

## Marguerite Duras, Experimental Filmmaker Between Antinarration and Iconoclasm

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C'est aussi à partir d'une manque à voir ma  
mère, que j'ai écrit l'histoire d'une mère.  
(Marguerite Duras, *Cabiers Renaud-Barrault*, 96, 1977)

### *Abstract*

The essay is focused on how Duras' film writing is a visual expression of the central themes of her literature (love and desire) and how certain practices of aesthetic aniconism – and their theoretical reading – refer to the manifestation of emotional and sentimental control. End of love, end of representation. The essay will also analyze how the field of feeling in Duras' cinema is characterized by a double process of taking the loved object off the frame, from the early films to the iconoclast *L'Homme atlantique* (1980), the French writer's cinematic testament.

The process is accomplished in this film, the most radical and experimental of Duras' film works, in which thirty minutes out of the forty are characterized by a black screen. The process of rarefaction of the constituent components of cinema has been achieved by denying the image itself. The anti-narrative begins to approach the idea of an iconoclastic cinema, devoid at the same time of narrative and images. This essay intends to deepen precisely this path towards the annihilation of cinema as an act of provocation.

### Moriremo guardati: *Duras, Or of the Affective Iconoclasm*

The aim of the essay is to show how the literary universe of Marguerite Duras manifests itself in an aesthetically innovative way in her film productions. Duras' cinema is a cinema that reworks themes already expressed in other forms and that in cinematic form finds a totally new and authentically modern expressive capacity. Duras' cinema draws from life, transforming life into an aesthetic experience and thus depriving it of the narrative realism that is more present in its literary production, to bring it to a symbolic universe full of evocative references.

*Moriremo guardati*<sup>1</sup> is the title of a collection of poetry by a great poet who has been overlooked by critics, Mario Benedetti. The title evokes the literary and cinematic universe of Marguerite Duras in two verbs — *to die* and *to watch*/

<sup>1</sup> Mario Benedetti, *Moriremo guardati* (Forlì: Forum Poesia, 1982).

*to look* — which seem to collide and explode the dimension of the future and the idea of a literary posterity. The latter is collected under the auspices of a transitory dimension of human fragility and a past participle (*guardati*), the gaze of the other on us which seamlessly extends to an undefined time from the past to the future. Past and future are dominated by the gaze, a gaze imposed upon us even before death, when perhaps we do not wish to be looked upon, we do not wish to be the object of glances but perhaps the subject; or rather, we would prefer to be a black screen, a mirror which reflects no image. All the cinema of Marguerite Duras revolves around the problematic question of the gaze, which is doubled, deferred, betrayed, annulled, or reflected. Nevertheless, the reflection of the gaze does not arise from Duras' interest in the cinematic system, according to a meta-textual approach like that of the historical avant-garde (at least from Vertov to Buñuel), but rather from the understanding that the cinematic gaze is an extension of the true gaze, a declination of feeling through a screen which is also a mirror. Gazing and feeling.

The creative corpus of Duras' work represents a unicum which is difficult to disentangle, in which literature, memoirs, theatre, cinema, and journalism intermingle through a thematic reiteration which is, under many aspects, enveloping: many texts are born on the written page only to be transformed into cinematic or theatrical scripts. The childhood in Indochina, the dazzling encounters with several female figures of legendary stature (e.g., Anne-Marie Stretter, Lol V. Stein),<sup>2</sup> love in all its declinations (from filial to maternal love, from sensual young love to bitter senile love) become the interwoven themes from one film to the next, from one novel to the next in a complex corpus in which cinema is only one facet among many. The relation between the written page and the cinematic image is complex, which Duras as a writer has often simplified, declaring to have chosen the cinema because she was dissatisfied with the film adaptations of her novels (dissatisfaction which begins with René Clément's *Barrage contre le Pacifique* and extends to Jean Jacques Annaud's *L'Amant*, for which Duras went so far as to rewrite a new screenplay, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*). Nevertheless, the cinema offers Duras an additional possibility, namely, to materialize memory and elaborate a meaningful image, as Youssef Ishaghpour writes: 'Duras resorts to images for a lack of words, and returns to words for the lack of images[...]'.<sup>3</sup> This semantic coming and going exhausts the possibility of separation between cinema and literature, bringing the latter into the cinema while categorically refusing the illustrative approach and destroying the cinema from within, through its own images. Ishaghpour continues:

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan's intense essay on Lol V. Stein should be noted: Jacques Lacan, 'Homage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein', *Ornicar? Revue du Champ freudien*, 34 (1985), 7–13. On Duras' reading of Lacan see Daniela Angelucci, 'Il fantasma di Anne-Marie. Duras e il cinema dell'immaginario', *Fata Morgana*, 36 (2019), 161–68.

<sup>3</sup> Youssef Ishaghpour, *D'une image à l'autre. La nouvelle modernité du cinéma* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1982) p. 226. My translation.

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'Duras and Saturday night cinema have something in common: the mythology of mortal passion which leads to death and madness but, in Duras, this resemblance is written in the negative'.<sup>4</sup> Nothing more so than the cinema is capable of recounting passion; where words are not enough, are not sufficient, the materialization of the gaze intervenes. The Sicilian poets of the thirteenth century had already identified the profound bond between vision and revelation, the consciousness of the image as a source of pleasure and privileged means for falling in love.<sup>5</sup> Passion originates in the sense of sight; thus, the end of love, the tomb of passion, can only coincide with the absence of image, with the black screen, with the impossibility of all vision. Pleasure is transformed into pain; revelation is transformed into concealment. In *L'Homme atlantique* (1982), through a progressive journey, Duras brings the denial of the image which coincides with the end of the love between the aged author and the young Yann Andréa to the extreme consequence: 'You have moved out of the movie camera's angle. You are absent. With your departure, your absence has come into being, it will be photographed in the same way your presence was. Your life has been removed'.<sup>6</sup> A bit further in the script: 'This time, you will die before your eyes'.<sup>7</sup> We can annotate love at the time of its technical reproducibility. The cinema, therefore, becomes an instrument which gives the image, the form of romantic passion.

Consequently Duras' aesthetic is manifested as an affective aesthetic in which the form, the modernity of the language, and the rupture of cinematic grammar assume not only an affective value but a metalinguistic one. Ironically paraphrasing the famous maxim of cinematic modernity, 'the track is a question of morality',<sup>8</sup> we can say that for Duras, the track is a question of heart. It matters less to Duras to reveal the artifice of the cinema to expose its mechanisms than to use the cinema to reveal the internal mechanisms for the retrieval of memory, emotion, absence, and return. Duras plays with the image like the Freudian child plays with a yo-yo:<sup>9</sup> vision and concealment, proximity and distance, presence and phantasmatic evocation. Images and the absence of an image correspond to

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacopo Da Lentini, 'Amore è uno desio che ven da core', in *Dal testo alla storia, dalla storia al testo*, ed. by Guido Baldi and others (Torino: Paravia, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Marguerite Duras, *L'Homme atlantique* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> This concept emerges in Luc Moulet, 'Sam Fuller: sur le brisées de Marlowe', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 93 (1959), 11–14 and is then taken up by Jean-Luc Godard in Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Jean-Luc Godard, Pierre Kast, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, 'Hiroshima, notre amour', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 97 (1959), 1–18.

<sup>9</sup> In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud describes the behaviour of his nephew Ernst. This child, at the age of 18 months, had among his favourite games a kind of yo-yo that threw over the bed, making it disappear; later, pulling it to himself, the yo-yo reappeared, accompanied by expressions of happiness on the part of the child. According to the Austrian doctor, the game was repeated with great frequency because of the function it performed for the child. This function is associated with repeating compulsion. With this formulation, Freud intends the tendency to propose, through daily actions, a sort of scheme present in the internal world of the child, which in the past would have generated a suffering.

the tremors of the heart and to the evocative journeys of memory. The aesthetic of a writer, only momentarily lent to the cinema, as she loved to say, is an aesthetic of subtraction and refusal, of illustrative cinema in favour of an evocative cinema: 'Duras multiplies the procedure of distancing the performance: muteness and the absence of actors, fixed frames, use of voice over and off-screen'.<sup>10</sup> The voice-overs, in particular, which are central to her cinema, beginning with *La Femme du Gange* (1972-73), take on the role of giving expression to off-screen scenes. There remain ghostly traces on screen which are often no longer human; for instance, the ruins of aristocratic palaces in *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* or the statues of the Parisian gardens in *Césarée*. Evoked by absent voices, whatever is off-screen assumes a presence that only literacy writing is able to offer. Off-screen scenes are paradoxically more vivid than the profilmic on screen.

Situated, for the critics, within the context of modern cinematography in that which Truffaut defines as the Editions de Minuit tendency (also evidenced by Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, Henri Colpi, Frederic Rossif and Jean Rouch), Duras overturns the assumption of modernity which 'seeks destruction in the form', whereas she 'gives form to absence'.<sup>11</sup> Duras manages to separate the two essential moments of cinema, the image and the narration. As Ishaghpour notes: 'The world finds itself in front of the movie camera and fiction is found in the narration'.<sup>12</sup> The word, in this way, is banished, the fictitious is relegated to the off-screen scenes, the existence of the story has its last possibility in the absence of the image.

Duras' films are strewn with mirrors: 'the image is only the reflection of the thing, it is not the thing itself. The windows, like all the reflective surfaces in the film, are there to plant the doubt of the ontological presence, to remind us that every image is not the presence of something but the inalienable trace of an absence'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this absence does not represent the alienation of the individual in a capitalistic society, as it does for instance in the cinema of Antonioni, but rather it represents the marginality of woman as opposed to the dominating presence of man. The fact of her being off-screen, and above all, represented in an autobiographical manner, suggests the absence of the fundamental female figures in the life of Duras. The absence of her mother and of the other female archetypes in Duras' formative years, the phantasmatic Lol V. Stein, Anne-Marie Stretter and the other face of the mirror, namely the beggar, the black soul of the Orient is the personification of the colonizers' sense of guilt towards colonized women. In Duras' experience, in fact, the father's role is weak (he dies in France when she is still quite young) while it is the mother who embodies the male behaviour of oppression (it is she

<sup>10</sup> Najet Limam-Tnani, 'L'Autobiographie dans le cinéma de Marguerite Duras. Une expérience des limites', *La Revue des lettres modernes*, 73 (special issue *Marguerite Duras: le cinéma*, ed. by Jean Cléder, 2014), 55–69 (p. 59).

<sup>11</sup> Youssef Yshaghpour, *Cinéma contemporain. De ce côté du miroir* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1986), p. 273. On the relationship among Duras, modern cinema and narration's fragility: Pascal Bonitzer, *Système des émotions*, in *Le champ aveugle. Essais sur le cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 280.

<sup>13</sup> Roberto Zemignan, *Introduzione al cinema di Marguerite Duras* (Padova: Unipress, 1994), p. 35.

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who dominates, decides, commands) and of the sentimental egoism (excluding the young Marguerite from her affective realm, blatantly preferring her older brother).

After outlining these aspects, it seems important to show how in the cinema of Duras there are two large hidden presences that turn into absences for the spectator: the mother and the lover (declined in its various forms depending on the periods of the writer's life). In particular, there are many screenplays centred around maternal absence in Duras' cinema; one of the most interesting interpretation of this is the one proposed by Madeline Borgomano. According to the French scholar, Duras' cinema is a cinema of destruction (*Détruire dit-elle*, 1969, is one of her most famous titles and one of the anthems of revolt for the most intense and radical protestors of 1968) which draws upon its own iconoclastic roots in the contentious relationship with the writer's mother, the cinema: 'like the mother, an instrument of destruction: the mother plunders, devastates, the cinema mutilates, beheads, undoes'.<sup>14</sup> The cinema-mother bond is original, almost a founding myth. In *Une Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) Duras' first literary success and later mainstream cinematic adaption of René Clément (1957), the writer evokes a movie theatre, the Éden Cinéma, where her young mother worked as a pianist to make ends meet and maintain her children who had suddenly lost their father. Duras' mother, playing the piano with her back to the movie screen, could not see the images but could hear only the murmuring of the audience and the voices in the hall; her position in relation to the movie screen remains unseeing in a diachronic position. The mother does not see the images but hears the voices. The experience that Duras later presents to the spectator will be the progressive reproduction of this inadequate condition: listening to voices of a film without seeing the images or seeing images which do not correspond to the voices one hears. Filial love, the frustrated love of a daughter who feels unloved, reproduces the desire to: 'allow the spectator to relive the pain of the mother, her vertigo in front of the image and her desire of the image'.<sup>15</sup> The mother's space is a sonorous one defined by the absence of vision. But the mother's cinematic universe is that of the Saturday night cinema, her sentimental expressions are recurrent in Duras' memory of her mother, cinematic in the most common sense that is given to this adjective (creating cinema, namely, assuming melodramatic behaviour, caricatures). The cinema is a place of deception, a cinema-illusion which dazes, deludes with false promises in which only the bewitching music of Duras' universe lingers. As modern spectators we have certainly questioned the origins of the poignant harmony of Carlos D'Alessio's compositions in Duras' cinema, a strident contrast between the Jansenism of the production and the exasperated romanticism of the music (the melodies of *India Song* or *Valse de l'Éden Cinéma*).<sup>16</sup> The contrast resides within the

<sup>14</sup> Madeleine Borgomano, *L'écriture filmique de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Albatros, 1985), p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Najet Tnani-Limam, 'Duras cinéfilie: le cinéma comme quête de la mère', in *Duras, femme du siècle*, ed. by Stella Harvey and Kate Ince (Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 127–43 (p. 140).

<sup>16</sup> An interesting reading of the Durassian musical universe can be found in the collective volume *L'écriture désirante: Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Anne-Marie Reboul and Esther Sánchez-Pardo (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016).

condition of the maternal vision and the sound of the sentimental music which she played on the piano of the Éden Cinéma. And so Duras reproduces through cinema what the cinema represented for her mother: a black screen, because behind her is heart-breaking music. It is sufficient to recall the musical motif of *Baxter, Vera Baxter* (1973) which seamlessly accompanies the entire film, a gentle, exotic motif which reflects, with frivolous levity, the idea of Indies which a provincial French woman at the start of the century might have had. The cinema which Duras refuses is, therefore, the bewitching cinema which seduced her mother with false promises and false myths; in the end, the same theme touched by Luchino Visconti in *Bellissima* (1951); however in Visconti's film the point of departure was scepticism, an ethical stance before the cinematic image, in Duras, the point of departure is the black screen, an aesthetic approach, an ecology of the image in the name of its despoliation, of its absence: 'With this unadorned cinema [Duras] creates an art which conforms to her life and films which contain the "leanness" of the children of the plain'.<sup>17</sup> In Duras' universe, the feminine figures pursue each other with the clear intent of creating the feminist figure par excellence, the missing piece, namely, the mother: 'Because of their attachment to their experience and of their contiguity with the mother in the familial novel, Anne-Marie Stretter, the beggar, Indochina, the sea (feminine in French) music, become metonyms of childhood and a symbolic reference of this character'.<sup>18</sup> Linguistic modernity does not have, in Duras, the Nouvelle Vague cinephilic connotation so much as the autobiographical connotations, attributed to a constant self-analysis of her past.

The themes of Duras' cinema are the same as those of her novels, plays, and nonfiction and journalistic writing. It is not difficult to identify three distinct periods in her cinema: from *La Musica* (1966) to *Nathalie Granger* (1972), it is a cinema of modernity under the influence of Alain Resnais (with whom Duras successfully collaborated on the screenplay of *Hiroshima, mon amour*); from *La Femme du Gange* (1972-1973) to *Le Navire Night* (1979), it is a cinema of the voices in which images and sounds are no longer synchronous but a journey in distant and often inaccessible time frames, the film and the text travel on parallel tracks, the voices are in dialogue with the images; and finally from *Césarée* (1979) to *L'Homme atlantique* (1982), it is a cinema of a single voice — Duras' voice alone accompanies the images. Aesthetically anomalous but in line with the author's themes is *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (1976), in which the tale and the image happily unite in a domestic *kammerspiel* in which the great theatre actress Madeleine Renaud embodies the author's mother in both voice and gesture. In all the forms which Duras' cinema takes, there is the constant of an absence, of an obsessive search for the maternal figure and for the extension of this figure in sensual love, mother-lover, male-female.

In this sense, *Nathalie Granger* is an interesting work of transition; a film on maternal love, it is also a powerful and effective metaphor for the role of women in cinema and in society:

<sup>17</sup> Najet Tnani-Limam, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi p.137.

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The two women [Lucia Bosè and Jeanne Moreau] live in a house (Duras' house), the last inhabitable house of her cinema, which becomes the extension of their femininity, a house-uterus [...] the space of the house assumes the security, intimacy, warmth and safety of the nest, it belongs to the women and to their ways of being, they have control over their space as far as possible, it is a space of refuge, possibly even of cure.<sup>19</sup>

The space of the house is also exclusionary, a voluntary prison, compared to the exterior where men live, where men distance themselves and see themselves disappear, swallowed in the world of work and language. Silence reigns in the house: the music (oppositional when compared to the verbalization of sentiments) the slow, repetitive gestures of domestic care (cleaning up, ironing, sewing), a mother's silent misgivings for the excesses of a young daughter, Nathalie, who appears on the screen only to look and to play. From outside come the menacing voices of a diffused violence and a travelling salesman who tries unsuccessfully to sell the two women a revolutionary washing machine, without attaining any answers, if not the veiled insinuation of the uselessness of his role in society, of the desire to give a name to every object. Naming things is similar to representing them, to giving them an image. The film *Nathalie Granger* is the last act of illustrative cinema; subsequently, the disappearance of bodies and the rupture of the bond between voice and image gradually become more radical and the feminine idea expressed in this film becomes the form of the feminine through the disappearance of the actions and the valorization of the tale (external to the image). It is, as Roberto Zemignan observes, 'a process which effectively begins with this film, [*Nathalie Granger*] even if some traces were already present in *Jaune le soleil* and becomes continually more meaningful in the film which follows arriving at the total disappearance of bodies in the short films and to the black image in *L'Homme atlantique*'.<sup>20</sup> Duras comes to the awareness that the image takes away strength to the imaginary, so creating images without imagination.

#### *On L'Homme atlantique or the lover as absence*

I love going to the cinema,  
what I hate are the images on the screen.  
(T.W. Adorno, *Transparencies on Film*, 1966)

*L'Homme atlantique* is Duras' most difficult film. The writer herself would invite the public, often puzzled during the screening, to abandon the viewing of the film which played for two weeks in the Parisian theatre L'Escurial with a single showing at 6:00 pm. Duras' invitation is for a solitary viewing: the film

<sup>19</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Women & Film. Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 99. On *Nathalie Granger*: William F. van Werth, 'The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Sound and Voice in Closed Room', *Film Quarterly*, 33.1 (1979), 22–29.

<sup>20</sup> Zemignan, p. 92.

must always and in any case be projected even for a single spectator. The film lasts a total of 42' and more than half of the scenes consist of a black screen. Initially the colour black alternates with several unedited shots of *Agatha ou les lectures illimitées* (1981). The frames are interior scenes: an old, poorly lit hotel, a window, Yann Andréa, Duras' last lover, shot in front of a window, immersed in the contemplation of the sea. The light is weak, the nocturnal shadows prevail, and Duras' off-screen voice envelops the spectator in a hypnotic state. We first see the images, then the images alternate with black and then, only black. The love of Yann Andréa has come to an end, the arguments between the two are a daily occurrence and *L'Homme atlantique* is nothing if not the invisible trace of the end of a love. From the title we detect the sense of a man who, like the powerful waves of the Atlantic Ocean, appears and disappears (the mother, love, the sea, three terms which in French have the same profound assonance: *la mère, l'amour, la mer*). If love draws its sustenance from the eyes, as Jacopo Da Lentini has written, then the absence of the lover foresees the destruction of the lover's image, his nullification, by a profoundly iconoclastic act. In *Césarine* (1979), Duras tells the story of Berenice, the queen of Palestine and lover of the Roman Emperor Tito who refutes her for political reasons. The queen, devastated by pain and rejection reacts with destructive fury. The tale is told by Duras, in a seductive voice, though nothing is seen except statues corroded by mould in the Tuileries Gardens and Place de La Concorde. Berenice or her personification is absent: 'The absence of Berenice highlights the emotional and physical devastation which, for many of Duras' heroines, is equivalent to the destruction of identity'.<sup>21</sup> In *L'Homme atlantique*, Yann Andréa resembles the emperor Tito, the lover's living body, documented in his process of disappearance, by means of a destructive and omnipotent fury capable of playing with the image of the lover in the appearance and disappearance of his face to the point of total nullification. The act which Duras performs in this film is authentically iconoclastic and not aniconic<sup>22</sup> as the imposition of the black image is provoked by a sadistic sentiment directed toward the visual simulacrum of the lover which revolves around the film maker's omnipotent conception and is able to give form as well as to remove form from the profilmic: 'No one, no other person in the world could do what you are about to do now: commanded only by me, before God'.<sup>23</sup> In the moment in which Yann Andréa disappears and the black image seamlessly affirms itself, then, Andréa has passed to the other side of the movie camera, he has become an anonymous, faceless spectator who mutely assists his own death, a death which lasts 20' with the spectator in front of a black screen,

<sup>21</sup> Renate Günther, *Marguerite Duras* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> On the subtle difference between iconoclasm and aniconism: Marion Poirson-Dechonne, *Le cinéma est-il iconoclaste?* (Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Duras, *L'Homme atlantique*, p. 24. An interesting reading of Duras' film by Sylvie Loignon, 'Archiver l'oubli: *L'Homme atlantique*' in *Les archives de Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Sylvie Loignon (Grenoble: UGA Editions, 2012).



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predisposed to abandonment, with his unconscious dilated from nothingness. 'A man, among others, immersed in the time of a projection of black and who lives the vision of his intimate memory reflected in that which the film proposes to him'.<sup>24</sup> A spectator, a man, the lover he once was. In *L'Homme atlantique*, as in *Le camion* (1977), the woman speaks and the man listens; neither appears on the streets in the film. Yann disappears but Duras continues to speak and recount the disappearance, turning the impossibility of communication between male and female to black, the natural point of departure in Duras' films: 'In *L'Homme atlantique* the divorce between male and female lapses into an impossible, failed dialogue between voice and image. All communion between the sexes, as between text and screen is found to be desperately lacking or wanting'.<sup>25</sup>

In *Nathalie Granger* the flaws of this fracture had already become evident. The point of departure could not be anything but the black screen. The central gap between the literary and cinematic medium lies in the final stage. Writing permits the encounter between one's own mental images and those of the writer. In cinema the obliteration of subjective images is absorbed by those of the director, who destroys them at the very moment he displays them. Think of the famous photograph which is meticulously described in the first pages of Duras' cult novel, *L'Amant* (1984): the image of the adolescent on a boat crossing the river, a photograph described in its every detail, but an image which does not exist, which was never photographed: 'Elle a été omise. Elle a été oubliée. Elle n'a pas été détachée, enlevée à la somme. C'est à ce manque d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertue, celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur'.<sup>26</sup> The cinema belittles and impoverishes the imagination; in fact, in the film that Jean-Jacques Annaud draws from Duras' novel *The Lover* (1992), the missing image becomes invasive presence, recurrent motif, an image which absorbs the infinite potentiality of the unrepresentable through a process of explicit voyeurism. The image would impoverish the imagination, reducing it to a single possibility. The photograph of the lover is missing in the novel *L'Amant*; accordingly, the lover and every possibility of his representation, according to the same theoretic assumption, is missing in the film *L'Homme atlantique* in order to shift the self-narration from an external gaze to an internal one. In this way, the central point of view remains the author's, without concessions to the reader/spectator: 'it is essential to her representational strategy that she contradicts specific accounts in one text with those in another and that she represents visual images that elude the

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Bellour, *Le Corps du cinéma, hypnoses, émotions, animalités* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009), p. 16. On the same theme, namely the transformation of the actor in spectator: Arnau Vilaró Moncasí, 'El imposer del cine. Un análisis sobre *L'Homme atlantique*', *L'Atalante-Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 24 (2017), 137–48.

<sup>25</sup> Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras. Apocalyptic Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 144. On the question of gender in the cinema of Duras: *Revisioning Duras: Film, Race, Sex*, ed. by James S. Williams (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 10.

voyeuristic gaze'.<sup>27</sup> For this reason Duras could certainly not tolerate Annaud's affected and illustrative depiction in a film in which the cinematic extension is the young actress, Jane March, who became the object of men's gazes and incarnation of desire. The fact that Duras and her heroines regularly remove themselves from the gaze of men, in an increasingly evident manner, transforming themselves into an extension of a literary image which is the constant disjunction of the image and the word, ratifies their own alterity. Duras always affirmed that she was the subject, never the object of the gaze: 'This identity, self portrait of a female filmmaker is materialized through the absence of her image and the presence of her voice, to develop in this way the duality-identification between the author and her female characters, in what is borderline experience, never surpassed, as far as relations between literature and cinema are concerned'.<sup>28</sup> For this reason Duras' aesthetic choices, which she pursued with increasing radicalism, became part of a sentimental project in which the maternal and the male become the nerve centres of an absence to which the author is unable to reconcile. As Detassis writes in an interesting letter on Duras' first cinema: 'The feminine remains closed in her diversity, it conserves an intact and inexplicable place which is sufficiently far from the ideological operation of a cinema which knows how to recuperate the new femininity almost exclusively under the form of a new genre'.<sup>29</sup> The centrality of the affective dimensions of Duras' universe therefore leads to the constantly growing emergence of an intimate relationship between the lack of love and the absence of vision (consider the black images of *Baxter*, *Vera Baxter* or the continuous dislocation of vision in *La Navire Night*), to the point of revealing what can be considered a total form of emotional iconoclasm.<sup>30</sup> Duras' iconoclasm develops around the question of having a relationship with two privileged forms of the feminine gaze: the mother and the lover, the two pole of affective discourse which constitute figures of absence in Duras' cinema. The absence of the body produces an aesthetic of separation, and the cinema becomes tolerable only by cancelling it. 'When we read, we encounter ourselves.

<sup>27</sup> Erica L. Johnson, 'Reclaiming the Void: the Cinematographic Aesthetic of Marguerite Duras's Autobiographical Novels', in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, ed. by Natalie Edwards (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp. 115–138 (p.119).

<sup>28</sup> Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez, 'Identity Self-portraits of a Filmic Gaze. From Absence to (multi) presence: Duras, Akerman, Varda', *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, IV.8 (2016), 63–73 (p. 67). On the theme of feminine gaze: *In the Dark Room. Marguerite Duras and Cinema*, ed. by Rosanna Maule and Julie Beaulieu (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Piera Detassis, 'A proposito di Marguerite Duras', in *Il cinema di Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Giorgio Gosetti (Torino: La Biennale Cinema, ERI-Edizioni RAI, 1981), p.32. Among the Italian publications, the following monographic issues should be noted: *Duras mon amour*, ed. by Edda Melon and Ermanno Pea (Milano: Marcos y Marcos, 1992); *Duras. Mon Amour 2*, ed. by Edda Melon (Torino: Lindau, 2001); *Duras. Mon Amour 3*, ed. by Edda Melon and Ermanno Pea (Torino: Lindau, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> The iconoclasm in Duras is very different from other forms of cinematic iconoclasm such as the iconoclasm embodied by the Lettrist and Situationist movement or the selective iconoclasm of Claude Lanzmann or the biological iconoclasm of Derek Jarman.

## Marguerite Duras, Experimental Filmmaker Between Antinarration and Iconoclasm

When we go to the cinema, we lose ourselves. When we go to the cinema, we lose ourselves and in the blackness we meet ourselves once more'.<sup>31</sup> In the black image conjurer of chasms, black hole of the spectators, unconscious, we meet ourselves again in a double reflective movement, we meet with ourselves and with the author who prepares us for this encounter through the use of blackness.

To sum up, Duras' film writing is a visual expression of the central themes of her literature (love and desire) and how some practices of aesthetical aniconism in Duras and the theoretical reading made of it are linked to the manifestation of an emotional and sentimental defeat. End of love, end of representation. The field of feeling in Duras' cinema is characterized by a double process of eliminating the object loved by the frame, first the maternal and then the male, from the first films up to the iconoclastic *L'Homme atlantique*, cinematographic testament of the French writer. Despite the personal characteristics of her aesthetic, Duras' anti-cinema offers inspiration for considering new studies on mirror-neurons: 'In this way, as much as the spectators of Duras' film are not carried away by the story, nevertheless, they are not totally detached from the film: on the contrary the sensitive body is constantly stimulated beyond the threshold of consciousness through continuous reference to their intimate memory'.<sup>32</sup> Duras' cinema is a radical form of expanded cinema in which image, text, written and recited word syncretically give form to a complex, non-never self-referential, but rather fertile point of departure for the contemporary filmmaker, a coherent corpus in which the aesthetic choices become a means for giving a feminine voice to the cinema, refusing the male form of the gaze where the presence, the action, and the need to act and the need to be, overwhelmed and predominate through a baroque vision of the image. Duras' cinema is a cinema which gives expression to women, where absence is prevalent, as well as silence, oral narrative, inaction, empty space, servants, internal spaces inhabited by ghostly presences, the blackness of the image, the loss of memory, the absence of women in the action and her narrative presence always situated in the off-screen of the narration. Telling all this through the cinema, transforming an idea into an aesthetic is already an important contribution which has yet to be fully embraced.

<sup>31</sup> Marguerite Duras, 'Les yeux verts', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 312–313 (numéro spécial, 1980), p. 93. My translation.

<sup>32</sup> Michelle Royer, 'Le spectateur face au bruissement sonore des films de Marguerite Duras et à ses images', in *Marguerite Duras: le cinéma*, ed. by Jean Cléder, (Paris: Lettres modernes Minard, 2014), 43–54 (p. 53). An important essay by Michelle Royer on Duras' cinema, 'L'expérience spectatorielle à l'aune des neurosciences. Les films de Marguerite Duras' is also housed in the important collective volume *Marguerite Duras Passages, croisements, rencontres* ed. by Olivier Ammour-Mayeur and others (Paris: Classique Garnier, 2019) published on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Marguerite Duras and the publication of her work omnia in the Pléiade.