



Marguerite Duras's passage to India

From: *The Times* [London]: 3 December, 1975

By: Melinda Camber Porter

"In *India Song* I pose, in principle, the sovereignty of Woman. I hope I have demonstrated it or made a didactic film," says Marguerite Duras of her sixth film, as if to silence those who reproach her for a cerebral or theoretical approach. For within her own framework, such an approach belongs to the masculine world and Duras wishes to define the distinction between male and female and to place herself firmly in the latter category.

"When I write or film I have the feeling that I silence the virile voice, the cultural voice within me. I am never as female as when I write," she says in a stylized manner, worthy of her latest heroine. "It's not true to say that my films are created by intelligence. They are made in a state of passionate crisis. Normally, in about 15 days. Afterwards, intelligence intervenes, in the montage and editing. But during the shooting and before I am in an extraordinary, emotional state. . . In the beginning I maintained a distance from my films. But now that the technical side poses no problem, it does not mask the crisis."

In *India Song*, Duras calls on Delphine Seyrig to represent her notion of Woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, France's Ambassadress in Calcutta who speaks little, moves like a tigress and is "infinitely desirable". Duras explains: "She represents the sovereignty of Woman's body. She is the only person in the film who pronounces the word 'intelligence'. She has an intelligence of India and of the oppression. She and the Vice-Consul who is a virginal man, almost androgynous. I say that they are both mad. The Vice-Consul because he wakes up each morning and sees the world for the first time. The injustice and horror of his life is intolerable. He remains true to his madness and Anne-Marie to hers: her corporeal knowledge of the world which I call intelligence."



I questioned Duras on her choice of the word “mad” in this context. “Yes, you are right to question me. I do not give recognition to the term “mad”. I use the masculine world's language so they will understand me. It is a form of accusation.”

Talking to Marguerite Duras one feels that one has been female without being aware of it. She ushers one into an undiscovered sovereign world of women which defies male participation. “The knowledge that Anne-Marie Stretter has is completely female. A man could never have it. I could describe this female quality as a kind of constant identification. I say somewhere that she *is* Calcutta. Woman is open to everything. She is constantly listening. She has no specific place. Men have lost this corporeal knowledge. They are everywhere at the same time, dispersed—in their heads, in s. rhetorical practice of life.

“It is the millennial silence of woman which makes this osmosis with life possible. It is a liquid state which flows on the same level as life. Almost like a child's perceptions.”

While Duras extols and perhaps creates certain specifically female qualities, I wondered if her films would get made if she followed these precepts too faithfully. The wielding of power through words, the direction of a film crew, all require that which Duras chooses to term masculine. Even if her ideas are not born from intelligence, she certainly demonstrates an analytical capacity when communicating them in words and images.

Duras stresses the importance of Stretter's Womanliness, but the central theme in the film and in our conversation was her death and its implications. Stretter's story is recounted about 40 years after it happened. Instead of attempting to reconstruct a “livable” narrative, Duras presents the lacuna and disintegration that death and passing time imposed. “It was only possible to make the film because the woman's story had been stopped by death. One could not write her history if she were living. For writing or filming are always in the past. Narration cannot refer to the immediate present.”



The sole link with the past of Anne-Marie Stretter is through memory. The fragmented, elusive narrative of *India Song* mirrors the distortions and fictions created by remembrance. The film is not a monument immune to time. It reenacts the erosions caused by passing time. Duras refers to it as the “place of death and doubt”.

“The photography of death is there on the screen. The settings are also important: Anne-Marie appears by what I call the ‘altar’—a piano, with a bowl of roses and an old photograph, in a rectangle surrounded mirrors. The mirrors cast further doubt on all that happens. There are also the ruins where no one enters, which are emptied forever by time. The sucking in of everything by death. Here the narrative voices speak in the past tense”.

Such careful details characterize the film and suggest the work of a conscious, analytical intelligence, even though the source and effect are emotional. But Duras continues to play her anti-intellectual role: “I cannot formulate any philosophy about death. My awareness of death simply makes me feel that I must occupy my time according to my desires.”

If Duras’s films and books occupy her time adequately, it is strange that she should conclude “I hope women will never talk as much as men, and never on the same level”. Fortunately, Marguerite Duras is the last person to be taken in by her own rhetoric.

© 2015 Melinda Camber Porter Archive

Ref: The Times, 1975

