rediscovering the spectrum of silence through creation of new aesthetic modes and new ways of configuring alienation, fragmentation and absence. Therefore, absence in Duras's oeuvre is the poetic technique that most overtly connects her to her artistic milieu, the modernist art cinema. See further in D. O'Rawe, *The great secret: Silence, cinema and modernism*, *Screen*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2006, p. 403.

<sup>68</sup> Cohen, 1993, p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Bordwell, 2018.

the need for communication. The use of dialogue is characterised by paradoxical impossibility to speak about Hiroshima, that is the impossibility of speech that generates an obsession to speak.<sup>70</sup> Dialogue has the central structuring presence, which derives from her novels. In fact, it was the initial dialogues that convinced Resnais that Duras was the right person for the collaboration. As specified in the script, the dialogues are recited rather than spoken, which instigates a trancelike mood, building the atmosphere of the film. The rhythms of repetition and redundancy in the dialogue dramatize the urgency of narrating these experiences, and this way testimony becomes the central concern of the script.<sup>71</sup> The rhythmic patterns of repetition and opposition set the tone, not only by the actors' performance, but as we can see, by Duras's writing. Through intonation and repetition of words and sentences, long pauses and slow spelling of names of the cities repeatedly mentioned – Nevers and Hiroshima – the sound becomes more important than the meaning of the words. Duras's work thus proves that the scriptwriter can have immense control and power to create the tone and mood of the film through her or his writing.

As mentioned before, it is impossible to talk about Hiroshima, about the horrors of the tragedy, and this impossibility is formally integrated in the film through contradictions, unique lyrical tone and the speech that is cut off from its psychological roots, transformed into the lyric recitation. However, it is not only through dialogue that Duras dramatizes desire. The narrative in *Hiroshima mon amour* is further complicated by the implementation of the memory process into the film's aesthetics through the use of voice-over and its juxtaposition with the images. For instance, in one scene, while washing her face, the Frenchwoman's inner voice emerges onto the soundtrack in a form of interior dialogue, as Duras

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<sup>70</sup> Davies, 2010, p. 161.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

herself called it, meaning a dialogue between past and present self.<sup>72</sup> The woman addresses her dead lover in the mirror, confiding that the past is for her no longer a present reality, but merely a story that happened long time ago. Instead of using the voice-over to explain to the audience what has happened to the character, Duras uses this technique to show the uncertainty within the woman, the madness and humanity which resides in this imperfection; after all, we all talk to ourselves in one way or another. In the subsequent sequence of the film, when the Frenchwoman is walking at night through the streets of Hiroshima, Duras again uses the interior dialogue as a tool to bridge the past and the present. This time, however, the woman's point of address is no longer her former dead lover, but the Japanese architect. "I meet you," she says, "this city was tailor-made for love. You were made to the size of my body."<sup>73</sup> The interior dialogue thereby becomes a way to merge the former love with the new affair, revealing desire as the character's driving dramatic force. Throughout the last third of the film, the spoken words and seen actions are contrasted, and we hear her thoughts in a form of an unusual cinematic stream of consciousness.<sup>74</sup> In effect, this use of voice-over provokes both frustration and curiosity within a viewer, who expected to hear a voice narrating the past from a detached perspective. Instead, we hear the woman's thoughts, not descriptions of what has happened, but her current questions and revelations. This suggests that the film is not so much about love or Hiroshima, but about the ambiguity and uncertainty of our attitudes towards anything that we hate or desire. About the irrationality of desire, of love; about its elusiveness.

Another example how Duras orchestrates the paradox of desire by juxtaposing voice-over with image is when the Frenchwoman talks about the illusion that she would never forget Hiroshima, where Duras writes the description

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<sup>72</sup> Silverman, 2005, p. 45.

<sup>73</sup> Duras, 1960, p. 77.

<sup>74</sup> Cohen, 1995, p. 163.

that the accompanying image should be that of an eye surgery.<sup>75</sup> So instead of resorting to writing a monologue or a dialogue, Duras here instructs the director how to present the subtext, the hidden meaning; how to visually articulate the theme of desire as the state of blindness. Paradox continues to operate at the level of the dialogue, for example, when the Frenchwoman in the same sentence says she is lying and telling the truth. Susan Cohen lists as elements of Duras's narrative style lies, doubts, errors and questions, arguing that Duras purposefully decentres the truth, refusing to solidify it, which Cohen relates to the rejection of the documentary approach agreed between Duras and Resnais.<sup>76</sup> Also, by frequently using paroxysms and narrative returns to what the Frenchwoman has already said or to what we have already seen, the film reveals repetition as one of the structural principles. It creates an anti-cathartic loop, the never-ending but incomplete circle, a sort of continuous intensity, madness that leads to epiphany. So to sum up, besides providing an original example how the tone of the film can be inscribed in the script, the film offers an insight in Duras's filmmaking mind, revealing two important aspects of the poetics of her cinema: the incantatory nature of the dialogue that will reach its glory in *India Song*, and the fragmentary structure in which voice-over and image function in a contrapuntal relation rather than in parallels.<sup>77</sup> The paradox is thereby achieved by showing important information while simultaneously establishing a mysterious mood of not knowing, which quite accurately describes the very nature of desiring and being hurt.

Lastly, the scriptwriting strategy at the level of image is Duras's use of flashbacks, written in the script through specific stage directions. The first and most astonishing example is when the Frenchwoman stares at her sleeping Japanese lover's hands and suddenly sees the hand of her former German lover,

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<sup>75</sup> Duras, 1960, p. 22.

<sup>76</sup> Cohen, 1993, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> Davies, 2010, p. 166.



in the same posture but dead.<sup>78</sup> This jump in time is literally a *flash*, lasting only a few frames. Duras thereby shows the inner trajectory of the woman's emotions and the process of memory that works through associations and fragments, suggesting that memory does not belong to the past, but rather to the present, as things and people are being remembered. Bordwell emphasises the importance of this narrative strategy in contrast to the 1940s Hollywood flashbacks, where memory is presented through big chronological blocks,<sup>79</sup> that fail to capture the nature of memory and the mental landscape full of holes.

The reason behind Duras's choice to use such narrative strategy is of course the theme. Most of the film theorists I refer to, like Rosamund Davies, Kristeva and Silverman, argue that the structure of the film evokes the structure of a trauma.<sup>80</sup> The woman is unable to move forward from her traumatic experience, hysterically trapped in the cycle of repetition. The only way out of this fixation is to relive the passion with someone new; to forget, but forgetting, as we have seen, is at the same time remembering. The memory returns in form of the visual perceptions, shown to the audience, thus directly involving them in the construction of the story. By portraying the process of remembering on screen, by showing fragments of someone's mind, Duras and Resnais suggest that the language of desire is more visual than verbal.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, one can regard this kind of aesthetics as a particularly female, "a kind of female language that opposes the rigid structures of male thought and the rational discourse".<sup>82</sup> The irrational disjunction of sound and image and the intuitive passage through memory might ground Duras in the feminine territory. In contrast to mainstream cinema, which is composed of images whose chief motive for visual pleasure is the sight of a

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<sup>78</sup> *Hiroshima mon amour*, 1959, min. 19:16. See Appendix 1.

<sup>79</sup> Bordwell, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Silverman, 2005, p. 40.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>82</sup> E. Showalter in Davies, 2010, p. 169.

woman, posed as an object of male desire, this film grounds the female protagonist as the subject and controller of her own gaze. The portrayal of such female emotional complexity articulates a new discourse of desire, inscribing desire in the film's texture, rather than simply describing it as seen in the classic melodramas.

To conclude, the poetics of desire in *Hiroshima mon amour* derive from the hidden parameters of desire that include a strong sense of lack, repetition compulsion, unconscious memories and the splitting between past and present. In order to come as close as possible to the truest nature of desire, Duras used chose to build her first screenplay on the extensive use of interior dialogue, unconventional flashback, silences, gaps and repetitions in the text, and thorough stage directions that elucidate the emotional complexity of each scene. Certain aspects of her scriptwriting choices stem from Resnais's affiliation to modernism, like the use of *acousmètre* and the consequent disjunction of sound and image, while others, like the use of silences, repetition and internal dialogue, emanate from Duras's own literature. This subchapter attempted to show how much a writer can actually ground control over the film in the text and how it is possible to set the mood and the tone of the film through the written word. The following subchapter will explore the merging of Duras's narrative strategies with her aesthetic choices in her solo directorial debut, the 1969 film *Détruire, dit-elle*.

#### B. *Détruire, dit-elle* (1969)

In allowing Duras to develop a distinctive film language, the experience of collaborations with other filmmakers was of great importance. As an introduction to the film analysis, let us mention few significant ones.

In 1961, Duras co-wrote with Gérard Jarlot the screenplay for *Une Aussi Longue Absence* (The Long Absence), directed by Henri Colpi, the editor of *Hiroshima mon amour*. The film, revolving around the story of a café owner tormented by the absence of her lover, won the Palme d'Or in 1961, establishing

Duras as one of the most applauded scriptwriters in France. During the 1960s, Duras completed scripts for the short films directed by Michel Mitrani, Martin Karmitz, George Franju and Jean Chapot. She also wrote the screenplay for Tony Richardson's film *Mademoiselle* (1966), based on a story by Jean Genet about a sociopath Marie, a village teacher driven by the senseless desire for crime. The treatment of desire as a ravishing, gluttonous force colours all of Duras's work written during this period. Also, a number of Duras's novels were adapted into films during these years: *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (*This Angry Age*, dir. René Clément, 1958), *Moderato cantabile* (*Seven Days...Seven Nights*, dir. Peter Brook, 1960), *10:30 P.M. Summer* (dir. Jules Dassin, 1966) and *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (dir. Tony Richardson, 1967). Duras was greatly dissatisfied how her work was treated in the hands of these directors, all of them – coincidentally? – male. She detested the sentimentality of these films, their fabricated and falsely heroic portrayal of female desire, so out of impatience, in 1969, she turned to making films herself.<sup>83</sup>

Before focusing on her directorial debut, it is important to mention one particular film Duras wrote in 1964 for another director. Of all of the aforementioned collaborations, the most significant one, as Hill argues, was a short film *Nuit noire, Calcutta* (*Dark Night, Calcutta*, 1964) directed by Marin Karmitz.<sup>84</sup> Inspired by her own recent recovery from alcoholism, Duras wrote a screenplay that would later become the novel *Le Vice-consul*, about an alcoholic writer Jean who comes to Calcutta to complete his novel about the French vice-consul. Impeded by the writer's block, Jean keeps destroying his pages, drinking in frenzy. While he is trying to write, the story unfolds in form of his mental images projected for the audience on screen, blurring the line between the imaginary and the real.

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<sup>83</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Most of the text is spoken through framed homodiegetic voice-over, evoking dislocation, fragmentation of time and space and disjunction between sound and image. Similarly to Resnais's example in *Hiroshima mon amour*, Karmitz was also playing on the set the working copy of the soundtrack which contained Duras's readings of the script.<sup>85</sup> The method of listening to her own recordings while rehearsing will be adopted by Duras herself ten years later while shooting *India Song*. Inspired by Karmitz, in 1966, Duras went to co-direct her first film, *La Musica (The Music)*, with Paul Seban, based on her own play. *La Musica* is a story about a divorced couple who after three years of not seeing each other rekindle their passion while settling the divorce papers. The film tackles, typically of Duras, the idea of the impossibility of desire, its duplication and repetition. However, the reason why I regard *Détruire, dit-elle* as her directorial origin is because *La Musica's* film language was more under Seban's control, while Duras was in charge of working with actors. Therefore, it is perceived as an adaptation of Duras's work, more than as its extension, unlike her multi-genre film *Détruire, dit-elle*.

Together with Robbe-Grillet, Duras has pioneered what she called the "multiple work of art",<sup>86</sup> or what Robbe-Grillet referred to as *cine-roman*: a text which is at the same time a novel, a play, a dance, a film, an opera.<sup>87</sup> Known for her recycling of the themes and characters from her literature, Duras found this form to be appropriate also as the basis of her films, instead of a classical screenplay format. *Détruire, dit-elle*, the first in the series of such hybrid texts, was first published as a book and then the same year adapted to a film. The term "adapted" is however unsuitable here: the relation between the book and the film has little in common with what is usually understood by literary adaptation. The

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>86</sup> Duras in W. F. van Wert, *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Sound and Voice in a Closed Room*, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1979, p. 22.

<sup>87</sup> W. F. van Wert, *The Film Career of Alain Robbe-Grillet*, Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1977, p. 45.

latter always aims to liberate the new work from dependence on its literary predecessor, but Duras's purpose in replicating her own texts does not follow this logic. Her adaptations do not supersede their predecessors, but double them, creating another version of themselves in another genre.<sup>88</sup> In the same way her characters are duplicated, mirrored in another couple and split by her frequent use of mirrors and reflective surfaces, so are her films the products of an intense process of intertextual repetition and constant duplication. It is not a process of adaptation, but an exploration of the relationship between text and image, strikingly different from the conventional approach adopted by the early film adaptations of her novels. It is thus important to bear in mind that this constant multiplication of texts and cross-genre performances is an integral part of Duras's poetics, starting with *Détruire, dit-elle* and achieving its prime formulation in her later India cycle. In the interview with French filmmaker Jacques Rivette and film historian Jean Narboni, Duras said that the reason for this intertextuality and repetition comes from "the desire to tear what has been made before to pieces".<sup>89</sup>

This destruction of cinema as a conventional form is found in each element of Duras's film aesthetics, or as William van Wert, a writer and film critic, puts it, the aesthetics of creative destruction.<sup>90</sup> Duras stated that in *Détruire, dit-elle* she wanted "to go back to the world of the senses in order to destroy the strait jacket of style."<sup>91</sup> Influenced by the events of May 1968, Duras aimed to destroy the very foundation of representation with this film, going further than the proponents of *nouveau roman*, whose viewpoint was deriving from existentialism and not essentialism as hers, and who gave significance to the individual, rather than to a

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<sup>88</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 86.

<sup>89</sup> M. Duras in J. Rivette and J. Narboni, *Destruction and Language: An Interview with Marguerite Duras*, trans. H. Lane Cumberford, in M. Duras, *Destroy, She Said*, trans. B. Bray, New York: Grove Press, 1970, p. 91.

<sup>90</sup> Van Wert, 1979, p. 22.

<sup>91</sup> Duras in G. Brée, M. Duras and C. Doherty, *An Interview with Marguerite Duras*, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1972, p. 409.

community of lovers, as did Duras.<sup>92</sup> For her, writing and activities of human mind were ruled by the presence of desire, and this desire had to condition the language of the film as well. Accordingly, *Détruire, dit-elle* is a dramatization of the triangular love, revolving around the erotic choreography between two women and two men, whose radical isolation from any social and political context stands as a rebellion against the world outside. This community of lovers suggests that the destruction of the conventions is the only way out of the mental and political captivity, and if we transpose this to the formal realm of her film aesthetics, we can see that the destruction of film conventions was a necessary mirror to show the deconstructed society, the torment around and within people. So let us look further into this “deconstruction of film”.

*Détruire, dit-elle* is set in a desolate hotel where four characters meet by chance: a struggling writer Stein, a Jewish lecturer Max Thor and his neurotic wife Alissa, and Elisabeth Alione, a woman recovering from giving birth to a dead child. Over the course of their stay, a network of complex relationships is formed and their identities begin to merge, slowly becoming reflections of each other, repeating the same sentences and wanting the same things, and people. Stein, Max Thor and Alissa orbit around Elisabeth Alione, the grieving woman, who embodies emptiness, the lack judged by the other characters. Duras achieves this transaction of identities through blocking and static cinematography, dialogues, voice-over and music, aiming to create the atmosphere full of tension, desire and uncertainty. Desire becomes a common denominator, reducing the characters to the same desirous entity, revolving around the mourning mother, Elisabeth Alione. So how is this achieved in terms of Duras’s concrete aesthetic choices?

Firstly, let us examine the film’s mise-en-scène. In her “Note for

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<sup>92</sup> D. Hecq, May 68: Parodic rehearsals of the future in Lacan and Duras, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, no. 33, 2015, p. 10.

Performance” at the end of the book, Duras specifies the mise-en-scène and stage directions for the theatre performance of *Détruire, dit-elle*. She describes the characters, the way the words ought to be recited (“indicating an inner reaction only”) and which music should be used as the score.<sup>93</sup> The film follows the same instructions, keeping the abstract décor and no other characters but the main ones, in the same manner constructing a stylised, theatrical world that falls short of the conventional requirements for dramatic cohesion and continuity. For instance, there are just few sequences composed by shot-reverse shot editing and eye-line matches are rare.<sup>94</sup> The characters stare at the void, somewhere off-screen, at a space never revealed. Structurally, the film is made up of people watching each other at different levels, without ever seeing the narrator.<sup>95</sup> This creates a strong sense of absence, disengagement, accentuated by the slow-paced editing and reliance on long takes. Through medium-sized two-shots and static camera, Duras directs the attention of the audience towards the space in-between the characters, instead of framing the faces and gestures which would express the emotional content, the emotional charge conventionally needed for the plot development. The occasional slow panning shots of empty spaces, in combination with minimalistic acting and immobility of the cast, create a trancelike, almost religious atmosphere.

As we can see, Duras is not interested in the expression of particular emotions of the characters, but rather in their relations, their mutual exchange and fluid identities that encompass the entire spectrum of emotions instead. She chooses to keep distance through the use of wide and medium shots, and to direct the attention to the voice, rather than the face. We end up witnessing the abolishment of the conventional narrative along with the abolishment of linear

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<sup>93</sup> M. Duras, *Destroy, She Said*, trans. B. Bray, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1970, p. 87.

<sup>94</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 91.

<sup>95</sup> Rivette and Narboni, 1970, p. 94.

time, with the characters being stuck in transit, outside of clearly defined time and place. Duras's choice to omit any establishing shots or continuity editing, and her use of static, eye-level shots and framing that resembles still photography, lacking any sense of spatial three-dimensionality and depth, violates the unity of the systems of cinematic time and space, thus destabilising the viewer temporally and geographically. The stillness of camera and subjects in the frame, the overall lack of motion, deprives the images of life, identity and emotions, suggesting that the state of desire is identical to the state of death. The experience of watching characters watch each other becomes anti-filmic, to contrast Bordwell's notion of pro-filmic event.<sup>96</sup> Duras thereby creates the *mise-en-scène* of absence, the space without a subject, without any identification anchor.

Secondly, to understand the complexity of desire in *Détruire, dit-elle*, one has to examine the sound: Duras's use of dialogue, the voice-over and music. Until 1969, Duras's writings have moved progressively through reduction of narrative descriptions towards dialogue as the core narrative element. Equally, much of the dialogue itself has been reduced to a minimum, full of pauses, silences and repetitions. The delivery is slow, as in a trancelike chant, with measured and precise dictation; the sound, rather than the words, are the objects of Duras's investigation. The voices of the four characters do not usually say what they are really intending to say. The two characters present on screen discuss the characters who are off-screen, and their dialogue, synced with the image, is usually interrupted by the audio track of the framed homodiegetic voice-over of the two other, off-screen, characters.<sup>97</sup> For example, in one of the first meetings between Elizabeth and Alissa, the audio track of their conversation is replaced by a conversation between Max Thor and Stein, although the camera holds in an

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<sup>96</sup> D. Bordwell. Camera Movement and Cinematic Space. *CINÉ-TRACTS: A Journal of Film, Communications, Culture and Politics*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1977, p. 20.

<sup>97</sup> Van Wert, 1979, p. 23.



unbroken take on the two women.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the audio and visual tracks are out of sync. However, it is important to bear in mind that the voice-over in this film is homodiegetic and we recognise that the voices belong to the narrative world depicted on screen, whereas for instance in her later films, Duras pushes the desynchronisation technique further and creates extra-diegetic voice-over, not anchored in the narrative world created by the visuals. Still, in this film, Duras's manipulation of the narrating voices and their points of audition also raise the question regarding the anchoring of the narrating voice: which point of audition is the voice speaking from? Where is the voice in relation to the image? The answer remains obscure, as Duras uses this destabilizing technique to express her opposition against the dominating knowledge that a single – usually male – narrator has. She opposes the conventional authority, linearity and totality of a narrating voice by dislocating it. Duras herself answered the question regarding whose point of view and audition it is if there is a severe disjunction between image and voice, saying that it is the point of view of the camera, but not the spectator.<sup>99</sup> I would conclude therefore that the point of view of this absent voice might be from the position of the writer or the voyeur observing and listening to the characters. It might also refer to some ethereal presence that knows no limits of time and space, since the visual absence of the narrator suggests the presence of the something invisible, omniscient; audible and invisible. This kind of manipulation of voice-over, its desynchronisation with image, derives from absence being one of the film's guiding structural principles.

Furthermore, there is no first person narrator in the film, but a variety of speakers whose relationships are determined by mutual desires.<sup>100</sup> The reason for

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<sup>98</sup> *Détruire, dit-elle*, dir. M. Duras, France: Ancinex, 1969, min. 27:05.

<sup>99</sup> Duras in Rivette and Narboni, 1970, p. 95.

<sup>100</sup> D. Hecq, May 68: Parodic rehearsals of the future in Lacan and Duras, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, no. 33, 2015, p. 12.

this is found in Duras's own explanation, suggesting that one can identify only with one person, so in order to achieve identification with multiple people, which is a paradox, at the same time implying the annihilation of clear identification, the audience has to hear multiple voices.<sup>101</sup> This brings us to the important conclusion about the reasons of using the multiplicity of voices and the overlapping voice-overs in her films: in order to avoid the primacy of one character over another, Duras enables the viewer to hear many characters, this way revolting against a vertical hierarchism and conventional authority. Through dialogues that are full of questions and not mere descriptions or explanatory statements, the multitude of voices becomes the anti-representational strategy, explored in depth in her later India cycle. By forcing the viewer to watch *nothing*, static human bodies detached from their voices, Duras directs the attention towards the sound, the voice, the invisible. The viewer ends up attentively listening to thoughts and observations of the characters, acquainted with their inner landscapes. The characters are exposed, rather than represented, in all their uncertainties and paradoxes. Duras chooses this aesthetic strategy to show the interchangeability of the characters, their gradual merging of identities, their loss of self as the consequence of desire.

The triangular structure of sexual relationships in the film reminds us of *Hiroshima mon amour*, where the couple's privacy is interrupted by the memory of the dead lover; in *Détruire, dit-elle*, the multitude of voices likewise destabilizes the private union of a couple. The destruction – “destroy” from the title – is therefore the destruction of the conventional sexual relationship, privacy, fixed identity. To sum up, Duras destroys the conventional narrative by systematically resorting to audio-visual desynchronisation, utilizing off-screen narration where characters recite texts with no obvious connection to the visual track. This feature becomes a signature mark of her filmmaking style and is considered to be her

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<sup>101</sup> Duras in Rivette and Narboni, 1970, p. 95.

most innovative contribution to cinema.<sup>102</sup>

This brings us to the final innovative element of her film poetics, introduced in the film's final scene: music. Forming an integral part of the scene, Bach's Art of the Fugue dominates over the soundtrack, linking all four characters in the polyphonic creation, four voices composed in a single melody, in a state of disorienting fugue. It is not an accident then that Duras uses precisely this score in the film that deals with the destruction of identities, fugue being a contrapuntal compositional technique where voices imitate each other. The structure of the fugue as the basis for Duras's soundtrack will be further explored in the India cycle, analysed more thoroughly in the following chapter.

To conclude, destruction, desire and madness are entangled together in this film in order to create a fragmented portrait of mutual desires and the longing for the lost child embodied in the character of the mother, Elisabeth Alione.<sup>103</sup> Like *Hiroshima mon amour*, the film shows a woman trapped in the trauma of loss, while others around her lose their identities as they gradually become driven by desire, unable to relate to her loss. The prevention of identity is here achieved through the alienating cinematography and the *mise-en-scène* of absence, where Duras refrains from expressing emotions, seeking instead to find what lies beneath, not on the surface. Aurally, the loss of self is revealed in Duras's choice of desynchronisation and voice-over dialogue. The image becomes subordinate to the voice, in the same manner as cinema is subordinate to literature, according to Duras.

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<sup>102</sup> R. Maule, Introduction: Marguerite Duras, la grande imagière in J. Beaulieu, *In the Dark Room: Marguerite Duras and Cinema*, New York: Peter Lang, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, Kristeva argues that all of Duras's dichotomies and human relations can be traced back to the relationship with the mother, who is "the archetype of all mad women who people the Durassian universe." Kristeva in M. Block, *Situating the Feminist Gaze and Spectatorship in Postwar Cinema*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 196.

## IV. DESIRE TO FILM: DURAS'S CINEMA OF THE 1970s

### A. India Cycle

I would like to take cinema back to zero, to a very primitive grammar...very simple, very primary almost: to begin everything again, without moving.

– Marguerite Duras in *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*<sup>104</sup>

The India cycle revolves around an extensive series of fictions in which characters, places and events reoccur in forms of repetitions and variations, embodying the never-ending circle of desire. This subchapter will demonstrate how the nature of desire conditions the use of specific aesthetic strategies in Duras's India cycle, focusing on absence, disjunction of sound and image and repetition as the guiding structural principles of Duras's narrative and aesthetics. As already mentioned before, the roots of Duras's cinematic techniques in the India cycle can be traced to her manuscript for *Hiroshima mon amour*, especially to the film's opening scene. Like in *Hiroshima mon amour*, in order to express the overall impossibility of representing historical catastrophes, Duras contrasts the personal, intimate desires of the characters with the colonial reign and the sufferings of the local people under the European imperialism, which is embodied in the character of the chanting beggar woman. Duras's audio-visual experiments conceived in *Hiroshima mon amour* and further developed in *Détruire, dit-elle* have bloomed in the India cycle, especially polished in her 1975 masterpiece *India Song*. What distinguishes the India cycle from other auteur films of her zeitgeist is its exceptional semiotic structure and complexity that derives from the multi-layered soundtrack of four timeless narrative voices and the use of female extra-diegetic voice-over. Let us examine then the aesthetic strategies of Duras's 1970s cinema.

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<sup>104</sup> Duras in M. Duras and M. Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, trans. L. McMahon, Paris: Minuit, 1977, p. 74.

To begin with, the India cycle is comprised of three novels – *La Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1966), *Le Vice-consul* (1968) and *L'Amour* (1971) – and three films – *La Femme du Gange* (1973), *India Song* (1975) and *Son Nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* (1976), with *India Song* also being written as a play. It is qualified as a representative of traumatic realism, a combination of modernist stylisation, psychological realism and postmodernist intertextuality, in other words, the circulation of the same material.<sup>105</sup> The modernist stylisation and psychological realism are found in Duras's innovative use of sound and its disjunction with image, whereas her approach to intertextuality is seen in her cyclic aesthetics, revealing repetition as the basic principle. The India cycle's narrative is comprised of three storylines, each disclosing a similar aesthetic progression from self-reflexive novels into self-reflexive films. These storylines are each connected to different, ontologically separate narrative worlds, each narrated by a different voice. The first, original storyline of the India cycle is found in the novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and tells about the humiliation, abandonment and obsession of Lol V. Stein, a young woman entrapped in her own heartbreak. The story continues in the short novel *L'Amour* (1971) and is modified in the cinematic form of *La Femme du Gange*. In the film, four characters, two women and two men, stand lifelessly on a sandy beach and move through the spaces of an abandoned hotel as if stuck in time, in the realm of endless waiting. The voice-over of two faceless women informs about the story that occurred in the hotel earlier in time, merely alluding to the possible identities of the characters on-screen. The story, narrated through fragments and memories of these two unknown women, revolves around Lol, abandoned in this very hotel by her fiancé Michael Richardson for a mysterious French ambassador's wife from Calcutta, Anne-Marie Stretter. Devastated by pain, Lol loses her mind, roaming along the

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

beach, trying to discover the reason for her abandonment, becoming obsessed by the “woman in black from Calcutta”. Desire is thus clearly directed towards the lost object in the past, without hope that it could be resurrected in the present.

Duras returns to the plot and setting of *La Femme du Gange* two years later with *India Song*, this time explicitly centring the narrative around Anne-Marie Stretter, who is also longing for a lover out of reach, although desired by men around her. So, the second storyline of the India cycle is set in the Calcutta embassy reception in the 1930s, where Stretter becomes the object of desire of the former vice-consul of Lahore, who observes her, stalks her, obsessed, eventually even witnessing her suicide by drowning. *India Song* is a story of a love affair, as Duras herself stated, “narrated by four faceless voices, who have known or read of this love story long ago”.<sup>106</sup> By the end, the viewer concludes that Stretter is already dead from the very beginning of the film, and that the scenes of her dancing and wandering through the embassy might be a reconstruction of the vice-consul’s memory of her. The film therefore is a slow-paced rite of mourning that revives her life,<sup>107</sup> a portrayal of decadence and emotional emptiness amidst the colonial decay. As Duras wrote under the general remarks in her text for *India Song*, the film’s story is taken out of the book *Le Vice-consul* and “projected into new narrative regions”.<sup>108</sup>

Lastly, the third storyline stems precisely from the material of *Le Vice-consul*, following the beggar woman who lives on the shores of the Ganges and feeds off the leftovers of the white European bourgeoisie represented by Stretter. She cries and chants throughout *India Song*, while other voices inform about the source of her pain: she sold her ten children in order to survive. Duras writes that

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<sup>106</sup> M. Duras, *India Song*, trans. B. Bray, New York: Grove Press, 1976, p. 145.

<sup>107</sup> Knuuttila, Sirkka. *Fictionalising Trauma: The Aesthetics of Marguerite Duras’s India Cycle*, Helsinki: Helsinki University Print, 2009, p. 220.

<sup>108</sup> Duras, 1976, p. 5.

it is a "story of horror, famine and leprosy",<sup>109</sup> inspired by the true characters from her early childhood memories.

The last film of the India cycle, *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*, presents the same story from a new perspective, as a cinematic comment on *India Song*. The film repeats the same soundtrack over the images of the decayed, empty palaces, which resemble the locations from *India Song*. Therefore, as we can see, all three storylines of the India cycle are present in all three films, interwoven together and inseparable from each other, but each time slightly changed and linked to different voices and narrative worlds. On this point, let us briefly clarify the meaning of these narrative worlds, since it is crucial in understanding the concepts of absence and disjunction in the India cycle.

The existence of multiple narrative worlds in these three films implies that the characters are at the same time present in multiple realms, in the past and the present, in reality and memory; dead and alive. Most commonly, they are seen physically in the present, while the voices expose how mentally and emotionally they are captivated by the past (this was already tackled in *Hiroshima mon amour*). The imaginary coastal towns in France portrayed in the film *La Femme du Gange* are contrasted with the colonialist Indochina as seen in *India Song*, but these two narrative worlds are bridged by timeless unknown voices that appear in all three films of the cycle. For example, while present in the narrative world of *La Femme du Gange*, the voices tell about Anne-Marie Stretter's experiences from Calcutta, which actually belong to another narrative world, another film, as a matter of fact. A third, new world is thereby created: the common world of the absent voices. Another example of the emergence of a new narrative world is at the end of *India Song*, when through the photo of dead Stretter, surrounded by flowers and incense, one understands that the film is depicting her memorial,

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

although we see her “alive” on-screen; another temporal dimension is thus created, where Stretter’s memories and experiences are juxtaposed with other characters’ memories of her, the dead woman. In the same manner, the common soundtrack of *India Song* and *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* with a rich multitude of narrative voices creates a feeling of an unknown spatial and temporal realm; the new world of voices. This increases the feeling of timelessness, making the whole cycle an endless circulation without any fixed points, which exhibits Duras’s understanding of desire as an eternal, damned loop. This creation of the multiverse of desire reveals that a complex narrative and aesthetic construction of a film is needed in order to truthfully portray the inner landscape of people as the desiring subjects.

The timeless voices first introduced in *La Femme du Gange* represent a fundamental idea for two Duras’s ground-breaking cinematic achievements: the multi-layered soundtrack that reveals the entangled structure of narrative worlds, and the use of the same soundtrack with entirely new images in another film, the soundtrack from *India Song* in *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*, which is Duras’s novelty without any parallel in film history.<sup>110</sup> In continuation, I will examine the India cycle, looking into its main aesthetic components: disembodied voices, specific use of music and highly stylised mise-en-scène with the emphasis on choreography and camera movements. My main focus will be on *India Song*, being Duras’s most critically acclaimed film, screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 1975. However, it is important to bear in mind that the same aesthetic strategies apply in all three films.

### 1. Absent Voices

The most important innovation in the aural aesthetics of the India cycle, firstly appearing in *La Femme du Gange*, is the *voix-off* (voice-off, or off-screen

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<sup>110</sup> Knuuttila, 2009, p. 225.



sound), which I refer to as the absent voices or the desynchronised sound. It is the voice-over that cannot be anchored in the *diegesis* of the film; the extra-diegetic voice-over. To begin with, whenever the source of the sound is not identifiable, it is described as off-screen.<sup>111</sup> It dramatically affects the creation of the meaning for the viewer, destabilising the spatial-temporal logic. In the conventional vocabulary of cinema, only certain non-visualized sounds are allowed: extra-diegetic music, off-screen ambient sound and voice-over. In all three instances, the off-screen sound is somewhere anchored, either in the diegetic space beyond the camera scope, in the emotional response of the viewer or in the authorial presence.<sup>112</sup> Both in *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Détruire, dit-elle*, the voice-over was anchored in the diegetic space, in the characters. However, in the India cycle, the four timeless voices do not seem to belong to any of these three anchoring spaces; they become disembodied, and their invisibility creates psychological curiosity, further annihilating the limits of the frame. The lack of unity between the body and the voice creates "invisibility anxiety", as Dong Liang, the researcher of film sound, puts it.<sup>113</sup> Interestingly, this lack might mirror the lack within the desiring subject, the gap between the body and memory represented by the voice. Liang further proposes a new possibility in defining the relation between the voice-off and the diegetic space, arguing that in the India cycle, the space is pre-diegetic.<sup>114</sup> These external voices invite the viewer to a new place which is not the space where the story is happening, i. e. the diegetic space, but rather a space where the narration is happening. What differs Duras's use of voice-over narration from the classic Hollywood films is that in Duras, the voice-over has a visible influence on the *diegesis*, which comes from her reversed way

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<sup>111</sup> D. Liang, Marguerite Duras's Aural World: A Study of the *Mise en son* of India Song, *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, p. 220.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

of working with sound and image, first recording the voice-over and then rehearsing and filming the performance while listening to it. One possible conclusion is that the pre-diegetic space refers to a writing room, the space where the text is created, where the voice reads. The voice-over precedes images and thereby dictates the performance. The voices move actors just as memories move lovers.

Furthermore, if we consider that the voice-off represents power coming from the opposite space than the image describes, emerging from the unknown, then it is important to notice that the voices in the India cycle are mostly female, which is contrary to the norms of the classic cinema. Conventionally, the disembodied voice can be seen as exemplary for male subjectivity, emphasizing power, visibility and knowledge. As Silverman puts it, it is a mechanism through which classic cinema manages to associate its male characters with authority, excluding female subjects from the position of knowledge and cognitive power, and confining them solely to the place within the story.<sup>115</sup> To allow a woman to be heard without being seen disrupts the convention which dominant cinema relies on, meaning it puts the woman beyond the reach of the male gaze. In classic cinema, femininity is usually reduced to the level of the body and the female psyche is shown as an extension of the body, commonly neurotic due to a repressed sexual desire.<sup>116</sup> In Duras, contrastingly, women are fully aware of their desires, free to express them, pursue them even if it costs them their sanity, safety or life. In the India cycle, Anne-Marie Stretter embodies the eternal object of desire, the one desiring and being desired at the same time, and the aesthetic choice of divorcing sound and image facilitates to show this dual state of desire. Moreover, the female voices heard throughout the films mutually express desire for each other, in form of a

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<sup>115</sup> K. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 64.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

voice-over dialogue, while at the same time piecing together the puzzle of desire in Stretter's life and death. This way, Duras uses desire to connect the multiple narrative worlds, as a red thread that stitches them together into a single patchwork. Moreover, as the focus from the female characters' outside shifts to their inside, desire is also expressed visually, through their mental images. Duras's women of the India cycle – Lol V. Stein, Stretter and the beggar woman ravishing on the banks of the Ganges – are thus aware of their madness, of their condition and split subjectivity: we hear their voices, we see their memories, traumas, lost desires revived via present encounters, we observe their schism in the mirrors. They are portrayed in all their complexities, stuck in time, in conflicting emotions, paralysed in their own emptiness; unable to move, but moved by their own inner screams. Let us examine then Duras's aesthetic choices by which she achieves to capture this complexity of desire on screen.

The soundtrack of *India Song* consists of a complex orchestration of instrumental music, chants, disembodied voices and other ambient sounds.<sup>117</sup> I will limit myself to the analysis of the voice-over and music, being the supporting element of the voice-over structure. To start with, the film is comprised of three parts, each characterised by different narrative voices. Firstly, during half-hour exposition, two young female voices tell the legends about all of the main protagonists, while the images show Stretter with her suitors appearing silent on screen. Secondly, during the French embassy ball scene, we see Stretter dancing with her suitors, and we hear several narrative voices of men and women as if gossiping, never appearing on-screen, accompanied by the diegetic chattering of the guests from the ball. Also, we hear excerpts from the past conversations between Stretter and her suitor, the vice-consul, revealing the moment when she rejected him, which leads to his outburst in the form of a bewildered cry in front

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<sup>117</sup> Liang, 2007, p. 211.

of the palace. Finally, two faceless voices, male and female (Duras's own), recount Stretter's last moments before drowning. The suicide is never represented, rather implied, and the audience understands in the very last scene of the film that they have been exposed to a presence of a ghostly woman who is in fact dead right from the start of the film. The voices therefore serve to build up a fantasy world and cinematically convey the time-space confusion that stems from Duras's literature.<sup>118</sup> They create a strong contrast between what is present and what is absent. For instance, while listening to the voice-off dialogue of two unknown women, camera pans across the empty room of the European palace, revealing objects belonging to Stretter, who is mentioned in the dialogue, but not seen on-screen.<sup>119</sup> This immediately raises questions who is missing and why, as we *observe* the absence of the protagonist, wondering who and where she is. Our gaze looks for what is *not* seen, which, even though paradoxical, is an outstanding achievement of film being primarily visual media. This technique of listening but not seeing therefore destabilizes the sense of time and location of the narrative world, preventing, as seen already in the example of *Détruire, dit-elle*, the identification with the characters.

The prevention of identification is actually the most important reason to use desynchronisation. The two female voices that appear in the first part of the film are bound by desire for each other, commenting on the events from seemingly intra-diegetic standpoint, but at the same belonging to an extra-diegetic parallel world that remains invisible.<sup>120</sup> They are multiplied in such a way that it becomes unfeasible to tie them down to a specific corporeal anchor.<sup>121</sup> By surrounding the

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<sup>118</sup> J. Beaulieu, *The Poetics of Cinematic Writing: Marguerite Duras and Maya Deren*, in *In the Dark Room: Marguerite Duras and Cinema*, ed. J. Beaulieu and R. Maule, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009, p. 144.

<sup>119</sup> *India Song*, dir. M. Duras, France: Les Films Armorial, 1975, min 5:59.

<sup>120</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 82.

<sup>121</sup> Silverman, 1988, p. 141.

image with this cloud of textual invisibility – a speech without a seen source – Duras prevents the viewer from assuming a fixed place in relation to the image, as if suggesting that what we remember in love and grief might not be the same as what we have really seen. As Hill points out, seeing and speaking in Duras are never joined together but are in contrapuntal relationship,<sup>122</sup> as a male and female principle, the rational and irrational, masculine and feminine. The voices, rather than being exposed as bodies and faces, remain invisible, secretive, as if speaking from some place of darkness, intimacy, mystery. This choice of using the disembodied voices reveals a possible operation of the feminine in Duras's film language, as Silverman notes;<sup>123</sup> the female voices are liberated, inviting the audience to listen to thoughts, conversations and secrets arising from some dark realms of the mind. Instead of conventionally representing desire of the woman on screen, through the straightforward first-person narration and synced sound, Duras chooses to show the inner workings of the mind through the disjunction of sound and image, resorting to the multiplicity of voices that do not provide explanatory information necessary for the progression of the plot, but rather reveal the multi-layered universe of memory and longing which does not fall into the category of the Rational mind.

To continue, let us examine the variety of relations between the voices and image. The disjunction of sound and image was carefully designed by Duras in her written text for *India Song*. While directing the film, Duras first recorded the entire text as voice-over and then played it during the filming of each scene, so the actors were listening to the recording while performing.<sup>124</sup> For instance, in the scene where Michael Richardson caresses Stretter's half-naked body, Duras notes that his hand should stop fondling her body precisely when the second voice declares

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<sup>122</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 83.

<sup>123</sup> Silverman, 1988, p. 147.

<sup>124</sup> Gunther, 2002, p. 30.

"I love you with an absolute desire".<sup>125</sup> In this moment, other voice-off narrators slow down and their narration follows the rhythm of the lover's hand, which is an interesting moment of synchronicity between the gesture of the hand and the tone of the voice, although they are diegetically disconnected. In a discussion about the film, Duras herself said that the point of contact between image and sound is configured in terms of touch: "There's a place where 'the voice film' touches 'the image film'. Yes, there's a shock. They touch each other and it's fatal."<sup>126</sup> The desynchronisation as an aesthetic choice thereby helps to create the erotic tone of the film, the eroticism lying in the impossibility of touch, its inhibition. The image and sound can never be merged, synced, fused; only touch is permitted. In *India Song*, the character of the vice-consul desires the fusion with Stretter, but this desire is absolutely refused. When they dance together, he is finally able to touch her, but their brief unity is interrupted by the female voice-off saying: "I love Michael Richardson, I am not free of that love."<sup>127</sup> The soundtrack therefore interrupts the moment of touch, creating a new meaning of the image, and the memory of the lost love interrupts the current desire, similarly as in *Hiroshima mon amour*. We can conclude then that the voices are in contrapuntal relationship to the image, contrasting each other, rejecting the fusion. Let us elaborate on this further.

Certain French literary and film theorists, such as Wendy Everett and Madeleine Borgomano, consider the arrangement of the multiple voices in Duras's films similar to the principles of fugue, based on the counterpoint between the soundtrack and the image. Everett argues that the central concerns of Duras's work can be adequately expressed only by two possibilities: silence or music. The constant interplay between silence and music, or the music of voices, creates

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<sup>125</sup> *India Song*, 1975, min 21:48.

<sup>126</sup> Duras, 1976, p. 17.

<sup>127</sup> *India Song*, 1975, min 1:08:55.

internal patterns of variations which express the film's themes,<sup>128</sup> thus becoming narrative tools, strategies to expose desire. Many textual studies of *India Song* acknowledge the central place of music and its integral relationship to the absent voices.<sup>129</sup> The film is structured around two powerful musical compositions, Beethoven's fourteenth Diabelli Variation and the evocative blues melody composed by Carlos d'Alessio, *India Song*. The latter can be perceived as a leitmotif of desire that flows through the film, ultimately manifesting desire in form of a dance in the ball scene. This haunting melody repeats itself as in a loop, mirroring the nature of traumatic memory, constantly returning and enslaving the characters in a tormenting state where change and development are impossible. Interestingly, Everett argues that since no voice can be clearly anchored in the diegesis, the audience understands music as a part of the narrative construction, in contrast to the conventional use of music as a background, emotional highlight of a scene.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, the repeating music supports the feeling of absence and alienation provided by the voice-over dialogues, and together with the voices reveals the film's integral thematic concerns: the fragmentary nature of memory, the eternal malady of nostalgia and the persistence of desire.<sup>131</sup> We can therefore embrace the argument that the music in combination with the timeless competing voices and their ability to confuse, dislocate and express a sense of freedom reveals the structuring technique similar to the one of fugue, where voices are simultaneously "chasing, breaking free" from each other. There is never catharsis or solution; only the perennial circulation of longing and grief. The images of characters stuck in decaying timeless spaces only underline this notion of

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<sup>128</sup> Liang, 2007, p. 217.

<sup>129</sup> W. Everett, *An Art of Fugue? The Polyphonic Cinema of Marguerite Duras*, in *Revisiting Duras: Film, Race, Sex*, ed. J. S. Williams and J. Sayers, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000, p. 22.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>131</sup> Liang, 2007, p. 216.

hopelessness. Finally, although the voices hold the narrative power much more than the camera, the ultimate poetry of the film is constructed by their paradoxical intercourse. Choosing this juxtaposition of static images and polyphonic, elusive voices, Duras suggests that the past and the present are simultaneous, that time is not linear, and that the contrast and conflict give birth to the ravishing, maddening desire that is at the same time the most creative and the most destructive force.

## 2. Mise-en-scène

After analysing the soundtrack of the film, we will now focus on the way Duras constructs her images through the use of mirrors, static camera and still performance, with a special emphasis on dance as the purest manifestation of desire.

Besides through the use of voice-off narration, Duras transposes the poetic qualities of her texts onto the screen by using fixed frames over tracking shots, creating images that resemble photographs. Her images do not link together into a single narrative based on the causal logic as in the classic Hollywood films. Instead, each image produces its own meaning, relating to other images or soundtrack by the principle of analogy or contrast, usually in the contrapuntal relationship. The images bear strong metaphors, thus revealing an inner, hidden world, which Duras herself called "an inner shadow".<sup>132</sup> This inner shadow is something common to all people, similar to collective consciousness, and in order to direct the audience's attention to it, Duras omits the use of close-ups, shot-reverse shot editing, angular perspective and short duration of takes. Instead, through long, unbroken wide and medium static shots, Duras underlines her anti-representational strategy, disconnecting desire from faces, suggesting that desire and melancholy move between us as the streams of energy, the blues that floats

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<sup>132</sup> Duras in Gunther, 2002, p. 24.



around people and brings them to a common denominator. The stillness of images in all of her films, the slow cinema approach, gives the audience time to reflect upon the meaning of the image's relation to the voices heard in the soundtrack, offering us the chance to really listen. The contrast between the aural movement created by the dynamics of the multiple voices and the visual stillness, the static photography showing subjects frozen in time, creates an unsettling feeling of the presence of some apocalyptic desire, some Eros, energy that is trapped in-between memory and reality. Duras thus raises desire on the level of archetype imagery, in contrast to the scarce realistic imagery common to mainstream films. Likewise, she achieves this visually by using a sensual colour palette, namely in *India Song*, where warm tones and hues of red evoke life, sex and death, where Stretter's red dress stands as the powerful symbol of desire.

The crucial elements of mise-en-scène in the India cycle that convey a sense of abandonment, entrapment in memory and the circular nature of desire have already been explored in *Détruire, dit-elle*. These are: the stillness of actors and space, the use of mirrors, static camera with slow panning shots and the off-screen gazes of the actors, which underlines the absence of the object of desire. Regarding the stillness of space, in *La Femme du Gange*, for instance, the only movement traced in the frame is the pattern created by the still, almost lifeless bodies of two women and two men entrapped in the story of Lol's humiliation. *India Song*, on the other hand, creates a space for silence through its montage of the images of languid, voiceless bodies placed in the vast interiors of the luxurious Calcutta embassy.<sup>133</sup> The choice of such locations is not accidental, naturally; the loneliness and abandonment of characters seen on screen is emphasised by their placement in the capacious rooms with high ceilings and huge windows. The space thus bears a strong notion of absence, while the characters gaze off-screen or

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<sup>133</sup> O'Rawe, 2006, p. 402.

through the large mirror that assumes the central position within the film's scenography. In *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*, the destruction of people, objects and places is conveyed directly through mise-en-scène and the shots of cracking paving stone, broken windows, shattered mirrors, decadent exteriors of the palace in ruins. The film becomes an empty space on which the audience may project their memories of *India Song*.<sup>134</sup> The text and the voice-off prevail over the static landscape shots, announcing the annihilation of image in Duras's subsequent films.

The stillness of actors and a specific kind of performance – the so-called absence of acting – are also characteristics of the India cycle's imagery and tempo, most elaborately displayed in *India Song*. The ghostly movement of the actors is explained by Duras herself: "I see the actors' absence as parallel to our own when we gaze at them in the film. And thus, mutually lost, we meet each other."<sup>135</sup> So, in order to show the void within the character, Duras directs the actors to remain still, to become sort of a canvas on which the inner life and the inner emotional events can be projected. A movement implies will, emotion, determination to change; in order to enhance the absence of such determination, Duras demands total stillness, as if guided by the Buddhist principle that underlines nothingness and the void as the sources of eternal energy, the absolute. In order to show the richness of the suppressed desires, memories and grief, she chooses scarcity of motion to help the audience focus on the voices that illuminate the meaning of the images. In this stillness, people start resembling each other; the men around Anne-Marie Stretter all become similar, losing their own identities, driven by their common desire. It is exactly the absence of identity that allows us to connect to each other on a deeper level, in our mutual solitudes, which is perhaps the most

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<sup>134</sup> Gunther, 2002, p. 37.

<sup>135</sup> Duras in Gunther, 2002, p. 32.

relevant reason why to use such film poetics when tackling desire as human force. Furthermore, according to Renate Gunther, Duras's biography writer, Duras thought that the actor's task is not to embody a specific character, but rather to expose the latter's inner world. This recalls Bertol Brecht's approach where acting was a recognisable stage performance and the actors were not tied to the identity of the characters.<sup>136</sup> The choice of this kind of Brechtian acting which underlines the absence of identity goes hand in hand with Duras's exploration of desire as the state in which one loses identity. This choice once again proves how her film language derives from her in-depth understanding of the laws of desire. In both *La Femme du Gange* and *India Song*, the characters move throughout the films in a trance-like state, as if absent, in a state of folly. Desire as longing, disjunction and absence of closure characterizes the entire India cycle and it is made palpable visually through scenography, static cinematography and choreography. The characters are separated from one another or seen touching a prop that is associated with the object of their desire. Duras creates scenes of *tableau vivant*, such is the one in which Stretter lies half-naked on a divan surrounded by her male partners, physically, sexually present, but emotionally empty.<sup>137</sup> This kind of staging of desirability might reveal the principle of absolute feminine – the radical passivity, the female principle as static, silent energy. On this note, we can conclude that the stillness of Duras's actors reveals a certain kind of eroticism, with music as the flow of desire bringing them closer and closer together.

The stillness, detachment and alienation of the actors is enhanced through the consistent use of mirrors in the film.<sup>138</sup> "Mirrors are the doors through which death comes and goes," Jean Cocteau wrote in his 1950 film *Orphée*.<sup>139</sup> His quote

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<sup>136</sup> Gunther, 2002, p. 31.

<sup>137</sup> McMahon, 2012, p. 90.

<sup>138</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>139</sup> Cocteau in Hill, 1993, p. 104.

underlines a strong sense of connection between past and present that mirrors represent, being the tools through which we observe our mortality and monitor our transience. The splitting of a person through a mirror reflection is a powerful visual symbol and a common poetic tool in films, effectively conveying the character's inner schism, lack or dilemma. The persistence of desire as a lack within the characters and on the level of the narrative is in *India Song* consistently sustained by the images of separation like walls, grills, fences, but nothing conveys stronger the sense of absence and longing as the huge mirror that divides the central film location in half, enlarging the imaginative space further to off-screen.<sup>140</sup> The mirror, like the soundtrack, does not deliver the feeling of presence, but rather embodies the failure of representation, of identification.<sup>141</sup> The gap between the image and its reflection, analogous to the gap between the image and the sound, cannot be bridged; it represents the void between the desiring subject and the object of desire that is impossible to traverse. The images reflected in the mirror are difficult to anchor in the specific narrative world, confusing the viewer whether the image belongs to the past, the present or a fantasy. The mirror thus creates an unsettling, disturbing effect within the viewer, a sense of uncertainty and disorder overruling the rational mind. Carol J. Murphy, a Durassian scholar, argues that "this sustaining of past and present amounts to a crystallization of memory in an eternal presence of desire."<sup>142</sup>

In addition to specific approach to staging, performance and scenography, another significant asset of depicting desire cinematically is the use of dance. In *India Song*, as in the novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, dancing is a figure that dramatizes desire as a continual process of fusion and separation. For example, in her stage directions for *India Song*, Duras wrote that Stretter and Michael

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<sup>140</sup> Knuuttila, 2009, p. 230.

<sup>141</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 105.

<sup>142</sup> Murphy, 1984, p. 126.

Richardson "dance so close together as to melt into one".<sup>143</sup> Just as partners switch from one to another in the circular movement of dance, so does the theme of desire circulate in all of Duras's works, achieving its most apparent and seductive manifestation in the dance scenes in *La Femme du Gange* and *India Song*.

To conclude, by divorcing the sensual visuals from the trance-like soundtrack, Duras makes the viewer conscious of the separation of the two forms of desire, desire to see and desire to hear. This reveals the split subjectivity of the female protagonist and the dual nature of desiring, being at the same time the desiring subject and the desired object, or on the other hand, being torn apart by desire for the past love while commencing the new. Either of these dualities can be the reason why Duras divorces the sound from the image – the identity is never fixed, the woman is always in the state of schism. The female voices off-screen have been freed from their physical existence, from their bodies that define them as objects of desire. They owe their split subjectivity, their madness, their ravishing, and this freedom to feel and express highlights their power to tell *her* story. In contrast to the multiplicity of the narrative voices, there is silence, visual emptiness and stillness of the characters that achieves the feeling of some ghostly presence. There is also music that beautifully portrays the memory and flow of desire, revealing Duras's profound interest for the mysterious, invisible and sublime, which knows no sex or gender. She uses her own feminine softness and intuition to approach the sublime, looking for the answers about the nature of desire in the realm of the invisible. As Hill puts it, desire in the India cycle is a force that is always beyond the limitations of visual representation, which is the reason why Duras refused to construct her films according to the conventional film language that relies on the visual representation and synced sound.<sup>144</sup> The

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<sup>143</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 100.

<sup>144</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 103.

radicalization of her film poetics continued after the India cycle, which brings us to the final subchapter of the thesis, the analysis of Duras's radical cinema.

## B. Radical Cinema

As discussed in the previous chapter, Duras's cinema is characterised by the junction between literature and film and the disjunction between sound and image. The fusion of the two artistic disciplines, cinema and literature, is produced based on the need to turn the literary text into voice and juxtapose it with the image, thus creating new meanings while opting out of representation and conventional identification with the characters. A fixed meaning is never Duras's priority; as she herself said in the interview with Xavière Gauthier: "If there is meaning, it shows up afterward."<sup>145</sup> While other experimental filmmakers, such is, for instance, Maya Deren, perceive poetic qualities of a text through its visual representation, depicting time, desire or dreams through reverse motion, negative shots and freeze frames, Duras pushes the viewer's expectations to the extremes, often opting out from showing anything but the text.<sup>146</sup> This way, both literary and filmic narrative is deconstructed and fragmented, thereby mirroring the fragmented nature of reality, the non-linearity of time and the spiral, eternal nature of memory and desire. In the lieu of the modernist filmmaking tradition, Duras's mature cinema is also characterised by radical narrative discontinuity and thematic continuity, following the trend of the mental journey films, elaborated in the first chapter of the thesis.

However, her radical filmmaking period from 1975 to 1985 pushes the discontinuity and fragmentation further, annihilating cinema as a separate medium and subordinating the image to the text. Duras's rejection of cinema in favour of writing can be perceived as a radical extension of her technique of

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<sup>145</sup> Duras and Gauthier, 2005, p. 1.

<sup>146</sup> Beaulieu, 2009, p. 144.

desynchronization, in other words, as an appeal to senses other than sight.<sup>147</sup> Her later films demonstrate the inevitable limitation of vision when compared to the sublime power of voices, suggesting, paradoxically, that only the invisible, unseen text can hold the narrative power that otherwise lacks in images.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, the visual image in Duras's radical cinema is based on three elements: film image, literary text and black screen, the latter two being Duras's innovations. The use of all three elements opens up even greater distance between sound and image, pushing the notion of absence and disjunction to the extreme. Hence, this subchapter will provide the examination of the new elements of Duras's radical film language, such are the use of literary text in the visual track of the film, the reading voice-over and the use of black screen. During this period of radical cinema, Duras made ten feature and two short films. I will limit my analysis to the two films most courageously tackling the theme of desire, both made in 1981, *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* and *L'Homme atlantique*.

#### 1. *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (1981)

In a form of a dramatic reading, *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* explores the memories of an adolescent incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister, who now as adults have returned to the hotel by the beach in which they spent summers together as children. The theme of the film revolves around the forbidden touch, so Duras's attack on the visual representation and the film's thematic treatment of the taboo go hand-in-hand together. As Duras herself stated in *Duras filme (Duras Shoots)*, a documentary from 1981 that follows the making of *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*: "Incest cannot be seen from the outside. It has no particular appearance. It sees itself in nothing...I show that which cannot be shown; it's this impossibility which I show in cinema and which also makes my

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<sup>147</sup> McMahon, 2012, p. 97.

<sup>148</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 109.

cinema."<sup>149</sup> This filmic *irrepresentation*, as French literature and cinema theorist Lourdes Monterubbio names it, is a consequence of the indirect relationship between image and sound and between different elements of the film language that reveal irrationality and the impossibility of sexual union.<sup>150</sup> The images emerge from the text itself, like during a reading process, when a reader constructs her or his own images provoked by the text. These are mental images, which construct a new narrative world, a metadiegesis. The line between what the characters truly see and what they imagine becomes blurred, and the viewer is offered an insight into both of these realms, the real and the imaginary. The cinematography, however, does not formally propose which image belongs to which narrative world, as already observed in the India cycle. This contrasts the classic Hollywood cinema, where dream sequences, fantasies or memories are made blurry, out of focus, using different focal length or differently colour-graded.

*Agatha et les lectures illimitées* is constructed mostly through static shots of the reception area of the hotel and the panning shots of the deserted beach, similarly to *La Femme du Gange*. The brother and the sister move slowly through the space, as if absent from it, never seen speaking on the screen, which reinforces the same film poetics as used in the India cycle, with the aim to direct the attention of the viewer towards absence and silence, the invisible and the ineffable. Duras said that she wanted to make a film "closest to nothingness", and that the absolute rule of cinema lies precisely in this paradox: "It's through the lack of light that one speaks of light...the lack of life that one speaks of life, the lack of desire that one speaks of desire."<sup>151</sup> This radical reduction of image and light thus becomes the

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<sup>149</sup> *Duras Filme*, dir. Jérôme Beaujour and Jean Mascolo, France: Jérôme Beaujour and Jean Mascolo, 1981, min. 9:21.

<sup>150</sup> L. Monterubbio Ibáñez, *Agatha and the Limitless Readings* by Marguerite Duras. The literary text and its filmic (irre)presentation, *Communication & Society*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2017, p. 48.

<sup>151</sup> Duras in McMahon, 2012, p. 104.



perfect choice, necessary to capture the impossible sexual relation tackled in *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*.<sup>152</sup> At the same time, the impossibility of the siblings' contact signifies the eternity of their longing, since only if they stay out of each other's reach, they will sustain their desire.

The relation between sound and image reveals the poetic nature of Duras's coalescent creation of the narrative, where absence is the key structuring principle through which Duras achieves to show the irrepresentable, the "nothingness".<sup>153</sup> The image track of the film is periodically punctuated by the intervention of an empty image, the black screen. The soundtrack, on the other hand, presents the dialogue between Agatha and her brother at the moment of their final separation that reveals a strong lustful charge between the siblings, never articulated until now. Their voice-overs, in combination with the images of empty rooms and the abandoned beach, create a sense of mutual absence from each other's lives. When the characters are present in the frame, they are never together, but rather separated by doors, mirrors or windows. The way they are staged – gazing through the window, lying on the armchair – evokes a powerful presence of memory, in other words, they are seen remembering their past, as if looking for the seed of their incestuous desire. This was already introduced in Duras's first screenplay, *Hiroshima mon amour*, and further elaborated in the India cycle, gaining its momentum in *India Song*; we watch the characters remember their past loves, we watch their mental images, their memories projected on our screen and shared with us through soundtrack. In *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, this technique of destabilizing the temporal order and time-space continuity finally blossoms into the form of a film-reading: in the voice-over, the characters are heard reading their thoughts as if reading from their own letters that they never managed to

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<sup>152</sup> McMahon, 2012, p. 104.

<sup>153</sup> Monterubbio, 2017, p. 44.

send to each other.<sup>154</sup> On this note, let us clarify the aforementioned three film language elements introduced in this film: the use of literary text, reading voice-over and black screen.

To begin with, the film is Duras's only work that integrates the literary text into the filmic image. The film opens with the shot of the first page of the literary text, describing the situation in which the narration takes place. The reading of the full text is possible and the viewer constructs a literary-theatrical scene after the images of the vacant beaches appear on screen. For instance, it is written in the text on screen that "we hear the sound of the sea", then indeed the sound of the sea is introduced in the soundtrack, and soon in the following scene the sound turns into the image of the sea.<sup>155</sup> The text becomes the sound and then the image. In the same opening sequence where the text appears, the soundtrack introduces the musical number – Brahms's waltz no. 15 – that serves throughout the film as the leading narrative motif, embodying the repressed desire between the siblings. The music here bears the similar duty as in *India Song*: to reveal the invisible presence of the forbidden desire and displaced erotic communion. The second and last appearance of the literary text in the film divides the film into two parts. Five takes of the text alternate with the shot of the beach, while in the soundtrack we hear only the music, which creates a visual rhythm, as Monterubbio proposes.<sup>156</sup> Also, the text disables the junction of sound and image this way, interrupting its potential unity in much graver manner than it was demonstrated in the India cycle. The reason for this radical disjunction lies in incest as the theme of the film, which is revealed through the voice-over. Duras's creative choices thus underline the absence of any physicality of desire between the characters; through interruptions,

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<sup>154</sup> The "reading" is already highlighted in the film's title, *Agatha and the Limitless Readings*.

<sup>155</sup> *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, dir. M. Duras, France: Benoit Jacob Vidéo, 1981, min. 2:15.

<sup>156</sup> Monterubbio, 2017, p. 46.

textual interferences and disjunction of sound and image, Duras engages the audience to construct their own meaning out of the situation heard, read and seen on screen, thus encouraging a multi-sensory interpretation of desire as a fragmentary force. She does not offer a clear interpretation of such desire, but rather invites the audience to look for their own meaning of incest and taboo.

The second innovative poetic element used in the film is the reading voice-over. Defined by Michel Chion as textual speech and later analysed as the literalization of the voice-over,<sup>157</sup> it bears the same narrative function as the previous element, the literary text. Duras uses the reading voice-over to distance the narrative world of sound more radically from the image than in her previous films, and the reason for that is the theme of incest. Through the reading voice-over, Duras introduces the seclusion of the listening, separating the world in front of the camera from the world of intimacy, privacy of writing and reading, where one is able to read and listen to what otherwise might not be revealed outside of the own "dark room". The "dark room" or *la chambre noire* is the metaphor Duras used for the writing process, the solitary space of literary creation where one struggles to project the inner shadow onto the blank page (note the resemblance of the vocabulary to the cinematic process itself).<sup>158</sup> The text, turned into voice, points to the corporeity of writing, its musicality and orality. Duras actually introduced the reading voice-over for the first time in her 1977 film *Le Camion* (*The Lorry*), where she and actor Gerard Depardieu did an on-camera reading of a film script, seen sitting in the writing room, in the space of the text's creation. Similarly, in one scene in *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*,<sup>159</sup> the camera is revealed in the mirror and Agatha looks towards it, breaking the cinematic fourth wall, as if

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<sup>157</sup> M. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. C. Gorbman, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 171.

<sup>158</sup> Beaulieu, 2009, p. 25.

<sup>159</sup> *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, 1981, min 29:02.

finally revealing the extra-diegetic space of the film, or better to say, of all of Duras's films: the space of creation, of writing. Therefore, the reading voice-over brings us to the important conclusion regarding the narrative world from which the absent voices in Duras emerge from, the pre-diegetic space I mentioned earlier: it is the dark room of writing, the space of solitude and free creation, where words are conceived, preceding the images; where secrets, inner shadows, are released. The reason to reveal this pre-diegetic space now, in this film and not before, lies in the theme of the film: the pain of the most forbidden desire. Unable to speak about their repressed feelings, the characters read, absent from the present and from each other's company. This explains Duras's choice to use the literary text instead of image, and the reading voice-over instead of the voice-over dialogue.

Lastly, besides the literary text and the reading voice-over, the third most important poetic discovery of her radical cinema is the use of black screen, becoming the epitome of absence. In the subsequent film, *L'Homme atlantique*, analysed in continuation, the black image will assume the central aesthetic and semantic role in the film's construction. Here, in *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, the black image is introduced for the first time in Duras's filmography, though only twice, in the first part of the film until the literary text appears, and in the second part, when it merges with the panning shot of the beach. In both cases, it does not serve as a bridge between sequences, nor the indication of a temporal break, as it is common in the classic cinema. Rather, it is inserted between the shots that show the same space, as if disturbing their unified identity.<sup>160</sup> The relation between sound and the absent image is ambivalent: the female and male voice-overs are either initiated during the black image, continued, correspondent with each other, or they are paused, as in the second appearance of the black image. As Beaulieu puts it, "black shots, like the blank parts of the text, request the participation of

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<sup>160</sup> Monterubbio, 2017, p. 48.

the reader-spectator that must necessarily fill them, since these are abnormally empty spaces."<sup>161</sup> This abnormal space, the black image, becomes a metaphor for the irrational conflict happening in the obscure realms of the characters' minds that produced the sinful love affair between them. It is therefore most directly linked to the theme of the impossible desire that colours the entire opus of Duras, and it is fascinating to observe how long it took Duras to gain courage to speak about incest, to show the nothingness and emptiness of longing that she kept within herself since the adolescent age.

The second time the black image appears, the shot preceding it is the image of the siblings' encounter, where they are both placed next to each other, without looking at each other, almost in total darkness.<sup>162</sup> The female and male voice-over recall their adolescent affair and its repercussions, narrating the last sentence of the sequence over the black image: "Yes, no other love."<sup>163</sup> The juxtaposition of the black image and this bit of the voice-over might suggest that no other love will ever be possible for them, since they have experienced the apocalyptic flame of incest. The characters are then seen imagining what the voice-over is saying, closing this way a circular structure of meaning, underlining Duras's connection of voice to memory. The next two shots can be perceived as a distorted shot-reversed shot in which the male protagonist is seen for the first time gazing at the interior from the balcony, while the female protagonist lies on the armchair and gazes at the balcony. For the first time, the eye-line between the two characters is established and their possible exchange of gazes announces the end of the film; the incestuous consummation that inevitably leads to death.

## 2. *L'Homme atlantique* (1981)

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<sup>161</sup> Beaulieu, 2009, p. 232.

<sup>162</sup> See Appendix 3.

<sup>163</sup> *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, 1981, min 1:03:11.

Having finished *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, Duras followed it with the release of a new film based on the footage discarded from its final edit – *L'Homme atlantique*. The film is made up of the off-screen commentary spoken solely by Duras, while the role of the eponymous “Atlantic man” belonged to Duras’s partner Yann Andrea, to whom the image of the film is also addressed, and who likewise appeared in the previous film. Duras’s own reading voice-over points towards a female authorial conscience as formulated by Silverman, where the female voice assumes the central narrative position otherwise rarely ascribed to a woman.<sup>164</sup>

The literary text as a poetic element is omitted from *L'Homme atlantique*, while the use of black image is far more extensive than ever before. The film image is constantly interrupted by a series of black frames of various durations. Duras also ends the film with a black image that lasts for almost fifteen minutes, during which she reads in form of a voice-over nine and a half pages of published text. This kind of radical dominion of text over image points towards the total annihilation of cinema, the mastery of human voice over the visuals and Duras’s choice to trust memory and imagination more than realism. It also serves as the perfect embodiment of absence that is so persistent in all of her films. It is important to note that Duras’s dismantling of vision and the use of black screen in both *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* and *L'Homme atlantique* recalls Godard’s *Le Gai Savoir* (*Joy of Learning*, 1969) and the counter-cinematic style of early works by the Situationists, in particular the films of Isidore Isou and Guy Debord.<sup>165</sup> For instance, in Debord’s film *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (*Howlings in Favour of De Sade* 1952), off-screen dialogues and periods of silence accompany an alternation of white and black screens, culminating in a silent black screen for twenty-four minutes. Debord’s idea was to criticize the society of spectacle and

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<sup>164</sup> Silverman, 1988, p. 187.

<sup>165</sup> McMahon, 2012, p. 98.

consumerism, stemming from Marxism. In contrast, Duras's attack on cinematic representation, although might be influenced by these films, does not stem from an ideological backing, but is rather explicitly connected to the refusal of any ideology, to her exploration of the pre-rational, the intuitive and sublime.<sup>166</sup>

What Duras articulates in *L'Homme atlantique* is no longer in a form of recognisable narrative about desire, abandonment and madness as in her previous films; rather, it becomes an impossible dialogue between the invisible, absent voices and silent, absent images, referring to the lack in one's own memory and identity. The disjunction of sound and image thus becomes the most radical; amazingly achieved, without any other cinematic reference. The divorce of sound and image might finally reveal the sexual difference that colours the entire Duras's oeuvre, the principle of female and male energies, always contrasting and merging with each other. Duras's understanding of life and nature as the dance of active and passive principle, masculine and feminine energy – *ying-yang* – might very well come from her proximity to Taoism and Buddhism during the first eighteen years of her life. The only thing that brings these two energies, the creative and destructive forces, to harmony, is the sea, present in the soundtrack and mise-en-scène of the India cycle and Duras's radical cinema. I found Leslie Hill's reading of Duras's cinematic texts to be particularly interesting, suggesting that the sea in Duras's last films signifies the presence of the mother.<sup>167</sup> In *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, the lurking presence of water and the visual return to the sea might symbolise this return to the mother, since the mother represents the former unity of the two siblings, once sharing the same womb.<sup>168</sup> The sea represents the void, the space in-between, the beginning and the end, the birth and death. The sound

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<sup>166</sup> McMahon, 2012, p. 98.

<sup>167</sup> Hill, 1993, p. 148.

<sup>168</sup> In French, the word "mother" (*la mère*) and "sea" (*la mer*, also feminine) are homonyms.

of the sea is audible throughout the second half of the film, but in *L'Homme atlantique*, the sea is in fact constantly present, both aurally and visually, as the male character is seen gazing at the grand eternal Atlantic. Thus, a full circle of desire is achieved, returning back to its origin, to the womb, announcing Duras's own gradual "return to the mother": her departure from cinema back to literature.

To conclude, the metaphorical operations of Duras's radical cinema reject every univocal relationship between its elements: literary text and voice-overs, black image and silence, interior shots and music, or shots and sounds of the sea. These dominant elements of her films are on contrary forming a complex network of relationships based on analogy, paradox and contrapuntal principles, generating new meanings without a fixed interpretation. The choice to use black images lies in Duras's attempt to capture the impossibility of the incestuous love and the nothingness, the spiritual void it causes. The use of reading voice-over refers to the final manifestation of the junction of literature and film, and the primacy of words over images. This grounds Duras's films in the realm of poetic cinema, which blurs the line between these two artistic disciplines, film and poetry. This liminal space of creation, the in-betweenness, reveals the impossibility of representation and identification, the fluidity of emotions and identities, which is something so painstakingly present throughout Duras's work. Examining Duras's radical cinema, the notion of desire as the lack is ultimately clarified: the object of desire is always out of reach, since its conquest would mean the end of human progression; disaster, debauchery and death. Desire is thus apocalyptic, inevitably melancholic.



## V. CONCLUSION

The thesis attempted to demonstrate how is desire captured on screen in the films by Marguerite Duras, the controversial French writer and filmmaker. Through the analysis of Duras's filmmaking choices, from her first screenplay in 1959 for *Hiroshima mon amour* towards her radical independent cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the thesis aimed to reveal the evolution of Duras's film language and the reasons behind its complexity. We firstly examined the sources of Duras's poetics and desire, traced to her first sexual experiences during her formative years in Saigon and to her involvement in the intellectual and artistic milieu of the post-War France. Grounding Duras on the margins of *nouveau roman* and *écriture féminine* facilitated the analysis of her aesthetic and narrative techniques, concluding that the overall visual and narrative fragmentation in Duras's cinema stems from her *nouveau roman* writing style. In the second chapter, we examined the conception of her filmmaking career, the collaboration with Alain Resnais in *Hiroshima mon amour*, and her first directorial debut *Détruire, dit-elle*. We traced the influences of Resnais on the creation of Duras's own film poetics and examined the development of her choices to separate the image from the sound, analyzing desynchronisation as her most innovative film language element. Lastly, we analyzed two significant phases of her independent filmmaking career, the India cycle and her later experimental cinema, focusing on her two last films. We noted the radicalization of the film elements both in aural and visual realms, and the creation of a distinctive cinematic style that might be deemed as anti-cinematic. In general, the choice of films for the analyses was guided by two principles: the theme of desire and the extent of cinematic innovation. Now, in the end of the journey, we can conclude the following.

The poetics of desire is thematically treated in the films by Marguerite Duras through her choice to speak about the inner void, the impossible sexual relations

that deepen this void, the solitude that loss of love causes, the thin juncture between death and desire. She concentrates on female characters, using her own feminine intuition to understand the melancholy of a grieving woman, showing her characters as entrapped in silence and madness, in the jaws of desire. The void in Duras is not only the narrative subject, but it also resides in the formal and aesthetic appearance of the film, in the fragmented narrative structure, in silences and black images, as if suggesting that between the fragments, in this void, one can discover the presence of something greater.

Aesthetically or formally, the treatment of desire and loss is achieved by divorcing the sound from image, by using narrative ellipsis, temporal discontinuity, multiple extra-diegetic narrative voices and reading voice-overs, by creating highly stylized *mise-en-scène* and sensual images resembling still photography, with minimal movement and still performance, and finally, by using literary text and black screen in the filmic image. From *Hiroshima mon amour* to *L'Homme atlantique*, we witness the radicalization of Duras's film language, the negation of image and slow annihilation of cinema, with the aim to achieve the dominance of text and voice over the image; the mastery of memory over the presence and reality. The evolution of Duras's sound aesthetics is marked by the passage from homodiegetic voice-over dialogue in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, through desynchronisation of voice-over dialogue from the images in *Détruire, dit-elle* and a complex network of extra-diegetic voices conversing in the India cycle, finally to arrive to her own reading voice-over in *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* and *L'Homme atlantique*. The evolution of Duras's visual aesthetics concerns the passage from rapid flashbacks used in her first screenplay to the creation of static, sensual images that disable the identification with the characters, finally to witness the interference of literary text and black image in the visuals of her last films. Her aim was to destabilize the viewer's orientation in the time-space continuum and

to erase the boundaries between the present and the past, between reality, memory and imagination, since solely outside the boundaries of the Rational one can explore the true essence of love and desire.

The reason to use such complex film poetics lies in Duras's understanding of desire in the Lacanian terms: as a lack, as a state of emptiness from which the object of desire is absent or forbidden. Desire in Duras is thus melancholic, trenchant force, and not a romantic, passionate drive that moves her characters forward towards a certain goal, as common in the classic Hollywood cinema. Accordingly, her filmic strategies clear the narrative of sentimentality and ideology, preventing identification, fixed interpretation and representation. In other words, Duras uses voice and music to expose desire, to question the viewer's own interpretation of such mental state, in contrast to most of the film directors who succumb to its visual representation, especially when treating female desire on screen. Instead of showing passion in action, desire as manifested and consumed, Duras exposes the inner actions of a desiring woman, her thoughts, memories, fantasies, thus returning the subjectivity to her. On screen, she shows languid bodies stripped from any sexual energy, but their stillness and placement in carefully chosen locations, in combination with distant, melancholic voice-overs, is precisely what fuels her films with such strong eroticism. This way, Duras proves that the erotic has nothing to do with vulgarity or pornography, but with the contrast between masculinity and femininity, crystalized in the conflict between these two life forces. Erotic lies in-between, at the juncture of the creative and the destructive. Duras's interest in the inner world of a woman is thus not political, social or physical; rather, she is interested in the world of a woman detached from any external context, curious to discover what resides in her silence and solitude.

By directing the audience to observe what is present in absence and what is audible in silence, Duras, similarly to her fellow modernist filmmakers, tries to

capture the ineffable, perhaps even godly, believing that cinema has the power to generate new meanings and thus present what otherwise remains unseen. She achieves this by choosing specific aesthetic strategies: instrumental contrapuntal music, the absent voices and the choir of multiple voice-over dialogues, specific rhythm, punctuation and idioms in text that emphasize the importance of voice, its physicality and sensuality, and its connection to the perforated nature of memory. Linking memory to voice, Duras believed that the nature of desire and longing can be truthfully portrayed solely if omitting a classical visual representation and instead creating a complex soundtrack that properly mirrors the manifold construction of memory. As the power of the image decreases throughout her cinematic opus, the narrative importance of soundtrack increases, reaching its glory in *India Song*. Music and voices refer to the sublime, that which is dark, hidden, intimate, whereas the images of absence and nothingness reveal that which stands before us: the emptiness of reality. The erotic remains in touch and gestures, in the desolation charged with melancholy, in music and dance that mobilize the passive, frigid bodies on screen.

The intimate and the invisible in human nature is discovered in the *chambre noire*, the dark room of writing where solitude resides. I cannot but draw parallels between the dark room of Duras's creativity and the "dark continent", the term Freud used to describe women. The darkness, mystery and centuries-long silence of women is interrupted by Duras through her use of multiple female narrative voices, which is a rare, innovative and courageous aesthetic choice. What interests Duras in women are not women in themselves, but a possibility of language which may be found in women, challenging the conventional view on female identity, desire and agency. By resorting to the use of female extra-diegetic voice-over, Duras breaks the silence of a desirous woman, thus liberating her voice, most outstandingly achieved in *India Song* where two women talk about the desire of

the third woman, Anne-Marie Stretter seen on screen, but also about their mutual desires. Portraying woman as intuitive, passive, absent and essentially different than man, Duras celebrates femininity without masculinizing it. She uses the techniques of *nouveau roman* to show the schism within a woman as a desiring subject, which makes her unique in relation to the fellow male *nouveau romanciers*, who did not treat female desire from *within*, but also in relation to female filmmakers who did portray the desiring woman and her mental images, but did not apply the experimental *nouveau roman* techniques. I therefore argue that Duras's unique combination offered a view on women, sexuality and desire that is free of any ideology, purely feminine and human. By freeing women from identity and exposing their inner landscapes, their vulnerability, submissiveness and softness, Duras returned their subjectivity back to its original place: the voice, the darkness of memory, the ineffable void. By doing so, she opened space for a sincere, unmediated dialogue about love and sex.

So, to finalize, when commencing the research for the thesis, I thought to prove how in her treatment of desire Duras discovered a genuine feminine film language, illuminating passivity and silence as tools of female resistance. In contrast, I discovered that Duras created the unique language of desire that goes beyond the limitations of gender and ideology, beyond time itself. Her cinema is not a statement or provocation, but an infinite exploration of the differences and interactions between the sexes, formally conveyed through the divorce of sound and image and their contrapuntal relation. For Duras, portraying desire was a journey into the invisible; the liberation, not on the political or social level, but on the level of the soul. It was an escape from the wound created by the impossibility of love, much like her drinking; the wound that ties all people together and exists in each of us.

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## VIII. APPENDICES

1. *Hiroshima mon amour*, dir. Alain Resnais, France: Argo Films, 1959, min. 9:11.



2. *India Song*, dir. Marguerite Duras, France: Les Films Armorial, 1975, min. 1:07:26.



3. *Agatha et les lectures illimitées*, dir. Marguerite Duras, France: Benoit Jacob Vidéo, 1981, min. 1:03:11.

