

FEMININITY AND AUTHORSHIP: DEREN, DURAS AND VON TROTTA

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Programme of Comparative Literature)

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

JULY 1995

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Date Sept. 28, 1995

Abstract

The work of Maya Deren, Marguerite Duras and Margarethe von Trotta, three filmmakers who are also authors, inhabits a space between patriarchy and polemic feminism. The result, a refocusing and re-arrangement of traditional literary and cinematic discourse, may be termed a feminine authorship.

The principles of this authorship mainly derive from Laura Mulvey's controversial but influential application of psychoanalytical theory to feminine cinema in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen*, 1975), an investigation of the "male gaze" in film. Her propositions have been further developed by critics such as Teresa de Lauretis (1980), Mary Anne Doane (1987) and Judith Mayne (1990) as well as Mulvey herself (1981). Mulvey's approach shares with classical psychoanalysis an emphasis on the unconscious and its visual manifestations in dream and memory. Deren, Duras and von Trotta encode the latter in spatial imagery expressive of both women's repression and their hidden resourcefulness, most frequently drawing on the gothic novel and the exotic tale. In order to accomplish their vision, the three filmmakers variously offer original interpretations of well-established modes and genres such as surrealism (Deren), the *nouveau roman* (Duras), and the documentary (von Trotta), but none could have done so without conceding to a number of compromises with patriarchal discourse, partly for economic, partly for ideological reasons. This thesis asserts (in contrast to Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Peggy Kamuf) that these compromises need not be read as a flaw, but contribute to a discourse in its own right.

By analyzing authors from diverse cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds who, moreover, cannot be clearly categorized within the alleged dichotomy of patriarchy and feminism, this study seeks to expand the definition of feminism across national and ideological boundaries. In so doing, it may contribute to the study of other women authors and filmmakers whose views and methods have been similarly unorthodox.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Eva-Marie Kröller, for her inspiration, encouragement and confidence in this project from its fragile conception to the final phases of arduous editing. She has generously offered me guidance throughout my five years as a doctoral student. I am also very grateful to the other members of the committee, Dr. Maurice Yacowar, Dr. Sima Godfrey and Dr. Steven Taubeneck. Their knowledge and experience along with the expert editing skills of Sandra Cristensen have helped me complete this thesis. In addition, I wish to thank the professors of the English, French and German departments who have often assisted me. Dr. Francis Andrew and my colleagues at Language Programs and Services of Continuing Studies have also been extremely supportive.

I am grateful to my extended family and many friends for their encouragement and understanding. My four children, Suzanne, Olivier, Nadine and Isabelle, have shared their mother with the dissertation for the past year. I cherish our relationship and hope that some day they will understand my commitment to this project. I thank as well my parents, Margaret and Paul Reti, whose love, moral support and intellectual stimulation are always with me. Finally, I wish to acknowledge my husband, Roland Plessis: his help and dedication throughout my doctoral studies and our life together have been invaluable.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Adele Farkas, (1898-1985).

Introduction

Introduction

An all-purpose feminist frame of reference does not exist, nor should it ever come packaged and ready-made. We need to keep building one, absolutely flexible and readjustable, from women's experience of difference, or our difference from Woman and of the difference among women.

Teresa de Lauretis ¹

In over fifteen years of writing about women's literature, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have been searching for a writing tool to replace the "male" pen.² Since *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) they have documented women's literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries against "the material, social, and gendered conditions of authors' lives."³ They have also analyzed the often nightmarish images produced by the conflicts between male fantasy and female reality and investigated women's "schizophrenia of authorship" (*Madwoman*, 78)

¹ Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, and Contexts," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 14.

² Gilbert and Gubar ask "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" in Chapter One of *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 3.

³ *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), p. 241.

and "anxiety of authorship"⁴ as typical responses to the dominant discourses of the patriarchal system.⁵ Characteristic of their approach is a "strategic essentialism"⁶ which allows them to affirm the existence of women without unequivocally endorsing the legacy of idealist humanism. In their latest work, *No Man's Land: Letters from the Front*, Vol. 3 (1994) they revalidate this approach.

However, in the polemic preface of this new book, Gilbert and Gubar address the criticism that they have encountered since the 1980s and '90s for their feminist position and investigative procedures. They admit that "an extraordinarily diverse chorus of voices has lately been raised in protest against either the political or the epistemological assumptions that shaped feminist theory and practice in the seventies."⁷ On the one hand, they refer to the recent ultra-conservative elements who denounce feminism *tout court*. They mention specifically the late Allan Bloom, who blames the dismantling of the classic canon on feminists in general, and who has held them responsible for many of the ills in contemporary society including the disintegration of the family and men's insecurity about their sexual performance. Equally disquieting, according

⁴ *No Man's Land: The War of the Words*, Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press 1988), pp. 191-200.

⁵ *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, eds. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 655 defines patriarchy as follows: "the universal institutionalization of male privilege is experienced most immediately as the power of the father within the biological-nuclear family. Its dominant cultural manifestation in the West continues to be humanistic individualism allied to capitalist economics."

⁶ Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. xi.

to Gilbert and Gubar, are Camille Paglia's reactionary assertions about women's alleged intellectual inferiority to men in *Sexual Personae* (1990). Even more worrisome to the authors of *No Man's Land*, however, are feminist theorists of the 1990s, like Peggy Kamuf, who specifically target the 1970s feminist generation's approach based on theme and imagery as outdated and simplistic. Instead of asserting and analyzing a woman's subject position, these more radically deconstructionist feminists emphasize "plurivocality" and "plurilocality" (*No Man's Land*, 1994), concepts which deny the meaning of a humanist perspective altogether. This particular post-structuralist perspective disallows the interpretation of women as subjects as well as any kind of essentialist approach because it conveys a transcendental meaning to the idea of woman, a meaning that, as Kamuf and other post-structuralists claim, does not exist. Because they believe absolute meaning to be inaccessible, these critics are reluctant to conduct the kind of descriptive and analytical work we find in Gilbert and Gubar. Instead, Kamuf and others dwell on the textual signifier as separated from the signified. As a result, the subject disappears in this "post-feminist" theory, as Gilbert and Gubar call it, and is replaced by the hidden and ambiguous meaning of the text.

The "post-feminist" position has not gone unchallenged. In *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (1989), Diana Fuss deplores the blanket dismissal of "entire schools of feminist thought"⁸ because of their apparent faith in essentialism and therefore in patriarchal humanism. Challenging

⁸ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 122.

the "twin assumptions" (Fuss, 123) that essentialism is inevitably linked to humanism and that humanism has an essence, Fuss points out that total denial of an essentialist position is in itself a form of essentialism: "To insist that essentialism is always and everywhere reactionary is, for the constructionist, to buy into essentialism in the very act of making the charge; it is to act as if essentialism has an essence" (Fuss, 21). Often grouped with 1970s feminists as diverse as Elaine Showalter and Annette Kolodny, who, although they are still publishing, are now sometimes considered to be of historical importance rather than generating current theoretical debate, Gilbert and Gubar nevertheless have much to offer to a contemporary reader. Their "strategic essentialism" effectively confirms Fuss's contention that the question is not "is this text essentialist (and therefore 'bad')?" But "if this text is essentialist, what motivates its deployment?" (Fuss, xi). And, one might add: "if this text is essentialist, how is the essentialism deployed?"

Gilbert and Gubar's pragmatic approach to essentialism compensates for what I consider one of the most regrettable shortcomings of "post-feminism," namely its failure to consider the relationship between the author's personal life and her work. The complexities of this relationship may hold the answers for apparent inconsistencies between her *oeuvre* and pronounced views, and it may even illustrate the need for some women to use "duplicity, subterfuge and luck" (*Johns Hopkins Guide*, 240) in order to attain female authorship. Gilbert and Gubar, together with other historians of women's literature, have outlined the difficulties

encountered by writers in search of a voice of their own. Women filmmakers, as I shall argue, find themselves in a situation which is even more daunting because they need access to training, equipment and personnel that are difficult to obtain. This is one important aspect of their personal conditions which makes female authorship different from male *auteurship*.⁹ The distinction between authorship and *auteurship* also raises the question of the differences between male and female film directors. *Auteurship* presupposes an authority over the screenwriter and the actor within the collaboration of making a film. Historically, with a very few exceptions such as Dorothy Arzner, *auteur* directors have been male.

Although I am indebted to Gilbert and Gubar for their understanding of the conflicted expressions of female authorship, their terminology is not always sufficiently differentiated for the analysis I wish to conduct. My own position also benefits from Elaine Showalter's distinction between feminist, feminine and female.¹⁰ Showalter explains that women writers predictably evolve through phases that she calls "feminine," "feminist" and "female" when coming to terms with their writing. She considers the first phase of self-discovery the "feminine" period in which women imitate established artistic models of the dominant tradition. The second phase, "feminism," one of anger and protest, is a reaction against these models and is called "advocacy." The third category, one of self-

⁹ The term *auteurship* was first used in the early '60s by Andrew Sarris as a loose translation of the *politique des auteurs* notion, developed in 1954 by François Truffaut. *Auteur* filmmakers were directors whose personalities dominated their films through a more or less consistent theme or style. See Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), p. 64.

¹⁰ Elaine Showalter describes these terms in *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 13.

discovery, Showalter defines as "female"; here, the female artist is freed from the dependency of opposition.

While I retain Showalter's terms, I do not necessarily accept her model of progressive development as equally applicable to or useful for all women authors, and I have therefore set my emphases differently. My definitions of the "feminine" and the "female" are not the same. First, "female," for my purposes, simply refers to a biological definition of gender. The distinction between "feminist" and "feminine" ("femininity" in my study), however, is an extremely important one in my hypothesis. Although both "feminine" and "feminist" focus on the construction of woman as the subject of discourse, I consider "feminist" expression as explicitly oppositional to dominant forces in patriarchal society. Authors of "feminist" writing are conscious of their political position and present it explicitly in their writing. "Femininity" is the most significant (and ambivalent) term within the context of this thesis. Showalter considers the "feminine" a transitional phase to be replaced by feminism in due time, but I wish to assert the legitimacy of this "in-between" phase in its own right. The compromises that the "feminine" has to undertake in its dealings with the patriarchy do not necessarily exclude it from feminism; instead the "feminine" encompasses women's experience in the broadest sense. In giving the "feminine" such a generous interpretation, I have been inspired by Julia Kristeva, who proposes an almost religious discourse ("Women's Time" [1975]; "Stabat Mater" [1975]) to support her belief that each woman must live through as many and varied "feminine" experiences as possible, a position that certain readers may

find extreme. I would like to focus on the "feminine" because it allows me to study the many forms of female artists' implicit rather than explicit resistance to the dominant order.

In order to conduct an investigation of this breadth I depend upon additional terminology. Throughout this study I will be using the words "woman," "Woman," and "women," terms whose nuances and interchangeability have caused much discussion in feminist theory (de Beauvoir [1949], Chodorow [1978] and Daly [1978] to mention a few) and whose relationship to dominant discourse is crucial to my discussion. The words "woman" and "Woman" are at the heart of the essentialist debate: if all women are identified by the transcendental quality of "woman," the word itself automatically projects an essence. I have refrained from generalizing about the female condition by using the word "woman" because, as Marilyn Schuster points out, the meaning of "woman" changes when "inflected by race, ethnicity, historical moment, sexuality, age, class and other markers of specific cultural positions."¹¹ Some theorists, like Monique Wittig, even avoid the word "woman" altogether because of the misogynist connotations already associated with it.¹² Furthermore, idiosyncratic uses of the term "woman," especially in film criticism, produce contradictory associations. Thus Mary Anne Doane refers to the "woman's film,"¹³ meaning Hollywood's melodramatic genre aimed at female spectators but

¹¹ Marilyn Schuster, *Marguerite Duras Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. xxvi.

¹² See discussion in *Marguerite Duras Revisited*, pp. xxv-xxviii.

¹³ See Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

made by male directors. "Woman" (with a capital) is a term which can be more easily generalized than "woman." "Woman" refers to the expression of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of Other (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949). As in theories linked to Lacan, the Other is the realm in which women are signified. According to this concept, women are excluded from dominant discourse. Marilyn Schuster points out, however, that women can rewrite *woman* by writing within and against the dominant figure of woman.

When I speak of dominant discourse I refer to a concept which may include educational, legal and clerical institutions, but which, within the context of this study, more specifically refers to the form of writing which entrenches "the hierarchic oppositions--for example man/woman, speaking/writing--that are bases of Western thought." (*The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing*, 655). Their marginalization does not imply that women do not participate in the dominant ideology. However, throughout most of history women have been denied their own language, leaving them with a choice of either remaining silent or becoming complicit with patriarchal discourse. Some critics have sought to overcome the impasse, and Gilbert and Gubar single out Kristeva, Cixous, Clément and Irigaray as the most important ones: "to undo the binary oppositions from where they believe patriarchy has been constituted, [they] seek to excavate and celebrate the semiotic beyond the symbolic, the preoedipal beyond the oedipal, the multiplicity beyond univocality, even the feminine behind or within the masculine."¹⁴ I wish to contribute to this project of

¹⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, p. 377.

excavation and celebration by analyzing and categorizing the expressions of feminine voice in the works of Maya Deren, Marguerite Duras and Margarethe von Trotta.

This study represents the first time these authors have been explored together. Privileged as well-known women authors, they have been less marginalized by history than many of their female contemporaries have been because, in each case, at least one of their works has brought them celebrity. In other words, my purpose is not to recover neglected women authors but to analyze the concept of authorship with respect to three established artists. I have deliberately chosen three women writers who are also filmmakers because, by focusing on women who disrupt and re-arrange both written and visual imagery, I emphasize the common denominator which determines "femininity" in both media. All three authors worked collaboratively in male/female teams. In each relationship the female contributor was in the subordinate or less experienced position in filmmaking at the beginning of the partnership while the male offered technical expertise and financial support. Yet, each female author broke away from the male/female team relationship to embark on her own path as an independent film director with distinctive ideas about her own choice of subject and the characteristics of her own filmmaking style. Re-arranging and re-visioning can be accomplished in literature, especially through innovative forms such as the experimental syntactic structures used in Deren's poetry and Duras's experimental novel, but the visual medium of cinema gives the female artist additional mimetic tools with which to juxtapose space or distort time. By choosing the cinematic

medium, Duras, Deren and von Trotta challenge the logocentricity of writing by diverting language off-screen or displacing it into music. Thus the screen becomes the site for creative feminine expression. The script combined with the filmmaking remains an essential part of the feminine expression analyzed in this study: Deren creates "ciné-poems," in which the written text and the voice-over at the beginning are integral parts, in *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land*. Duras gives primacy to the off-screen female storytellers in *India Song*, while von Trotta uses dialogue and sophisticated word play in *Die bleierne Zeit* to reach the viewer at an intellectual as well as emotional level. Most importantly, I suggest that film, a newer medium than literature, disrupts physical reality more easily than do literary forms, thereby allowing women writers to dismantle the representations of patriarchy.

Deren, Duras and von Trotta are united by a style of authorship that transcends the polemical concerns of feminism and focuses on expressions of femininity instead. Most frequently, these expressions are encoded in the spatial imagery of the gothic novel and its derivatives, the thriller and the *film noir*. All of these genres draw on the unconscious and all emphasize dream and memory as important means to "re-vision" traditional modes of perceiving time and space. Cinematic techniques like flashbacks indicate fluctuations of time, while iris shots announce entrance into a dream world. The voice is displaced to rework the body as object of desire; sometimes the voice is replaced by music as a more associative and emotional form of "speech." To varying degrees, all three authors also use elements of the exotic tale to suggest their protagonists' spatial and

temporal displacement. This approach is somewhat problematic, as is to be discussed later, for while they attempt to free feminine expression from the domain of the Other, the three authors do so at the expense of an exotic Other. Thereby they reproduce, to a degree, the paradigms of oppression outlined by Edward Saïd in *Orientalism*.¹⁵

Both the spatial imagery and the exoticism in these works can be analyzed using the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan. Although their marginalization of women makes their views controversial, their influence on film theory cannot be ignored and some of their concepts remain indispensable to feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey's famous article on spectatorship, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen*, 1975), written during the International Women's Year, sparked debates on the questions of pleasure, spectatorship, women as spectacle, and gender identity. Mulvey's work proposed that cinema itself was a patriarchal apparatus, dependent on the image of "woman" as the object of male desire or the "male gaze." Mulvey bases her theory on "scopophilia,"¹⁶ the pleasure of watching a desired person as an erotic object. Referring to theories of Lacan and Freud, Mulvey confirms "woman's" identity as lack and her image in film as destined to dwell in the realm of the "Other." According to Mulvey, the visual pleasures of narrative film involve the contradictory phenomenon of experiencing both objectification of the image and

¹⁵ Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

¹⁶ Freud isolated "scopophilia" as one of the basic sexual drives in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, citing examples of voyeuristic tendencies in children. Christian Metz discusses the "scopic drive" in his influential article, "The Imaginary Signifier" which appeared in *Screen* in 1975. Laura Mulvey and other feminist film theorists base their theory of the "male gaze" on scopophilia.

identification with it. The process of objectification creates a distance between the spectator and the object, resulting in a voyeuristic pleasure of watching another person in her private domain. In addition, the camera itself becomes a phallic symbol as "bearer of the look."

Linked with narcissism and the ego, identification is a second process which occurs simultaneously with the "male gaze." Mulvey's interpretation of identification is influenced by the work of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's "mirror phase theory" (1949)¹⁷ explains why the theoretical "male" viewer derives pleasure from the image of the female body while the same image reminds the male of his fear of castration since "woman" represents "lack." Lacan, discussing the development of the ego, explains that a child's ego is reinforced the first time it sees itself in the mirror, a pleasurable experience since the child at this stage is still physically uncoordinated. The desire formulated during the "mirror phase," repeated by the cinematic experience, comes from the pre-language or pre-symbolic period before the child has acquired language. The symbolic, on the other hand, occurs after the mirror phase when the child begins to speak. Mulvey explains, "It is the birth of a long love affair/despair between the image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience."¹⁸

From Freud's extensive theories Lacan borrowed some postulates useful to describe feminine signification in both literature and cinema. He developed a

¹⁷ See Jacques Lacan's "Le Stade du Miroir" in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 53-62.

¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16. 3 (1975): p. 10.

thesis of sexual development in which women are "lacking" the transcendental signifier, the phallus, and are therefore condemned to the status of "object-of-desire" for men. Portrayed in the male imaginary realm (in opposition to the symbolic realm of language), women do not have speaking voices. An important aspect of the Freudian theory Lacan developed is that while Freud felt that both girls and boys have the same libidinal energy when they are young, he also equated the development of femininity with the repression of sexual drives (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1908). The mother represents to the child, in the earliest stages, a unity of subject and object. However, when the sense of this unity is lost, the mother, and with her all women, become the symbol of "lack" and the threat of castration. Only the male sexual organ, symbol of power as the transcendental signifier, places male subjectivity ("the law of the Father") in the symbolic order. Hence, "woman," eternally lacking the phallus, is relegated to silence in Lacan's symbolic order.

My study of femininity proposes to analyze what in Lacanian terms has too easily been dismissed as "woman's silence." I would like to investigate the possibility that "woman" has a voice that is not determined by the "transcendental signifier," but by "a network of multiple possibilities, multiple perspectives, multiple identities, where there is no clear split between 'I' and 'not I'."¹⁹ In other words, is it possible for women to use a special language to create an order unspecified by Lacan, somewhere between the imaginary and the

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *New French Feminisms*, eds. Isabelle Courtivron and Elaine Marks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 167. This text was not available in the original.

symbolic? I suggest that music, as part of the pre-symbolic language that does not depend on logocentricity, may be one such special language. In order to convey their resistance to logocentricity, the three authors under discussion often represent the feminine voice through music. Deren's soundtrack in *Meshes of the Afternoon* consists only of dissonant Oriental music indicating a journey into the Other of women's psychological reality. In the film adaptation of Duras's *Moderato Cantabile* (Brook, 1960), the left hand of the Sonatina, which is associated with feminine "harmony," takes over the melody from the classical right hand melody which symbolizes the *status quo* of the patriarchal system, while in *India Song*, Duras allows the music to dominate the film. As the title indicates, the music (*India Song*) is the subject of the film. Von Trotta uses music in her films of the 1970s and '80s to reinforce the dreariness of the patriarchal system. (Katharina Blum's voice emerges in the musical representation as a squelched sound of an electrical saw.) Von Trotta does not use music to create "atmosphere," but rather, a feeling of unease: irregular sounds punctuate the unmelodic strains of dissonance. After the radical action of the female protagonist there is only silence. Von Trotta's characters can kill the "music" of the patriarchal system, but not until *L'Africaine* does she replace it with a melodious feminine voice. In *L'Africaine* the harmonious music, with a counterpoint that allows both the melody and the harmony to dominate, creates the complicity between the sexes, and between the realms of the symbolic and the imaginary, that von Trotta proposes in this film.

If music responds to the silence projected onto women through psychoanalytical theory, so too does spatial imagery, which is the staple of dreams. Domestic and confining spaces, traditional signifiers of woman that Gilbert and Gubar analyze in great detail, become reinterpreted in the feminine writing I explore. Examples in my study are the staircase and window in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the attic in *Heller Wahn*, the living room or salon in *Heller Wahn* and *India Song*, the prison in *Die bleierne Zeit* and the hospital in *L'Africaine*. The authors in this study introduce accepted connotations of domestic space in dominant discourse as representing woman; they then create a new category of signifier that depends on the traditional sense, while at the same time revising it. The staircase is the "turning point" in 1940s thrillers like *Rebecca* and takes on new meaning in Maya Deren's work as the place where the representation of the female psyche is transformed from the passive (signified by the flower) to the active (the knife). The attic or the cellar, marginal spaces where women such as Bertha in *Jane Eyre* were shut away in nineteenth-century literature, remain the spaces in which woman is isolated, but also become places where Ruth finds a site for her creativity in *Heller Wahn*. Windows marking the boundaries between inside and outside, have been at least since the nineteenth century liminal and often also luminous spaces of desire: many female heroines sit by the window looking out. The window acts as a transparent boundary that traditionally marks woman's space as the interior. However, in *Meshes of the Afternoon* the outside is reflected in the window, superimposed on Maya Deren's face. The prison in *Die bleierne Zeit* and *Rosa Luxemburg*, in addition to being a traditional signifier of male power, becomes a transitional point for the female

characters' knowledge about themselves. For example, Juliane begins the painful but enriching process of self-knowledge through the visits to her sister in prison, and Rosa Luxemburg turns the prison into a creative space where she gardens, writes and continues both artistic and political activities. The living room, an accepted signifier of the semi-public sphere of male-dominated society, is transformed in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* and *Heller Wahn* into a place of feminine action, since both female protagonists kill what they consider to be a male adversary in the living room. On the other hand, the kitchen, which is identified with woman's activities in traditional discourse, becomes a sphere that men also occupy in *Heller Wahn*. Wolfgang is making the dinner and trying to assume the nurturing role in the relationship while Juliane tries to discuss with him the problems of her feminism and her relationship with her sister. The reversal of the roles in the signifying space indicates the reversal of the male/female roles in the film.

By using these "accepted" signifiers of woman, the authors reinforce established notions of femininity, but by reformulating their significance, women create a new space within the old definitions: the attic becomes a room for artistic creativity rather than a confining space; the staircase is a transition point in which woman can become assertive instead of passive; the kitchen is no longer woman's domain but is cohabited by man, and the window provides an entry to the outside space. These examples illustrate Elizabeth Cowie's theory (1984) that female "categories" are produced during the signifying process. By keeping the

same signifiers, but changing the process of identification, Deren, Duras and von Trotta redefine femininity as an expression of personal experience.

Spatial images are also closely connected to psychoanalysis and are staples of dream imagery. Much of my argument is based on the ways in which women refocus these images to create a feminine discourse. The texts in this study relate to Freud's "dream-work," that is, the mental process which transforms latent dream materials into the manifest dream.²⁰ In the psychoanalytic approach to reading texts, a secret or unconscious story plays an important role in parallel to a more logical, conscious story. The dream as a whole is a distorted substitute for something else, something unconscious, and the task of interpreting a dream is to discover this unconscious material.²¹ For the authors in my study the unconscious representation, often associated with memory, is more important than the conscious one, because women become empowered as the subject at this level. For example, Maya Deren's protagonist becomes the subject of the "narrative" in the dream scene of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the memory of Anne-Marie Stretter is more real than the story of her life and, although von Trotta does not use dream scenes, she portrays memory to reveal the repressed reality of her characters (as in *Die bleierne Zeit*).

Representation of memory transcends linear and temporal constraints, making the past as real as the present. Memory also eliminates the mimetic gap between

²⁰ Linda Ruth Williams, *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 46.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, p. 44, cited in *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject*, p. 47.

the real world and psychological reality and the authors erase the distinction between memory and dream, lucidity and madness. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Maya Deren creates several simultaneous stories, using specific techniques such as the iris shot to indicate the transition between them. "Elle"'s story at the memory level becomes more "real" than the present in *Hiroshima mon amour*, just as the sisters' past becomes the real story in *Die bleierne Zeit*. The seamless interweaving of past and present, reality and memory, and, in *India Song*, life and death, illustrates femininity as an expression of women's personal experience.

All three authors re-discover the realms of the imaginary through the use of exoticism to explore the Other. For example, Deren is influenced by her knowledge of tribal dancing and her study of Haiti, Duras reverts to the settings of her Indo-Chinese childhood, and von Trotta systematically allows her characters to escape to warmer climates like Portugal or Lebanon to achieve selfhood. By placing their female characters within the Other these authors participate in the marginalization of the Other by the dominant ideology. However, by allowing the characters to achieve self-knowledge in the context of the Other, they redefine its significance. Here, their historical position seems significant since, with the exception of the early works of Maya Deren, these authors were writing after the war, a time when western society was desperately attempting to achieve normality after the Holocaust and the spectre of the A-bomb. Thus, the exploration of the Other became the exploration of a repressed reality, buried under the optimism of the prevalent discourse of the New Order. Since I have defined femininity as an expression of female

experience, memory, the visual "story" of this experience, is understandably an important feature of "feminine" writing. By expressing their personal past, the three authors are also inscribing a feminine past for the exotic Other. As Kristeva proposes, these authors eventually seek to redefine woman's "magical" place in the imaginary realm, rather than striving to place their female protagonists within the symbolic order.

Chapter 1

Maya Deren's Poetry: A Place She Had to Enter

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Maya the gypsy, the Ukrainian gypsy, with the wild, frizzy hair like a halo around her face. Sasha Hammid placed her face behind glass and in that softened image she appeared like a Botticelli.

Anaïs Nin
1945

Film historians' descriptions of Maya Deren's physical appearance, which have helped create the "myth of Maya Deren," echo that of Anaïs Nin, an avant-garde writer and personal friend of Deren. Pictures often emphasize Deren's tousled curly hair, provocative lips, high cheekbones and questioning eyes. The many photographs and publicity materials surrounding Deren make us think more of a 1940s movie star than a poet and filmmaker. Although not principally known as an actress, Deren was a star in her own right, very much woman as the object of desire of a projected "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975), a gaze that was also assumed by female spectators of her time. She cultivated her own image as an object of sexual desire through the provocative poses in her photographs and her leading role in many of her films. Lauren Rabinovitz explains the importance of Deren's physical image to her public: "Deren's forceful personality and

intimidating presence could also be her greatest assets. Her striking good looks drew journalists to her interviews and people to her talks."¹ As an author she also tried to portray women as subjects of discourse. Because Maya Deren adopts two positions—the first as an object of desire and the second as an outspoken woman in the male-dominated field of avant-garde filmmaking—she represents the duality of feminine authorship. It is the simultaneity of woman as subject and object that distinguishes her writing and filmmaking. This chapter explores the multiple dimensions of the Maya Deren persona, including the poetic writings of her early career and the links with the American artistic avant-garde of the 1940s. In the next chapter I will explore three of Deren's films and the ways in which they reworked the "woman's film" and the genre of the *film noir* in order to create an innovative form of feminine expression in cinema.

The Legend of Maya Deren

Since the publication of *The Legend of Maya Deren Project*, Vol. 1 (1988), a collaborative volume of interviews, letters and other original documents on Maya Deren's early life as well as her writing and filming career, a great deal of information has been compiled on her life. *The Legend of Maya Deren* helps perpetuate the link between Deren's personal mystique (as evoked above) and the mystique generated by her films. An eclectic work, *The Legend of Maya Deren* aims to unite multiple feminist voices to create a biography that does not depend

¹ Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 77.

on one "authoritative" voice. Its goal is to demystify the history of independent American film, which was previously associated with male names such as Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka. To date Volume I, Part I, and Volume I, Part II (of a planned three-volume work) have appeared in print. Although I do not consider that analysis of Deren's work should be exclusively based on specific personal details of her life, I do believe that her experience as a woman has affected her *oeuvre*. Because *The Legend of Maya Deren Project* has reproduced the tendency of *auteurism* to turn the artist into a central figure, Lauren Rabinovitz claims that the project has not served to redress women filmmakers' neglect in general. It has concentrated on one filmmaker by providing an inordinate amount of information on her while continuing the overall neglect of others.² While I agree that *The Legend of Maya Deren* appears to focus excessively on one female writer while others are ignored, it can also serve as a model for further studies of women writers and filmmakers who have been neglected in the literary and cinematic canons. By giving as much importance to Maya Deren as to her male counterparts, feminist historians assert that the work of women writers and filmmakers is as important as that of men.

Maya Deren was born Eleonora Derenowsky to a bourgeois Jewish family in Kiev in 1917. Deren's family emigrated to the United States in 1922, where Deren's father practiced as a psychiatrist in Syracuse, New York; it was at this time that the family name was shortened to Deren. Eleonora enjoyed a privileged intellectual relationship with her father. However, her parents' marriage was

² Ibid., p. 26.

unhappy and as an adult she indicated that there was also a rift between her and her mother. Eleonora received much of her rigorous education as a young teenager at the League of Nations School in Geneva; she was trained so effectively in languages and literature that she was admitted into Syracuse University at sixteen.

At college, before the outbreak of the Second World War, she established links with socialism. Active in journalism, she participated in the Youth Party of the Socialist League. At this time, Maya Deren also began her career as a poet, inspired by T.S. Eliot and the Imagists. Her association with the young Socialists at Syracuse led to her first marriage, to Gregory Bardacke. By the time she was twenty she was already separated from Bardacke, but since she had followed him to Manhattan, she completed her studies at New York University. She studied English literature and Gestalt psychology; her Master's thesis (*The Influence of the French Symbolist Movement upon Anglo-American Poetry*, 1939) analyzed the influence of French Symbolist poets on the Imagist poets, notably T.S. Eliot. The subject of her thesis affected all her work in poetry and cinema as it laid the theoretical groundwork for her later work in literary and filmic imagery. The imagery of the poets she had studied, however, burdened her when she tried to express herself as a female poet. Comparing her own poetry to a male literary tradition, she found it necessary to revise their poetic language to suit her own purposes.

Deren began writing in 1939, as well as free-lancing as a secretary to writers. In 1941, this position in the New York avant-garde artistic milieu led to her association with dance choreographer Katherine Dunham, who trained as an anthropologist and was famous for the work she had done with Afro-Caribbean dance. While forced to accommodate a grueling production schedule, Deren started to pursue her interest in dance through her relationship with Dunham. In 1942, during her association with Dunham, Deren met Alexander Hackenschmied (he later shortened his name to Hammid), a Czechoslovakian immigrant who was to become her collaborator in filmmaking and her second husband. As is the case for the two other authors in this study, Deren's personal life determined the direction of her life as an author.

In 1943, the death of her father seemed to mark an important transition in Deren's life; she underwent a rebirth through a name change and the discovery of new creative expression within cinema. Much of her poetry in 1942 still dwelt on the intellectual hold her father maintained over her. After his death, she changed her first name to Maya, meaning "illusion" in Sanskrit. She also stopped writing poetry, which to her represented a male preoccupation, and she made her first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* with Hammid in Hollywood. A few months later they moved back to New York where Hammid began to work as film director for the Office of War Information and Deren continued to make other films, *A Study in Choreography in Camera* (1944) and *At Land* (1945). If we see Deren as an innovator in a masculine sphere of endeavour, we must also consider that at the beginning of her career she worked in partnership with a man,

her lover/husband. Before making independent films, Deren went through a period of apprenticeship in which she was influenced by Hammid's surrealist and documentary film techniques.

As a poet and dancer who aspired to become a film artist, Deren initially depended on Hammid for technical knowledge and entry into her new chosen field. Yet Deren quickly came into her own as an artist when she started making films. People who worked with Deren found that she considered herself very much an independent artist. According to Miriam Arsham, her camerawoman for *At Land* (1944), Deren did not know the meaning of true collaboration: "Collaboration was not interesting to her at all...the true responsibility was certainly something she wanted herself."³ Deren said in an interview with Dave Garroway: "I am the sole arbiter in the same way that a painter is the sole arbiter of his painting or that a composer is the sole arbiter of his composing. The fact that I am assisted in one capacity or another is necessary in the case of film, which, of course is a production problem."⁴ Her independence led her to abandon the female apprentice role after her initial professional affiliation with her husband. She quickly assumed responsibility for her own films and would often stay up all night to write or prepare the scripts for them. Although Hammid introduced her to cinema, she pursued it with an intensity that rapidly surpassed his own. "*Meshes of the Afternoon* was conceived by Hackenschmied and myself in collaboration. The others were conceived by me alone."⁵ *At Land*, her third

³ Miriam Arsham, quoted in *The Legend of Maya Deren, Volume I, Part Two: Chambers (1942-47)* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1988), p. 206.

⁴ Maya Deren, *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 205.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

film (her second film, *Witch's Cradle*, was not completed), was a solo production. In the following chapter I have chosen to analyze films which trace the development of Deren's career in filmmaking. *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) remains a "classic" of avant-garde filmmaking; *At Land* (1944) is her first independent production; and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) is the film in which she completely abandoned ties with conventional narrative form.

In 1946 Deren won a Guggenheim Award. This financial assistance allowed her to continue with filmmaking and make the first of her three trips to Haiti to observe Voudoun rituals. She later wrote an anthropological book based on this research called *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (1952) in which she analyzes Haitian Voodoo priests and their relationship in society, as well as two other films, *Meditation on Violence* (1949) and *The Very Eye of Night* (1955). Much of the last part of her career was devoted to travelling around the United States as an advocate of the avant-garde movement in film, lecturing at universities and cinema clubs. Her most famous theoretical work is *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946), which discusses the aesthetics of cinema. At the same time, she separated from Hammid after five years of marriage. Although she married a third time (to Teito Ijo, a Japanese composer and musician), she was committed to a bohemian rather than a domestic life: only in her forties did she speak of wanting children. When Maya Deren died at forty-four in 1961 of a cerebral hemorrhage, it was thought to be caused, at least partially, by her continued use of the stimulant Benzedrine.

A "feminine" voice of the avant-garde

Maya Deren, known as "the mother of avant-garde,"⁶ rejected the mainstream Hollywood discourse in which women were valued because of their relationships with men. Although she began her career by a professional collaboration with her husband, she quickly moved to independent filmmaking and insisted that even in their first film she was "responsible" for the style and imagery. She innovatively explored non-realistic spatial and temporal possibilities, in confrontation with the dominant Hollywood cinema, while promoting production in the small group rather than the studio system. She advocated the collaborative model in which friends and acquaintances participated at all levels of film production, but Deren took complete control and responsibility of her films after *Meshes of the Afternoon*. A pioneer in using 16 mm film, along with artists of the Cinema 16 Film Society, she enjoyed the challenge of this new format. The government had used 16 mm film for army training films because the equipment was lighter and the process more economical than with 35 mm. Having worked for the Office of War Information, Hammid was familiar with 16 mm filming. Without a budget for sound or color, Deren's films took on the look of personal works, and she took pleasure in this more modest approach which reflected an individual rather than studio viewpoint. Hammid compared their films to "home movies." Because her films seemed accessible and easy to make, Deren inspired many of her viewers, through lectures and public viewings, to take up

⁶ See Diane Carson, ed., *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1994), p. 461.

filmmaking themselves. At the same time, periodicals such as *Saturday Review* ran articles on new independent cinema, and reviews of non-Hollywood films were appearing in magazines such as *New Republic*. Deren proposed a support structure for the rapidly growing avant-garde cinema by articulating categories of production, distribution and promotion for the independent film movement. While periodicals and magazines promoted cinema's position as a contemporary art form, Maya Deren became the person who was most closely associated with the avant-garde film culture in New York.

The capital of avant-gardism shifted from Paris to New York during the Second World War. New York was transformed into the international centre of modern art, attracting writers, dancers, artists and filmmakers who eschewed the philosophy of mainstream production and ideology based on realistic representation and linear narrative. Emigrés who fled European fascism, such as Hamid, brought along libertarian aesthetics. Others followed Soviet film theorists Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov in seeing film as a didactic form provoking political action. Nevertheless, the old studio system persisted; its conventional genres such as westerns, crime thrillers, women's romances and musicals remained, with only minor changes. *Mesher of the Afternoon* was not directly affected by World War II since American cinema remained largely untouched by political concerns, as long as the United States was not involved in the international conflict.⁷

⁷ Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, pp. 49-52.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbour (1942) and the direct involvement of the United States in the War, new genres such as *film noir* and the thriller drew on readers' and spectators' feelings of fear, cynicism, treachery and moral ambiguity. In addition, the "woman's films" or "weepies," were melodramas made by men but mainly watched by women. Although women characters often carried out leading and emancipated roles, this genre proposed a conservative ending which would put women back into their place within patriarchal society. In so doing, these films signified that the "absence" of American men who were off fighting was only temporary. Therefore, the implicit message of the "woman's films" of the 1940s, such as *Mildred Pierce* (1944), was that women would eventually have to pay the price for a successful career: Mildred Pierce succeeds as a business woman but fails as a mother. The message of the "woman's film" was to "keep the home fires burning," but not to disrupt the *status quo* of the patriarchal society.

In addition to the impact of the war on film genres, avant-garde cinema of the 1940s, reacting against the mainstream films of large production houses, was strongly influenced by innovative aesthetic movements in painting such as surrealism and expressionism. Avant-garde film translated these movements into disruptions of spatial and temporal relations as well as the predictable narrative line. Traditional mimesis was dismissed in favor of a fusion of "here and there" and "past, present and future." Using personal and simplified methods of production, without studios and large budgets, a woman artist could often compete on the same level as her male counterparts. Many surrealist women

artists, such as Lenora Carrington, had rejected the image of the woman as muse to the male artist and turned to the feminine expression of personal experience in the 1930s and '40s. Maya Deren was among the women filmmakers who used cinema to express their own realities in the relatively new medium. Other women artists who developed a new aesthetic in New York at the same time were writer Anaïs Nin, filmmakers Shirley Clarke and Marie Menken, and composer Bébé Barron.

This group of artists based in New York, widely termed the "New York avant-garde," includes the proponents of and contributors to art movements influenced by the European Modernists and recognized for their opposition to the *status quo* in artistic expression. Despite its oppositional nature, the notion of the "avant-garde" itself may be read as a concept of patriarchal society (Rabinovitz, 16). The military term "vanguard," meaning "advanced guard," leads us to believe that this type of movement is part of an inevitable "progression" in patriarchal society and that eventually the avant-garde will become the new *status quo*. Contemporary French theorists, like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes,⁸ question the legitimacy of this "progression," claiming that it is the construction of a capitalist society seeking to perpetuate its dominant power position. I agree that in many instances, avant-garde, when described by forces of the dominant order, can be used to define a movement of temporary "resistance" against the *status quo* before becoming the new *status quo*. However, women avant-garde

⁸ Foucault speaks of "epistèmes," which are a series of similar, but non-progressive movements in history; Barthes questions Western civilization's notion of progress in several of his works, such as *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957).

artists, unlike men who reacted only against the dominant form of signification in their media, also reacted against the patriarchal stance of dominant discourse. This dual "resistance" has often been ignored in studies of the avant-garde, such as John G. Hanhardt's *A History of the American Avant-garde Cinema* (1976), which either altogether avoid discussions about the women involved, or mention them to suit traditionalist expectations. In recent years "women-centered" explorations of the avant-garde have appeared, notably the articles on women avant-garde filmmakers by Constance Penley and Peggy Bergstorm in *Screen and Camera Obscura* and Bonnie Kime Scott's anthology of modernist women's literature, *The Gender of Modernism* (1990).

Although many works, including P. Adam Sitney's *The Avant-garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, associate Deren with the New York avant-garde movement of the 1940s, Maya Deren did not view herself as part of any movement during her early career; she wanted to be considered an original thinker and filmmaker who was setting new standards for "pure film." She rejected associations with surrealist and symbolic filmmakers such as Jean Cocteau because she did not want to belong to a specific "school" of art which would dictate a set structure for her work. Nonetheless, she respected Sergei Eisenstein's montage techniques and his creation of film aesthetics, especially because of his emphasis on time and movement. In her use of "spatiotemporal leaps" (Rabinovitz, 74) Deren openly borrowed from Eisenstein's theories in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. On other points, such as the importance of narrative, or the use of documentary for political purposes, she did not agree with

him. While Eisenstein advocated radical editing techniques for the purposes of reflecting a new world politically, Deren saw the use of these techniques as producing new artistic meaning about time and space.

Although Deren's insistence on assuming an independent place in the avant-garde, rather than declaring herself part of a movement, may be called individualist, her own descriptions of her role in the male-dominated field of filmmaking were contradictory. Because of her innovative filmmaking techniques, after her death Maya Deren was linked to male successors in experimental filmmaking such as Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol and Michael Snow. She is one of only three women who appear in the seminal work, *The Avant-garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (Sitney, 1976), and *Meshes in the Afternoon* has been studied more widely in the United States than any other independent American film (Rabinovitz, 1991, 67), a phenomenon at least partly due to a polemical promotion of her filmmaking by feminist critics. Maya Deren has been recognized for her significant contribution to a movement dominated by men. She has disrupted and re-arranged traditional signifiers to create a uniquely feminine avant-garde expression that goes beyond the artistic resistance of the movement to a new form of feminine expression. Deren herself claimed that as an artist she transcended society's limits of what was masculine and feminine: "It always comes as a little bit of a shock when a woman is doing something in a field that has to do with machinery and with creating in terms of inventing with a machine."⁹ But instead of truly transcending

⁹ Deren, *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 354.

gender limits, Deren seems to accept, rather than challenge the stereotyping of women. In her lectures and theoretical writings such as *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, she adopted an autocratic style quite at odds with the experimental nature of her films, often telling viewers what they were supposed to see before they actually viewed a film. Despite the individual place that she claimed for herself within the avant-garde, Deren apparently felt that she had to justify that place by borrowing the didactic voice of patriarchy. In addition, she considered that feminist problems—as represented in the documentaries—had secondary importance to artistic questions and considerations. In fact, Deren scorned feminist filmmakers such as Dorothy Arzner who used the visual medium of cinema to recreate in realistic terms women's marginal position in a male-dominated society. In her pamphlet *Cinema as an Independent Art Form*, Deren explains her opposition to feminist filmmaking:

The recent increase in documentary and educational films has belatedly enlarged the scope of cinema beyond the commercial entertainment film. What is still conspicuously lacking is the development of cinema as a creative art form. A truly creative work of art creates a new reality and itself constitutes an experience, in contrast to the merely descriptive effort which produces an existent reality or adventure.¹⁰

Deren felt that by trying to recreate reality that is based on exterior conditions, filmmakers who linked feminist discussion with the documentary were taking away from the true role of cinema, that of displacing time and space through visual images.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 543.

Although she did not consider herself a feminist, it would be possible for a 1990s feminist reading to interpret Maya Deren's resistance to mainstream Hollywood narrative as an example of female discourse against a dominant order represented by the studio production system. However, neither *Meshes of the Afternoon* nor *At Land* was necessarily understood as this type of discourse when first seen by Deren's friends at private screenings and at New York film societies in 1943, 1944 and 1945. Hella Heyman, Deren's camerawoman for several years, explains: "I don't think we were at all aware of being women during this. I think if we had models, it couldn't be men or women, but rather just models of a certain ethic, or a certain achievement in whatever field."¹¹ Although not willing to admit publicly that she was creating "woman's discourse," Deren went on to do precisely that. I propose that her "feminine" authorship was the result of an implicit rather than explicit resistance to the Hollywood narrative. Her classical literary education, her private and professional relationship with Alexander Hammid, as well as her exposure to the New York avant-garde, prepared her to reformulate conventional tropes, first in poetry and then, more convincingly, in filmmaking.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 200.

A Place She Had to Enter

I know no longer if I wake or dream; whether the thing remembered lives
this side or that of sleep.
I went from sea to cellar scene
without will or walking;
some place I had to enter, without knowing why,
I could not, without knowing why;
the face which hangs upon my left I could not name.
Nothing of this is real except the pain.

E.D. (Maya Deren)
March 3, 1942¹²

Deren was influenced in her writing by the French nineteenth-century Symbolists, as well as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. She wanted to transcend words and the literary narrative, but always expressed frustration in the use of words: "When I was writing poetry, I had constantly to transcribe my essentially visual images—always of movements, incidents, events—into verbal form. In motion pictures, I no longer had to translate. Fortunately, this is the way my mind works, and I could move directly from my imagination into film."¹³ Clearly, words restricted Deren in her personal expression in a way that the visual images of cinema did not.

Since Deren did not find her own poetry either significant or outstanding, she did not seek to keep it or have it published, and often disposed of it. Hammid claims that during the years they spent together Deren was writing all the time,

¹² Eleonora Deren wrote this poem before she changed her name to Maya.

¹³ Deren, *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 57.

but only a few of her remaining poems are published in *The Legend of Maya Deren*. Jan Millsaps comments that Deren's development as a filmmaker most certainly owed a great deal to her knowledge of modern poetry and her own not entirely successful attempts at writing it.¹⁴ While I agree with the first part of Millsaps's statement, I do not think we can be sure that Deren's poetry was "not entirely successful" when we do not even know most of her poetry. The following verses, the final portion of a poem called "He/To Sasha," were written the year before her first film was produced:

After your skeleton has melted and poured into me
 your flesh spread out within your skin. You slept,
 Your boneless face fell down into the smile of an unfinished child
 dreaming and for the moment free of being formed.

It took the night for you to be remade.
 Within your skin the mists precipitated
 into streams of bone; the red flesh hills
 arranged themselves around the stone.
 At dawn you were once more defined:
 risen and stiff, and the sharp-edged outline.

Opening the door to pass through where last night
 you might have streamed through keyholes.
 You stood erect above your altar
 and denied the ancient and deserted ruins.
 I was toothless; with stumps where hands should have been.
 I could neither blaspheme nor pray
 I could only impale myself upon you. ¹⁵

¹⁴ Jan Millsaps, "Maya Deren Imagist," University of South Carolina Conference Paper, n.d.

¹⁵ Published in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 70.

Deren makes the subjective voice feminine in this intimate poem. The poet addresses her male lover whose physical qualities are transformed into stark images: "your skeleton has melted and poured into me leaving a boneless face." Images of nature and body are evoked together in "streams of bone" and "red flesh hills." The fluidity established in the first two verses, with verbs like "melted," "poured," and "precipitated," changes into stiffness: "defined," "risen," "stiff" and "sharp-edged" simulate a male sexual metamorphosis of desire. The final verse joins, but also contrasts, the two images: "streaming through keyholes" and "standing erect above your altar." The word "streamed" evokes the fluidity mentioned in the first two verses, while the keyhole signifies female sexuality, a limited opening through the rigidity of a closed door. What lies behind this closed door? Deren could be referring to feminine expression when she says that she could neither "blaspheme" nor "pray"; without a "voice" she cannot speak as a woman writer.

In speaking about "ancient and deserted ruins" Deren may also be reading one of modernism's favorite metaphors, that of the wasteland, from a feminist perspective: she might be alluding to a primitive feminine heritage, a "forgotten civilization" presided over by a female divinity. Although we have no evidence that Deren was familiar with the work of contemporary women poets, her technique of appropriating and reinterpreting the tropes used by male modernists resembles that of other women artists of her generation. It is important to point

out some of these parallels to show how Deren, despite her reluctance to subscribe to an artistic school or movement and despite her disdain for gender-defined art, still shared in a growing feminine tradition. The poet H. D. for instance, influenced like Deren by Ezra Pound, speaks of a primitive feminine heritage in her poetic narrative *Trilogy* (1944-46). In the first volume of this work, "The Walls Do Not Fall," H.D. creates spatial imagery "where there are no doors" and suggests that civilized history has failed to create forms that can protect or nurture the inhabitants of this wasteland. In the face of a monotheistic society that has created her psychological and physical dispossession, H.D. responds with a conscious female perspective; she illustrates how the patriarchal society can be subverted by women who "re-invoke" and "recreate," "to recover old values." In the following lines Deren, too, seems to "re-invoke" an ancient female culture that has been erased from history:

You stood erect before your altar
and denied the ancient and deserted ruins.

The word "erect" has two meanings, just as the poem itself can be read on two levels. First, there is the sexual image of male virility in the progression of the love scene described in the poem. Second, this image of male sexuality is transferred to the image of a monotheistic patriarchal god. Deren could be referring to the rigidity and demands of this god who has denied a female divinity and who commands, "Thou shall have none other gods but me."¹⁶ Both H.D. and Deren express women's reluctance to submit to a male god, the ultimate

¹⁶ See Susan Gubar in "The Echoing Spell of H.D.'s *Trilogy*," *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 200-218.

authority of the father in patriarchal society. As women artists they try to revision the absolute signifier of authority, replacing it with a female divinity that is in "deserted ruins."

While the first part of Deren's poem is a dream sequence, the "wakened" female subjective voice appears late in the poem. Not until the last three lines does Deren adopt the persona of the first person singular, repeated at the beginning of each line. While her lover is evoked as "fluidity" and "hardness," suggesting virility, she portrays herself as a negative image, as nothingness: "toothless; with stumps where hands should have been." She is also voiceless: "I could neither blaspheme nor pray." The lack of hands and teeth may be said to signify the "lack" which Freudian theory associates with Woman as the Other: "If Woman is defined by what she 'lacks'—the phallus—and is relegated to significance only as a negative site, then so is the irrational realm also made a site for relocating and containing patriarchal fears of Otherness."¹⁷ The act of "impaling" referred to in the last line not only alludes to a passive female sexuality resulting in closure by death, but also to the destruction of the feminine Other. Sandra Gilbert explains this phenomenon of destruction through the female Other with the following literary examples: "Charlotte Brontë's madwoman burns up Rochester's house and herself; Mary Shelley's monster plans a funeral pyre to extinguish himself entirely, soul and all; Emily Dickinson's bomb of the spirit will surely explode any minute; and Sylvia Plath, dissolving into the cauldron of morning, 'is lost' as she says in the poem 'Witch-

¹⁷ Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, p. 68.

Burning'."¹⁸ Impaling, signifying torture and death, introduces the important theme of woman's self-sacrifice and victimization in heterosexual sex as it occurs within the confines of patriarchal society. This theme runs through the works of many other female poets of the twentieth century, suggesting that women artists independently express similar personal feelings of frustration. Thus, the sexual implications of the following lines by Edna St. Vincent Millay, a precursor to the female modernist imagists, show the contradiction inherent in women's willing surrender to sexual love. As in Deren's poem, which speaks of impaling, heterosexual love relations are represented as rape, murder and victimization:

Sweet love, sweet thorn, when lightly to my heart
I took your thrust, whereby I since am slain,
And lie disheveled in the grass apart,
A sodden thing bedrenched by tears and rain.¹⁹

Jane Stanbrough explains how victimization through brutalization, as depicted in this poem, characterizes woman's existence and how women are conditioned to feel that their needs are emotional, with their greatest need being love.²⁰ Deren addresses this same subject in her poem "He/To Sasha." Like Millay, she feels a victim of female entrapment, and she is drawn to the world of male desire through her physical and emotional need for love. She is willing to endure the "torture" inflicted by her lover to obtain the illusion of fluidity of the "streams of bone" and the "red flesh hills"—a sphere where time and space are transcended.

¹⁸ Sandra Gilbert, "A Fine, White Flying Myth: the Life/Work of Sylvia Plath," *Shakespeare's Sisters* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 245-260.

¹⁹ Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Fatal Interview," *Collected Poems*, cl. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 646.

²⁰ Jane Stanbrough, "The Silver Reticence-Modernists," *Shakespeare's Sisters*, pp. 183-189.

The real becomes imaginary and the imaginary real. The opening through the "keyhole" provides a transition between the two worlds (female entrapment and male desire). "Toothless" suggests both infancy and old age; time is manipulated and superimposed when the "unfinished child" is contrasted with the skeleton, representing death. Consistently, the female persona has no voice from birth to death. As a female poet, Deren neither screams nor whispers; she cannot speak. Using traditional modes of expression in poetry based on the male imagist poetry she had studied, she expresses her frustration in not finding an active "feminine" voice. Like other female Modernist poets who attempt to redefine poetic voice through imagist poetry, Deren uses the diaphoric mode²¹ in her poetic writings; that is, she juxtaposes two or more incompatible images, to produce new meaning. Although the merging of these unrelated signifiers cannot necessarily be explained logically, their direction is linked to the subconscious mind and through associative rather than linear movement. Syntax no longer plays as important a role, while voice, action and objects are all treated as distinct agents in a "re-arranged" semiotic system. This "re-arrangement" allows women to create new forms of expression while reworking the more traditional symbols attached to conventional discourse in the poetry.

²¹ Jeanne Kammer opposes diaphoric to epiphoric in her article "The Art of Silence and the Forms of Women's Poetry" in *Shakespeare's Sisters*. Epiphoric sets in motion a primarily linear process of concretion to abstraction; this movement is reflected in language which, for all its creative tensions, still fulfills syntactic expectations and leads to a generalization predicted in the terms of metaphor. Epiphoric poetry can be expected to be more conventionally rhetorical and more generally discursive in nature. By using the diaphoric mode, women can fragment and reformulate poetic rhetoric and metaphors.

Yet what makes women poets' use of diaphoric mode different from that of male Imagist poets such as Pound? According to Jeanne Kammer the diaphoric mode may reflect an internal division and fragmentation for women, a private experience opposed to the public one of men. If female poets employ the diaphoric mode to distance themselves from the traditional oral performance art of Western poetry, "the paradox of saying and not saying created by syntactic compression and ambiguity here becomes the paradox of voice-centered poems that are not written for the voice."²² As far as we know, Maya Deren was not exposed to the writing of other women poets, but nonetheless created diaphoric poetry similar to Millay, Plath and H.D. Deren was frustrated as a poet because on the one hand she felt that she could not match her male literary models' poetic writing, while on the other she had not found an effective means of poetic expression to distance herself from them. Finally, she turned to making films that were ciné-poems²³ or poems of images, thus finding an aesthetic outlet for visual creativity. Had she not found a cinematic outlet for her creativity, perhaps her poetry would have evolved differently by incorporating space and movement, paralleling Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Marianne Moore (1887-1972), and H.D. (1886-1961), as well as later poets such as May Swenson (1919-). These poets changed the concept of voice-centered poems through the reorganization of visual space in their work (sometimes by using the page as a screen with words as images). In the following example, Swenson imitates the movement of the wave and the sound of the water—not only in the repetition of the s, but also in

²² Ibid., p. 158-59.

²³ A term used by Deren to describe her films which she felt were visual poems.

the actual shape her words take on the page; this "iconograph" illustrates poetry as visual art.

HOW EVERYTHING HAPPENS (Based on a Study of the Wave)

happen
 to
 up
 stacking
 is
 something
 When nothing is happening
 When it happens
 something
 pulls
 back
 not
 to
 happen. ²⁴

These "concrete" poems focus on the word as a visual object occupying space, thus adding a third dimension to a medium that is usually two-dimensional. Concrete poetry can include movement and the sensory feeling of the object being represented, as well as adding focus on the word. For example, while John Hollander (1929-) chooses to represent objects such as a swan and a key, emphasizing their shape and plastic quality, May Swenson's poem shows the form and the movement as well as the quality and shape of the wave. By making her visual poetry a "living" thing with qualities of movement and sound, Swenson's poetry resembles the moving, visual image of film. Perhaps if Deren had moved in the direction of visual representation, uniting a visual image with

²⁴ May Swenson, *Iconographs* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), p. 71.

the written text rather than concentrating on performance-oriented verse, poetry might have remained an important form of her artistic expression.

Although based on the male Imagist model, Deren's poetry is an expression of her personal experience. Rather than being the object of desire as the loved one, woman in Deren's poem is both subject (the I who speaks) and object (the one who is impaled). While she is able to look and observe through a female gaze, she has no power, either to speak or to act. Yet in the first verse she still seems to obtain pleasure from the view of fluidity. With her own eyes (rather than the eyes of the "male gaze") she can see herself as the object of desire within the scenery of nature and fluidity. However, the pleasure she derives from the view is violently ended by the "impaling," the symbol of heterosexual love, a "sacrifice" against which she is powerless as a woman.

Maya Deren, whose writing predates that of Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), struggled like Plath to find a voice in poetic writing. Both authors have a similar, ambivalent attitude toward father and lover. The biological father is associated with male literary precursors who stifle the feminine poetic voice, while at the same time they represent a source of adulation and intense erotic love which is then transferred to the husband, the "father replacement" in patriarchal society. Similar to Deren's "He/To Sasha,"²⁵ Plath's parodic "Ode to Ted" transfers her ambivalent feelings about her father to her husband, Ted Hughes.

²⁵ Sasha is a nickname for Alexander (Hammid).

Ringdoves roost well within his wood,
 shirr songs to suit which mood
 he saunters in; how but must glad
 could be this Adam's woman
 when all earth his words do summon
 leaps to laud such man's blood! ²⁶

As "Adam's woman," the poet's identity exists only in terms of her creation from man, a "mutant growth," in Deren's words. Yet in both cases, the superficial adoration is tinged with fear and a death wish associated with the lover. Deren refers to her lover as a boa constrictor who can imminently wound her: "you writhe around me/choking the death out of my mouth" ("He/ To Sasha I"). Likewise, Plath refers to her victimization in love:

I am too pure for you or anyone.
 Your body
 Hurts me as the world hurts God.²⁷

Plath compares the creative act of feminine writing to the "swayings and coilings" of the snake in her poem, "Snakecharmer."²⁸ Her father is portrayed as having a "snake-rooted" mind, a destructive phallic symbol similar to Deren's boa constrictor. While the snake in Plath's poem is woman's artistic creation, the snake charmer is male with the god-like qualities attributed to the charmer.

²⁶ Sylvia Plath, "Ode to Ted," in *Women Poets and the American Sublime* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 117.

²⁷ Plath, "Fever 103," in *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 54

²⁸ Plath, "The Colossus," in *The Colossus and Other Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 20.

The internalization of this ambivalent feeling about the "father image" was both a source of creativity for Deren and Plath and the power that inhibited its free expression. Sylvia Plath released herself from her inhibitions by expressing herself through anger ("Daddy, I have had to kill you"²⁹) in poems like "The Colossus" (1959) and "Daddy" (1962), works which she considered "good" poetry because she was able to express her feelings about her confinement in the patriarchal system. Although Deren was able to identify these same feelings of confinement, she apparently did not go through a phase of anger in her poetry. Unlike Plath, she never sought liberation from patriarchal authority through vindictive poetry, but she did analyze her relationship to patriarchy and her father both literally and figuratively in the following poem, part of the 1944 work she entitled "Two Poems." Deren's interest in "primitive" cultures and her personal experiences in dance and travel within these cultures fuel the imagery. This imagery is remarkably similar to H.D.'s, who like Deren refers to a forgotten female race, "vestigial" and "vanished."

I am sworn to a vestigial treaty with a vanished race.
(The secret ritual of the child against the Evil Dream
here has a public place.)

So I prance to the dry drums
and in tone before the stone
and play I betray the sea...

Beneath the dancer's mask the flying fish
leashed to the sea-green sockets dart towards home;
and in the lunar brain the tidal wave
braces the skull against the alien air.

²⁹ Plath, "Daddy," line 6, *Ariel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 49.

Who beats the tight hide for the rock god is not my brother.
 For I remember thee, o father,
 and thy head on the sea-bed,
 and my own beginning.

How should I speak to segregated, laboured earth
 of the mutated miracle of me?
 Deep in the sexless sea
 the cell swelled passionless to this:
 the tender infant cancer grown
 green tubered from the parent brain.

How to atone towards those with navels
 (their hard scars plunging down their entrails)
 pressing their amputated bellies at each other
 deep towards the dream of the umbilic reparation?

But I, the cancer, throbbing from the parent head
 even the platinum scalpel of the moon could never sever.
 (How could this pulsing still persist
 if, as they tell, my parent heart has ceased)?

I somnambulist, in sea-weed gowned
 float down the green, the doorless corridors,
 leading myself at arms length by the mirror
 where I pursue the parent and the lover.

(1944) ³⁰

Deren, like other female authors such as Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson and Marguerite Duras, privileges images of the sea to represent both birth and death and the circular flow of life. The sea may seem sexless because it is the primal originator of life, where the author is a child of the parent "brain" rather than the passion of love. Yet the poet refers to herself as a "tender infant cancer," a

³⁰ Maya Deren in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 171.

"mutated miracle." Is the female sex or the female poet the "mutated miracle" to which Deren refers; or is femininity itself the mutancy, the deviance ("the tender infant cancer grown") which has developed from the parental (that is, male) brain? Deren says that she cannot "speak" about the "mutated miracle of me." She refers to her quest to find a voice as an artist who speaks differently from the literary origins from which she has emerged, from the "sexless sea" of literary precursors who were not without gender, but were actually male poets.

The prodigious effect of her creativity as a "miracle" is offset by the negative implications of the word "mutated." Deren often expresses herself in the negative, irrational sphere: "sexless, passionless, sleepless." She enters "doorless" corridors, symbolic of feminine confines. Like the heroines of fairy tales and nineteenth-century literature, she is a prisoner of the "mirror" which reflects her femaleness to society. Her approach seems Freudian, as she refers to Oedipal love, pursuing the parent and the lover at the same time. This poem, written the year after her father's death, expresses the ambiguity of her relationship with her father, which mixed dependency with emancipation. Upon his death, Deren wrote: "When I think of my relationship with my father I have the image of those sea-plants that reproduce by a growth out of themselves—not by an umbilical thread nor a seed planted. I was something that grew, like a cancer almost, out of my father's head."³¹ In addition to articulating the relationship with her father, Deren establishes in this poem a distinctive feminine viewpoint through the recurrent use of multiple selves which represent a refusal

³¹ Ibid., p. 73.

to accept a categorical position as object of discourse. The psychological rediscovery in which Deren is "infant," "lover," "cancer," and "miracle" represents many aspects of nature and the sea, and of the primitive and intellectual cultures. Deren returns to what Judith Mayne calls the "primitive" state (*The Woman at the Keyhole*, 1990) as a means of self-discovery or re-discovery for the female poet and reader. Within the poem the imagery moves from native ritual dancing ("So I prance to the dry drums") to the sea ("and in the lunar brain the father...and thy head on the sea-bed, and my own beginning; tidal wave/ braces the skull against the alien air"), from birth ("For I remember thee, O Father and thy head on the sea-bed, and my own beginning") to death ("I somnambulist, in sea-weed gowned"). If we refer to other poems by female poets such as Dickinson and Millay, each of these lines contains "feminine" imagery. In moving from sea to land, from primitive to culture and from birth to death, Deren expresses an important theme in her work: the speaker or subject considers perception and value as relative. As a result, Deren establishes a multiplicity of perspectives for the female artist and the reader/spectator.

Chapter 2

Feminine Expression in Deren's Ciné-poems

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Feminine Expression in Deren's Ciné-poems

The camera should not be used merely to record an incident or a papier-maché reproduction of an incident. Rather, it should bring to us the discoveries of an excursion beyond the apparent reality of the incident. It should bring to us the meaningful experience of the incident.

Maya Deren
1945

Maya Deren wanted to represent her personal vision of reality on the screen. The visual images of films, she felt, unlike her experience with imagist poetry, would be able to communicate the "experience of the incident." To understand the expression of Deren's personal vision better I refer to Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's model of authorship as a tripartite structure. Flitterman-Lewis sees authorship as a historical phenomenon, a desiring position (involving sexuality and gender) and finally a textual moment, involving the specific "style" of the filmmaker.¹ The previous chapter dealt with Deren's poetry, the personal expression of her feelings as a woman, an expression that she felt was inferior to

¹ Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 1-46.

that of her male role models. This chapter will explore Deren's films by focusing on the latter two elements of Flitterman-Lewis's model: gender (or a desiring position) and Deren's personal style. Deren's gender and specific style affected her literary and filmic authorship differently as a poet and as a filmmaker. Her creative "style" changed as she delved into the visual aesthetics of the film medium. Through film she was able to manipulate time and space to create a discourse that expressed her personal feelings about the "meaningful experience of the incident."

Elizabeth Cowie emphasizes that various discursive practices in society and art construct women differently from men ("Women as Sign," 1978). She encourages readers and spectators to reconsider Woman (embodying the qualities of the Other) in terms other than marginal or "reactive" to patriarchal discourse. She sees film as a particular site of the representation of fantasy, or the "mise en scène of desire," separate from the political or "feminist point of view."² However, according to Mary Anne Doane, "given the apparent masculinization of the very process of looking in the cinema, [woman's] films often manifest a certain convolution and instability in compatability between the idea of female fantasy and that of persecution."³ Doane even questions the construction of a "female spectator" for "woman's films" of the 1940s (films in which women were the central characters but not the "I" subject of the film, such as *Suspicion* [1944], *Rebecca* [1944], *Mildred Pierce* [1945], and *Secret Behind the Door* [1948]).

² Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign," *m/f* 1 (1978): pp. 49-63, here, p. 60.

³ Mary-Anne Doane, "'The Woman's Film': Possession and Address," *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), p. 69.

The central character can "see" herself, as a spectator watches a film: for example, the narrator of the film in *Rebecca* starts with, "Last night I dreamt I was at Manderly again." The dream recreates the cinematic model as the "I" of the narrator watches the female protagonist play out the narrative. Since the cinematic model is dependent on "voyeurism" and "fetishism," films about women are still associated with the male gaze and persecution of women. Deren's first films are also dependent on voyeurism and fetishism in a dream-like sequence, since they depend on spectators observing the surrealist adventures of a heroine who is attractive in the sense stipulated by Hollywood. However, Deren appears to achieve a greater control over "the gaze" in her films than in her poetry, as she transforms the female object into subject/object and successfully crosses over to the unconscious sphere of discourse. In addition, visual images more effectively conveyed the personal symbols and complex emotions she was trying to communicate with words. Discovering film, she said, "was like finally finding the glove that fits" (*Legend*, 16).

Meshes of the Afternoon

The scenario of *Meshes of the Afternoon* was imagined by Deren and recounts a dream, the most personal of experiences. Although *Meshes of the Afternoon* was Deren's first film, and a collaborative production with Hammid, it remains in many ways her most celebrated work—one that established her position in the cinematic avant-garde. A woman (played by Deren) is presented in fragments:

arms, legs and a profile in shadow. The female subject in this film does not seem to have a human form, a technique found in surrealist poetry. The camera follows her feet, and we see her pick up a paper flower from the sidewalk. She follows the sidewalk up stairs to the front door. As the woman enters the house, she looks at familiar machines such as the phonograph and telephone in a domestic setting. She falls asleep while resting in a chair and we enter her dream world. Here she chases a hooded figure three times into the house. After the chase three Mayas sit around the dining room table deciding who will kill the fourth Maya, still asleep in the chair.

The influences in *Meshes of the Afternoon* can be traced to three types of films which were popular in the 1940s: the *film noir*, the thriller and the "woman's film." These film types have as a common denominator elements of the gothic novel, in which a young heroine is entrapped in a prison-like house or castle—the scene of a mystery. Deren bases *Meshes of the Afternoon* on her spectators' knowledge of the structure of gothic literature as well as the popular films of her time. However, it is important to point out that in *Meshes of the Afternoon* Deren reformulates the themes of the *film noir*/thriller, rather than simply duplicating them. Through her self-reflexive film she makes a statement about woman's subject position. *Film noir*, represented by films such as *So Dark the Night* (1946) and *Born to Kill* (1947), is usually a misogynistic genre in which women are represented as sexually desirable and mysterious, but very often evil.⁴ Men, on the other hand, are helplessly caught in a web of attraction

⁴ I refer to Wes D. Gehring's discussion on *film noir* in *Handbook of American Film Genres* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 65-84.

for a *femme fatale* in a world of violence and capricious fate, a pattern of existence from which there is no escape. However, Deren's psychological drama without dialogue conveys that the terror experienced by the female subject in Deren's dream world is just as "real" as the physical terror in the world of *film noir* cinema. Thus, cinema can effectively signify the multiplicity of the real world. The transition into the subjective or dream experience expresses cinematic ambivalence between the "alienated world of female objectification and the 'imaginary' one of female subjectivity."⁵

Meshes of the Afternoon principally uses the visual vocabulary associated with the *film noir* and thriller genres: high-contrast black and white lighting, exaggerated camera angles and character point of view shots. In the thriller *Laura* (1944), for example, the heroine is fetishized not only as the object of the spectator's gaze, but as a *femme fatale* who is supposedly murdered because she is the object of several desiring males. Throughout the film, Laura is seen through different characters' points of view, all of whom have somehow coveted or desired her. The essential question is, "Who killed Laura?" or, with the surprise ending, "Who is going to kill her?" Superficially, there is the same driving question in *Meshes of the Afternoon*. The beautiful woman, the empty house, the telephone, the change of perspective and flashback, all the visual vocabulary of this *film noir* also appear in Deren's surrealist film. In the suspense-filled story-line which turns into a "thriller," Laura is saved by the policeman, who is investigating what was thought to be her murder, but who

⁵ Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance*, p. 62.

unwittingly prevents it from really happening. However, unlike a simple thriller narrative where the female protagonist is objectified as Other, Deren's story in *Meshes of the Afternoon* opposes dream and reality. Instead of a typical Hollywood narrative conclusion, there are two endings in the film, which, according to Doane, "enact two radically opposed narrative itineraries: the one which poses an endless movement between opposing poles, which opens up a threshold space between the dualities of self and other, and the other, certainly more 'conventional,' which asserts these dualities."⁶ The choice of endings involves the spectator's experience in an active way and confirms the multiplicity of viewpoints evident in Deren's film.

Meshes of the Afternoon also relies on the spectators' knowledge of the woman's film or "weepies," such as *Dark Victory* (1939), films which are themselves encoded through specific cinematic structures of female subjectivity. Mary Anne Doane explains:

The woman's film is not a "pure" genre—a fact which may partially determine the male critic's derogatory dismissal of such films. It is crossed and informed by a number of other genres or types of melodrama—film noir, the gothic or horror film—and finds its point of unification ultimately in the fact of its address. As a discourse addressed specifically to women, what kind of viewing process does the "woman's film" attempt to activate? These protagonists are subjects who fit into the "order" of patriarchy and cannot change their own destiny.

⁶ Mary-Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, eds., *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America and the American Film Institute, 1984), p. 190.

Although it is about women and for women, the "woman's film" reinforces the *status quo* of the patriarchal society since at the end of the film the female protagonist realizes the importance of returning to the accepted "woman's role." Deren's protagonists, however, no longer fit into the prescribed order for the "woman's film," because in *Meshes of the Afternoon* the multiple personalities of the heroine represent several realities, both conscious and subconscious. Deren expresses, through these multiple personalities, her personal experience as a female artist.

Films that have elements of both *film noir* and the "woman's film," like *Mildred Pierce* (1945), are a useful comparative model for *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Parker Tyler calls *Meshes of the Afternoon* "an afternoon reverie of erotic suspense."⁷ He combines the motivating factors for both types of films in the words "erotic" and "suspense," erotic referring to female desire in the "woman's film" and "suspense" to the *film noir*. Deren uses these cinematic prototypes to create a reworked "woman's film," one in which time and space and the transition from the dream world are abruptly affected through changing camera angles and jump cuts. In addition, dream sequences appear in Deren's films to reveal the protagonist's psychological reality, rather than to add missing pieces to the narrative, as is common in the "woman's film." Finally, Deren's film has many endings, rather than the classical Hollywood *dénouement* found in the "woman's film." Spectators' familiarity with *film noir* and their awareness of "woman's films" help them perceive the innovations of the new position for the

⁷ Parker Tyler, "Maya Deren as Filmmaker," *Filmwise* 2 (1962) p. 3.

female protagonist, who can master her environment. Since many female spectators are familiar with the underlying genre and participate in its revision they themselves become the signified in *Meshes of the Afternoon*.

The adventures of the woman's psyche become more reality than illusion in the dream sequence of the film, made effective through the cinematic medium. Deren uses her innovative techniques to expand time as several incidents occur simultaneously or action takes place in slow motion. In this way she simulates the time spent waiting, most fully associated with women in their personal lives. To achieve this transformation Deren, who denied Freud's influence on her work, makes use of Freud's concept of "Unheimlichkeit" ("Das Unheimliche," 1919), translated as the "uncanny" in English. With the word *heim* meaning "home" at its root, *Unheimlichkeit* represents the negative, repressed side of house and home. By rearranging the signifiers of domesticity, Deren sought to express the reality of women's personal experience by showing the repressed side of domesticity and by giving a fuller picture of the significance of women's activities.

Her father's work as a psychiatrist possibly familiarized Deren with the idea behind Freud's famous article on *Unheimlichkeit*. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Deren shows that the power of what is repressed can render familiar, everyday objects and activities "uncanny" and create a feeling of terror. Things appear as if they were normal, but actually something unidentifiable, but terrible, is happening below the "normal" veneer, as in the scene where the phone is

transformed into a knife. By using traditional signifiers in a genre with which spectators can readily identify, but placing them in a dream configuration, Deren begins to show other aspects of conventional representation of women in particular.

Deren reworks two basic techniques of women's representation in conventional cinema to examine the female subject's "real" and fragmented psychological world. First, the representation of the female body in parts is analogous with the image of Woman as Other. Secondly, the female body, conveying connotations of danger to the male spectator, is imprisoned within the house itself, encoded by a series of signifiers associated with fear and anxiety. When we see the protagonist at the beginning of the film she is not signified as whole, but rather as "fragmented" into parts such as the arms and legs. Deren employs a technique found in surrealist art: the female subject does not seem to have a human form. This disjointed impression of human fragments, replaced by objects, also confirms Elizabeth Cowie's statement that women have rarely appeared in film as a fully human form.⁸ The camera follows the female protagonist's feet to the front door of the house. This technique augments the suspense because we do not see the woman herself for some time, only her slow-moving shadow in profile, accented by the angles of the afternoon. We see her hand as she knocks at the door, as she fumbles and drops her key. We see her wide pant legs and sandalled feet as she chases the key down the steps in slow motion, and then as she stands in the open doorway, having finally let herself in.

⁸ Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign," *m/f* no. 1 (1978): pp. 49-63.

This synecdoche of body part for the whole woman contributes to a reversal of the subject/object relationship. Rather than having a "complete" woman act on the domestic objects, the objects exert a malevolent force on her "body parts," which in turn signify the incomplete woman.

What does Deren achieve through this reversal? Deren uses the surrealist technique of fragmentation to show that while the woman's everyday interaction with typically domestic objects fragments her psychologically, her reaction to her constrained domestic space becomes more "real" than in conventional cinematic representation. She is portrayed as an "object" in the world of inanimate objects. An example of the power of these objects appears in *Laura*, as the potential "voice" of the telephone could change the plot of the film. The phone rings while the murder is to take place, thus indicating that an outside force will change the subsequent events. Likewise, the phonograph in *Meshes of the Afternoon* can be construed as a potential unknown voice that could in some way interfere with the characters' interaction. It is only once the action shifts to her dream world, signified by the close-up of her eye, that she becomes the active subject. But at this point Deren leaves the intrigue of the *film noir* and explores the psychological significance of the "thriller." It is here that we begin to see her as an entire body and a whole subject. Now we catch a glimpse of her, or more precisely, her eye, as she looks out the window. She is still fragmented as her heavily-lashed lid flutters close; she slips into a doze, and we enter the realm of the dream world. The spectator has slipped through the "keyhole"⁹ of the female

⁹ The keyhole also represents the frontier between woman as subject and woman as object in Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole* (1990).

psyche. By allowing the spectator to leave the superficial world of appearances and to enter (although as an observer) the psychological world, Deren uses film to represent the thoughts and dreams of the heroine and to portray her personal vision of the female protagonist's complicated world.

Deren also emphasizes the analogy between the female body and its representation by the house in *Meshes of the Afternoon*. As we see the various parts of the body of the protagonist in the first shots, we later see the parts of the house in isolation: the door, the window, the staircase, the dining room, the living room. Similarly to the fragmented body parts, each individual space signifies the "whole" house, considered the prison for the female protagonist in much literature about women since the nineteenth century. Some striking examples are Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, a prisoner in the attic because of her madness, Lady Chatterly, a prisoner in her husband's manor, seeking escape at the gardener's cottage, and Molly Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses*, a prisoner in her own bedroom, awaiting the return of her "husband-warrior."¹⁰ Maya Deren's female protagonists, who become several facets of the same personality, reformulate women's position in respect to their imprisonment: the heroine sees "herself" in each room.

Among the feminine signifiers in the house, Deren gives special significance to the window, which is used symbolically in both the "woman's film" and *film noir* genres. The window, a very old symbol dating back to the Middle Ages

¹⁰ Refer to Gilbert and Gubar's works for additional specific references.

when ladies waited for their knights to come home, has, throughout history, marked the boundary between the feminine space of family and reproduction and the masculine sphere of production (Doane, 1984, 72). The technique of "double exposure," in which the outside is reflected on the window to make it look as if it were the inside, is used to represent the multiple personae of Maya Deren. The famous Botticelli shot shows Deren on the inside of the window looking out with her hair blending with the reflection of the trees (implying that she is also on the outside looking in). Deren's character has many facets and also looks at her own narrative from both sides of the window or from multiple perspectives. This vantage point contrasts with the previous window shot where the window is empty and the curtain is blowing in the wind. Although she is not contained on the inside of the house (behind a closed window like traditional heroines), her reflections help her see herself in nature (the trees), a privilege of identification usually reserved for men. According to Doane the window is also a potential site of violence. In *Rebecca*, for instance, the housekeeper tries to persuade the new Mrs. DeWinter to commit suicide while they are both perched at the window sill, looking out through the open window to the sea. Furthermore, the window can also represent the point at which the house is subject to violation, symbolic of the intrusion of the woman's body. The penetration takes place through the window in break-in scenes, such as the one in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947) where the psychotic husband penetrates the bedroom through the window. The "penetration" in *Meshes of the Afternoon* is implicit after the scene with the open window (symbolizing a possible entry) and the murder of at least one of the multiple Maya Derens.

Another significant space within the house is the staircase, "a signifier which possesses a certain semantic privilege in relation to woman as object of the gaze, which articulates the connection between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or neurosis and psychosis."¹¹ In films from the same time period as *Meshes of the Afternoon*, such as the thriller, *Rebecca* (1944), the staircase is either the place where the woman is displayed or the passageway to a foreboding transition. In thriller films it is usually the woman who leaves the world of everyday reality and the personal experience of domesticity to encounter the world of terror. The stairway can lead to a woman's self-discovery, as in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, when the wife goes upstairs and discovers the husband's plan to kill her. In *Rebecca*, the new wife unwittingly steps closer to the horror of her marital situation as she descends the staircase dressed to look like her predecessor. An even more radical example occurs in *Kiss of Death* (1947) in which Tommy Udo pushes a wheelchair-bound old woman down flights of stairs to her death. The staircase is also featured as a pivotal point in thriller movies of the same time period, like Hitchcock's *Shadow of A Doubt* (1943) and Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* (1946). The staircase is the place where the protagonist enters the sphere of terror, literally one step at a time.

As a staple of the gothic novel such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the staircase has special significance for women characters. The staircase in Deren's films has foreboding connotations, but she uses it in a figurative sense to

¹¹ Doane, "The Woman's Film," p. 72.

experiment with spatial and temporal disruptions rather than achieve closure through the murder or attempted murder which would occur in traditional cinema. She builds on the cinematic relationship established in thriller films in which the spectators are conditioned to feel fear for the female protagonist at the mere sight of the staircase. It is after her ascent of the staircase in *Meshes of the Afternoon* that the female subject "discovers," through the transformation of the objects (namely of the flower into the knife), the "death" that awaits her in the house. Even the laws of gravity are changed as the staircase itself begins to rock in slow motion. Yet the murder in *Meshes of the Afternoon* appears surrealist; there is no single victim nor a simple antagonist.

By featuring several psychological personae, Deren acknowledges the multiple workings of the unconscious. She also gives a ritualistic and mystical appearance to the scene. This technique creates a different narration for each of the female personae. For example, at the point when the woman's self-destruction seems unavoidable, a "dream Maya" lowers a knife toward the "sleeping Maya" and the dream ends. Thus, the woman protagonist becomes the killing subject and the killed object. Since the murder takes place in the imaginary realm, the scene can also be interpreted as the female protagonist killing Woman as Other. When she opens her eyes, a man, bending over her, has "saved" her from her own dream. The rest of the film is seen through the man's perspective. He sees her with her throat slit surrounded by mirror fragments and dripping seaweed. "Dripping seaweed" becomes a double image: first, it is related to the classic thriller where dripping blood is associated with death

(usually a murder) and second, the image of the sea represents rebirth in feminine terms. The woman, or at least one of her selves, has died, while another of her multiple personalities has been saved or reborn. The mirror, the "looking glass" of the nineteenth-century heroine, is also broken, as Deren uses feminine poetic imagery dealing with the sea, death and rebirth ("For a drowned woman's sake, and bring her back/To drip and scatter shells upon the rug")¹² to create an innovative cinematic discourse based on imagist poetry and the transformation of 1940s popular film genres.

Deren developed her philosophy in filmmaking based on the surrealist split between rational logic and a higher reality in art, a split that could result in freeing the mind of conscious constraints. She wanted cinema to express emotion without symbols, representing the "meaning behind the action" (*Legend*, 196) rather than depending on the association created by a symbol representing another object. In her Master's thesis, Deren described the Imagist credo as follows: "For the Imagist, the image is the synthesis itself of the thought and emotion; the direct communication of the synthesized experience."¹³ Deren was able to apply the Imagist credo to her filmmaking in *Meshes of the Afternoon* by using the unconventional visual imagery in the film to synthesize thought and emotion.

¹² Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Poems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 636.

¹³ Deren, Master's thesis, p. 90, cited in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 244.

At Land

Deren's cinematic *oeuvre* and her poems juxtapose "reality" and illusion in different ways. A single film image in her second film, *At Land*, recreates the following two lines found in her 1944 poem:

I somnambulist, in sea-weed gowned
float down the green the doorless corridors. (*Legend*, 170)

In *At Land*, Deren uses this image of a woman sleepwalking, "gowned in seaweed," to produce a feeling of timelessness. To create a juxtaposition of space, she uses a montage of a continual movement with changing background. While there is no discernible "storyline" in *At Land* the action takes place as follows. A woman drifts in from the rolling waves of the sea onto the shore. In an amphibian-like manner she slides over rocks and driftwood and we next see her in the middle of a banquet table. The people around the table do not notice her as she slides down the length of the table. She steals a chess piece from a board where the chess pieces move by themselves. Passing through time and space, she proceeds to travel through other landscapes such as a country road where she meets a man, the inside of a house, and the beach once more where she plays chess again. Throughout the film she remains essentially alone in her adventures, despite brief encounters with different individuals. She maintains a constant presence and a controlling gaze.

Through the cinematic technique of matching shots in *At Land*, we see the woman's sandalled feet move across various landscapes as if they were the same scene. Deren associates the female protagonist's rebirth with the sea: the woman comes from the sea at the beginning of the film and returns to the sea at the end. Much more than in *Mesher of the Afternoon*, however, it is the identity of the subject that is in question. Deren emphasizes this uncertainty by creating yet another liminal space, between sea and land. Furthermore, "at land" signifies women's access to men's world of civilization. Using a female protagonist who is associated with the sea, Deren draws from one of the oldest myths of patriarchal society: the legend of the mermaid. Mermaids have been portrayed in works from classical myths to Hans Christian Andersen's nineteenth-century fairytale and the recent Disney production of it, *The Little Mermaid* (1989). In some notable versions of the legend of the mermaid, she relinquishes her magic powers to be with her beloved, a human. Thus Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid sacrifices her beautiful voice, walks on painful feet and finally literally dissolves into the ocean when her prince fails to recognize her. Although Disney's version predictably insists on a happy ending, the film retains some of these "castrating" features. The violence inflicted on these mermaids in preparation for their entrance into the human world is an indication of their considerable power. In versions of the story ranging from *The Odyssey* to Heinrich Heine's Lorelei, the mermaid has been a seductive, inaccessible *femme fatale* who controls her own destiny and that of others.

Deren begins the dismantling of the myth of the mermaid with the title of her film, a modification of the expression "at sea." Deren's imagery parallels that of T.S. Eliot in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown¹⁴

Deren does not share Eliot's point of view in the poem, however; she assumes the perspective of the "sea-girl" herself. But simultaneously we watch her from a distance, just as the male poet looks at the mermaid. In this way Deren provides a new point of view for the female heroine because, rather than being seen as supporting men, she is portrayed as a female Ulysses, both conqueror and adventurer. In other words, she is now "at land."

Deren's knowledge of literary tradition and expertise in poetic expression were important influences, but she constantly sought to adapt this experience to innovative filmmaking. Although Deren's sea-creature is out of her element, she is empowered by cinema itself to enter a "new frontier." Perhaps the duality of Deren's version of the mermaid is a symbol not only of femininity, but also of avant-garde cinema itself. She wrote in the invitation to the première of *At Land*: "This is an experimental attempt to construct a film solely in terms of concepts suggested by the very nature of the motion-picture camera...creative workers, inspired by the possibility of a new medium for their talents, have, by and large, brought to cinema the traditions of the idiom with which they were originally

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock," *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1951), pp. 9-14.

preoccupied."¹⁵ She goes on to say that, like the airplane, the camera will pass from its utilitarian period to its creative period. Deren exploits the "newness" of this medium, explaining that those involved with film have brought with them talents and ideas from other, more established, areas.

Although *At Land* was Deren's third film, it was considered by critics such as poet Howard Moss to be in many ways technically inferior to *Meshes of the Afternoon*, because Deren did most of the editing herself. It is true that Alex Hammid's expert technical support had helped Maya Deren express herself as a woman poet working on her first film, but I find *At Land* in some ways more dramatic and strikingly unique in its re-arrangement of spatial signifiers. Deren's own statements confirm that since the poetic ideas that came to her were visual, transmission of these images to Hammid during the filming of *Meshes of the Afternoon* was not constrained by any technical limits (*Legend*, 189). She would express her ideas to Hammid, identifying the visual images she wished to represent; he would then produce these images for her. On the other hand, Deren took over the responsibility for the imagery, as well as its execution, in *At Land*. Deren introduced many innovative editing techniques, such as cutting back and forth from civilization to nature, thereby representing respectively man and woman. In this way Deren's editing creates the effect of condensation of time and/or space in the film. While critics claim that over-planning makes the film stilted, I suggest that Deren herself wanted to create the effect of formality through editing. The dream-like transitions depend on associative rather than

¹⁵ Deren, in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 191.

linear thought, revealing Deren's innovative style of authorship. Parker Tyler says, "*At Land* is a patently personal revelation transcending itself, the story of an individual in modern life as she extroverts the inner life in terms of the outer life."¹⁶ Though Tyler does not dwell on the "femininity" of the odyssey, he describes the film as the story of a woman's individual experience. The very fact, however, that it is a woman embarking on a typically male adventure is significant. Deren has re-arranged an ancient myth to create a space where the female rather than male protagonist discovers the world around her.

Although *At Land* seems preoccupied with the modernist theme of representing life itself in the epic sense (a feminine version of an epic or mythological adventure), Maya Deren's program notes indicate that *At Land* was meant to show cinema's capacity to portray ideological as well as personal statements (*Legend*, 195). The female protagonist is transposed from her "birth" at sea to the moment when she slides completely unnoticed down a dining room table surrounded by people dressed up for a dinner party. But the protagonist has the controlling gaze throughout the transition. Although she is constructed as the film's subject through her actions and her gaze, and through her choice of transition from nature to society, at the same time the spectators have the privilege of looking at her through a traditional "male gaze."

At Land's multiple selves suggest a radically original means toward feminine self-discovery. We see the heroine dominate several backgrounds, rather than a

¹⁶ Parker Tyler, quoted in *The Legend of Maya Deren*, p. 195.

single space. These contiguous spaces provide the continuity for a series of eye-line matches that direct the narrative's activity. As each self gazes off-screen, followed by another subjective point of view of herself in a new setting, the female protagonist is both the originator and the object of her own gaze. In this way, *At Land* is able to represent woman in relation to herself. As in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, multi-dimensionalism comes from the different states of mind that are represented, from dreaming to intense concentration, to absent-mindedness, to mental disassociation.

Like *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land* repeats the same actions and features a return to the places where the heroine has been before. Deren's films, although not explicitly oppositional to patriarchal discourse, do represent feminine empowerment through identification with the female subject. Judith Mayne believes that *At Land* represents the intersection between the feminine, the archaic, and the cinematic: "The bewilderment of the female protagonist as she emerges from the sea and discovers civilization places her in an area of flux that can be considered a threshold between dream and waking and man and woman in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, between nature and culture in *At Land*."¹⁷ Deren uses cinematic techniques to represent this "in-between" area that evokes the feminine in *At Land*. For example, the protagonist comes out of the sea, represented realistically on screen. We do not know, however, if the next scenes, represent "dream" or "waking." Deren purposefully places her characters in this area of "flux," "a no-man's land" between the imaginary and the symbolic orders.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 190.

In this way, she shows that women's common experience could serve as the compelling myth to take them into an active role not only in nature (the imaginary), which conventionally represents woman, but civilization (the symbolic), the traditional realm of men.

Ritual in Transfigured Time

Ritual in Transfigured Time differs from Deren's artistic orientation in her two other films. In this film Deren abandons all links with conventional narrative and concentrates on the representation of time and movement. *Ritual in Transfigured Time* was produced the year after *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945) in which Deren translated Martha Graham and Katherine Dunham's modern dance movement into cinema. As its title indicates, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* is based on the rhythm and movement in traditional rites. A woman, once again played by Deren, winds yarn in slow motion and a second woman, dressed in black, completes the movement. Yarn is used both as a universal signifier for women and as a stereotype. The viewers wonder whether the black-clad woman is a witch or a widow or whether she is one of the yarn-spinning Fates of Greek mythology. In the next episode, the woman dressed in black enters a party, where three people contribute to complete a gesture. Unlike the two other Deren films, the camera does not focus on a single female protagonist. The repetition of gestures, freeze frames and slow motion expresses the spectator's preoccupation with movement and time.

In the second part of the film there is another ritual, this time one of courtship. The woman in black performs a *pas de deux* with a man from the party while three female spectators stand close by. The three other women and the man are frozen into statues representing civilization, but when the man is revived, he chases the woman in black, using graceful, dance-like strides. However, as she escapes to the sea, she is interchanged with the first woman who was rolling the yarn and who begins running into the water until she is immersed to the waist. The woman in black completes the movement. She is transformed, through the negative exposure of film, from a woman with a veil dressed in black into a bride with a white gown who figuratively becomes a bride of the sea instead of the man. This is another example of the empowering, transformative ability of Deren's cinema to liberate a woman from the naturalistic restrictions of the conscious world.

Ritual in Transfigured Time represents three art forms: modern dance, abstract painting, and experimental cinema. Deren identifies women's traditional role in society as ritualistic. The transcending of time and space in her film allows her to present women's position in culture as universal, transgressing the boundaries of primitive and developed societies. The choice of weaving as a traditional signifier of women's activities is common to many cultures, and, through weaving, is associated with primitive, agricultural societies. Deren also represents the plurality of cultures by using one white and one dark-skinned actress. According to Rabinovitz, "*Ritual* did not so much rewrite a woman's cinema, but rather situated an alternative base within the vanguard from which

one could sound a woman's voice" (Rabinovitz, 71). In this way, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* represents femininity somewhere between the imaginary realm (represented by transfigured time) and the ritual (a replacement for the feminine language possible in the symbolic order).

While *Ritual in Transfigured Time* is obviously preoccupied with form, it explores women's relationships to courtship, marriage and "appropriation" by men. Deren disrupts the dichotomy between subject and object when representing women. She reestablishes the mainstream signifiers of women (domesticity, courtship and marriage) to the artistic realm of the Other. By doing so, she creates a negative image of the positive, similar to the physical negatives of the last frames of the film. As a "positive" signification of women in patriarchal society, the white bridal gown is representative of their traditional role in relation to men; it is thus placed in the "negative" realm of the Other. Therefore, in *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Deren breaks the positive/negative barrier of feminine representation in dominant discourse. Woman is no longer marginalized as the object of sexual desire in the male imaginary order. Deren, like Marguerite Duras, eventually finds her feminine voice by subverting the position of Woman as Other in cinema.

Maya Deren began her artistic career by writing poems that placed the feminine voice in the male imaginary realm, where she felt silenced. By moving into the medium of cinema, with its ability to alter the physical world and thereby social conventions, she no longer had to depend on or compare herself to the

male literary precursors she had studied and emulated. Although cinema was also male-dominated, Deren used the realistic/fantastic potential of the medium to establish a new "form" based on her personal ideas of creative expression. *Meshes of the Afternoon*, evoking well-known film genres such as *film noir* and "woman's films," was able to give Deren's female protagonists a subjective identity. With *At Land*, Deren entered a new imaginary realm, one of female desire rather than male desire inspired by the myth of the Siren. Finally, by featuring feminine rituals and opposing the positive and negative sides of patriarchal culture in a woman's imaginary world, Deren represents a reversed Other. In this innovative representation of the Other, marginalized races are brought into the dominant sphere of discourse. She proposes a new realm in which black is white and woman, who was previously represented as voiceless in the symbolic order of patriarchal society, has found a voice.

Adhering to an imagist model, Deren could not totally eliminate the symbolic or literary dimension in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land* and *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. Despite her formal concerns, her personal female experience and literary education were at the core of her art. Whether she was representing the events of the psyche or ideas such as relativism and multiplicity, her work expressed a personal and uniquely feminine view of the world and her position in it. Deren shared the techniques of *film noir* and "woman's films" made almost exclusively by men. However, as a female filmmaker she was able to reorient this male vision of a world where the female subject was prisoner. Deren forged a multiple identity for her female protagonist in which she reshaped conventional

cinematic narrative into a "woman's story." In the medium of cinema she was able to portray active female subjects instead of the female objects of her poems.

Chapter 3

Marguerite Duras: Feminine Writing about Love and Disaster

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J'ai vu tout ce qui se fait sous le soleil...
J'ai vu.
J'ai vu que tout est Vanité et poursuite du Vent
J'ai vu que ce qui est courbé ne peut pas se redresser.
J'ai vu que ce qui manque ne peut pas être compté.

Marguerite Duras
 1989

Despite the popular acclaim of *L'Amant* (1984), much of Duras's *oeuvre* remains at the borderline of mainstream writing and filmmaking. Because Duras sought to destroy preconceived notions of textuality, she refused to adhere to a conventional writing or filming style and did not associate herself with other writers of her generation. Nevertheless, Duras has been hailed as a *nouveau romancier* and an *auteur* filmmaker. While she has rejected these categorical associations, her fictions have anticipated, reflected and shaped the major literary movements of the past fifty years. Duras's work resembles that of Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet in its non-linear form and its dismantling of

conventional narrative story-telling. Duras has expressed interest in Nathalie Sarraute's writing because of the fragmented mental representations that make up her text,¹ but she does not read most of her contemporaries' works. For example, Duras's writing seems to illustrate theories of Jacques Lacan, but she refuses to be associated with Lacan and other French theorists such as Barthes, Foucault and Derrida. Lacan paid her the following homage in 1965: "Marguerite Duras s'avère savoir sans moi ce que j'enseigne."² Duras retorted: "C'est un mot d'homme, de maître. C'est quand même un mot d'homme de pouvoir, c'est évident. La référence, c'est lui."³ Duras's response indicates that she wishes to remain independent from the patriarchal ideology of power expressed by an established male writer such as Lacan. Duras is a "feminine" writer who, from the beginning of her career, distinctly expressed her personal experience as a woman and a writer, without depending on male role models.

In this chapter I begin by highlighting Duras's life, pointing out that fiction by Duras is sometimes hard to distinguish from the actual facts of Marguerite Donnadiou's (Duras) life. A second part of the chapter deals with Duras as a feminine writer who is also a feminist. Some feminists such as Trista Selous (*The Other Woman: Feminism and Femininity in the World of Marguerite Duras*, 1988) see Duras as complying with the masculine order, while at the same time disrupting it; by contrast, other feminists view her works as examples

¹ Roy Jay Nelson, *Causality and Narrative in French Fiction from Zola to Robbe-Grillet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), p. 190.

² Jacques Lacan, "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras, du Ravisement de Lol V. Stein," in *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Editions Albatross, 1979), p. 133.

³ Marguerite Duras, *Marguerite Duras à Montréal* (Montréal: Éditions spirales, 1981), p. 61.

of an *écriture féminine* as described by Cixous and Irigaray, which precludes complicity with the masculine order. My discussion of femininity and Duras's authorship leads to a close study of *Moderato Cantabile* (1958), a novel, and *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), a scenario. In these works I explore the use of multiple simultaneous narratives as well as the representation of woman as split subject to analyze the subject position Duras gives women in her work.

Duras's Life: Biography or Fiction?

Many of Duras's readers, spectators and critics have speculated on her life story and the interweaving of her own story with the characters and narratives of her fiction. Duras points out that the veracity of the biography is not important since facts and dates are not of prime significance to her readers. Rather, she unveils the unconscious story of her memories and her imagination, as it is tied to the various "events" of her life. Storytelling is far more compelling for Duras than objective biographic data. Although she is disdainful of Roland Barthes because she finds overly intellectual theory pretentious, in some ways Duras's work reflects or matches the ideas in Barthes's essay on the death of the author (1968). Like Barthes, she questions the place of the author both inside and outside the text by deconstructing the concept of the single person who is the "author." In many of her works we can not be sure if she is telling the story or asking the reader to fill in the blanks with her (that is, the reader's) own story. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) and *L'Amant* (1984) Duras writes and

rewrites a woman's personal story, but not necessarily the story of Marguerite Duras, the author. This chapter will describe how the Duras "story" becomes a general "feminine story," not attached to the specific life of a single woman.

Marguerite Duras was born Marguerite Donnadiou on April 4, 1914, in Saigon. Her representation of marginalization and colonization in many of her works is often linked to this period in her life. Her father, who died very early in Marguerite's life, was a mathematics teacher. He took the family to Cambodia and shortly thereafter succumbed to amoebic dysentery in 1919. Her mother had been teaching indigenous children in Vietnam since 1905. Because her own family existed on the margins of society and was in itself dysfunctional, Duras felt closer to her mother's Indochinese pupils than to the French colonists. The marginalization Duras experienced during her childhood stayed with her during her adult life. She claimed that she was "Créole," a child of Vietnam and of mixed origins, who grew up speaking Vietnamese and feeling oppressed, while still part of the colonizing class. When Duras returned to south-west France with her mother and her brothers to liquidate her father's estate, she felt unhappy and out of place. The family returned to Cambodia around 1921, when her mother took a position in Sadec and then Vinh-Long on the Mékong River.

In the next few years the true "Durassian tragedy" began, to be told and retold later in many forms, starting with *Un Barrage Contre le Pacifique* (1950). Duras's mother bought a "concession," a piece of land to be farmed, with the savings she had brought from France. However, Marie Donnadiou fell prey to

dishonest colonial administrators; she was unaware that good land could not be purchased without bribing those in charge. The land that Donnadiou bought would be flooded for six months every year by the China Sea. Discouraged after trying to build dykes to make the land workable, she returned to Vinh-Long, but remained poor for several years. It was a humiliating experience for Duras's mother, one that led to a state of mental instability she was not able to overcome. It was also painful for Marguerite because of the economic hardships and psychological effects that the failure had on her mother and the family. When the Donnadiou family returned to Vinh-Long, Marguerite went to school in Saigon. During the years around 1930 Duras met the Chinese man who is "L'Amant" in the novel of the same name (1984) and in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991).

Marguerite's two brothers, "le grand frère" and "le petit frère," also appeared as protagonists in her fiction. Both brothers were older than Marguerite, but "le petit frère" was small compared to the oppressive eldest, who bullied both his siblings to the point of mental torment. The little brother was so close to Marguerite that Duras has insinuated in her autobiographical works that she had an incestuous relationship with him. Marguerite's mother seemed to focus all of her maternal feelings on the older brother, while Duras powerlessly observed the abuse of Paulo, the younger. "Je voulais tuer, mon frère aîné, je voulais le tuer, arriver à avoir raison de lui une fois, une seule fois et le voir mourir. C'était pour enlever de devant ma mère l'objet de son amour, ce fils, la punir de l'aimer si fort,

si mal, et surtout pour sauver mon petit frère,"⁴ Duras writes in *L'Amant*. The hatred and love, tenderness and violence experienced by a child with no "power" to change the older brother's abusive behaviour or demand her mother's unconditional love, are woven into the fabric of all of Duras's texts. In 1932, Marguerite returned to France to stay. She was only eighteen, but most of the formative years of her youth were behind her: "A dix-huit ans j'ai vieilli,"⁵ she writes in *L'Amant*. The precise date of her arrival in France and her exact age vary in Duras's writings. The mother and the little brother returned to Saigon, while the older brother stayed in France to be rejoined by the mother in 1949.

In Paris, Marguerite studied Law and Political Science while also exploring the cultural life, particularly the theatre. She obtained a position with the *Ministère des colonies* in 1937. Three years later she co-authored a book with Philippe Roque called *l'Empire français*. In his biography, Alain Vircondelet explains Duras's mixed feelings at the time: "Ambiguïté de l'être qui participe au maintien du système colonial et en même temps le renie viscéralement, en connaît tous les rouages, toutes les roueries!"⁶ Although the book represented an important financial and professional opportunity for Duras, she felt she was helping to maintain the colonial system, a system she had learned to hate in Vietnam.

⁴ Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 13.

⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶ Alain Vircondelet, *Duras* (Paris: Éditions François Bourin, 1991), p. 87.

During her student days Duras met Robert Antelme, a law student, whom she married in 1939. Two of her greatest losses, which marked not only Duras's life, but also her literary works and attitude toward feminism, occurred in 1941 during the Occupation. Her first child died at birth because a doctor failed to arrive in time. The same year "le petit frère" died in Saigon. These two personal tragedies took place against the backdrop of the Second World War. She joined the Resistance with Antelme and Denys Mascolo in 1943. When Antelme was taken away to the Dachau concentration camp in 1944 for his role in the Resistance movement, Duras joined the Communist Party in what she later said was a political solution to a personal problem. However, it was not always evident with which movements Duras aligned herself. Often she refused to pledge allegiance to political credos for extended periods of time. For example, after a turbulent history with the Communist party, Duras gave up her card because she had a personal dispute with other members. Although she would not rejoin the party, she said that she maintained their ideals but generally found the French Communist party lacking in its leadership and its mandate. She later espoused many causes as an independent member, including the nationalist cause in Algeria.

When François Mitterand, a colleague in the Resistance, brought back Antelme from Dachau, Duras nursed her husband back to health. She describes this difficult personal time and the horrific effects of war in *La Douleur* (1985). However, she had already decided to end her marriage with Antelme, wishing to have a baby from their common friend, the resistance fighter, Denys Mascolo.

After her divorce, she remained friends with Antelme and they worked on many joint ventures together. She had a son, Jean, with Mascolo the next year (1946). The union with Mascolo ended ten years later, but they too remained friends. Duras's personal life is reflected in her works: love relationships are not limited by conventional parameters, nor do they abruptly begin and end, but drift into new passions and alliances. Duras's characters such as "Elle" in *Hiroshima mon amour* and Anne-Marie Stretter in *India Song* relive the same love stories, with new characters, playing the roles of the women who try to tell their story. For example, Duras began a love affair with Yann Andrea, an admirer she had met at a screening of *India Song*, when she was sixty-five. A homosexual thirty years her junior, Andrea shared her seaside apartment in Trouville from 1980 onwards. Duras tells the story of their encounter and their turbulent relationship in *Yann Andrea Steiner* (1992).

Marguerite Donnadiou became Marguerite Duras in 1943 when she published her first novel, *Les Impudents*. The following year she published *La Vie tranquille*. Her first major success was *Un Barrage Contre le Pacifique* (1950), in which she recounts the misfortunes of her mother in Indochina. Duras brought to her writing the complicated, unique, personal experiences of a young girl of the dominant class who felt oppressed by her family and by a society that treated her as the colonizer. In the 1950s, Duras continued to establish her reputation as a writer. During this time she was considered a "virile writer" by French literary critics (Schuster, 1993, 35) and was sometimes compared to such American authors as Hemingway after the publication of *Le Marin de Gibraltar* (1952),

imitative of Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. Although Duras's minimalist writing style, as in *Moderato Cantabile* (1958), received mixed reviews, it was sufficiently successful to earn her an invitation to serve on the jury for the Médicis prize for literature.

An established writer by 1968, Duras played an active role in the political events in France. She espoused the views of the Left against the Gaullist government, although she remained critical of many of her colleagues of the Left. Duras began to use the image of the Jew as marginalized or Other in her work, writing in the first person in the *Aurelia Steiner* series in the late seventies. The seventies are also known as Duras's cinematic period. Having adapted several cinematic techniques in her writing, she now tried new cinematic techniques to emphasize what she considered the utmost importance of the text in film. As with her fiction, she received mixed critical reviews and alienated some of her readers with "obscure" films such as *Nathalie Granger* (1974) and *Le Camion* (1977). However, the sensual experience provided by the opulent score and photography of *India Song* (1975) was well received by critics and connoisseur audiences alike. As Duras explained in a 1981 press conference, she does not seek a mainstream audience because she wants to be free to make the types of films she chooses: "Parce que si j'avais un public plus large, je ne ferais pas le cinéma que je fais. Ce serait le public qui me dicterait mon cinéma."⁷ She also continued her journalistic and political career by writing articles for the feminist journal, *Sorcières*.

⁷ Duras, *Duras à Montréal* (Montréal: Éditions spirales, 1981), p. 16.

In the 1980s, Duras's career and life experienced a rebirth. She published *L'Amant* (1984), her most popular novel, which finally established her in French letters: after forty years of writing she won the Prix Goncourt. Duras's life-long battle with alcohol and tobacco became more severe in the 1980s. In 1988 she was hospitalized again and went into a coma for five months. Duras now has a breathing apparatus in her throat after a tracheotomy. Despite the resulting physical limitations, Duras continues to be a media star, expressing her independent opinions on various issues. Her short hair, wrinkled face and dark-rimmed glasses are familiar to the public through television appearances, magazine interviews and starring roles in her own films. Unlike Maya Deren, who died at a relatively young age, she has fabricated a personal image that is not dependent on the "male gaze." Nonetheless, like Deren, she has made herself the "subject" of her own story.

Écriture féminine or féministe?

*"Moi, l'indécence, je ne sais pas ce que c'est parce que je suis une femme qui fait des films. C'est peut-être le seul point féministe auquel je peux faire allusion.....Je ne pense pas qu'il y ait une littérature des femmes. Il y a des femmes."*⁸

Both Duras's and Cixous's work bear similarities to the Lacanian model, but each interprets Lacan in different ways. Duras tries to tell a woman's story. However, like Lacan, she defines woman as lack and the perceived object of male desire,⁹ insisting, at the same time, that woman is a desiring subject who can manipulate the gaze upon her. The woman who finds herself at the center of the "Durassian" texts is actually woman as absence, who has lost the power of self-definition. The silence of Duras's female characters may be read as either passivity or the inability to tell a story, a difficulty which also affects the telling of Duras's own life-story. Duras says, "L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Il n'y a jamais de centre, pas de chemin, pas de ligne";¹⁰ she describes herself as she would one of her female characters. That is to say, Duras does not see her life as a continuum from birth to death, related as lives are in traditional biographies. Instead, she feels that her life is a series of personal experiences, recorded only in memory, linked by her thoughts and the writing they induce. Duras's elliptical writing/text is filled with blanks to represent silence. Her laconic style is in strong contrast to the verbal exuberance of Cixous' *écriture féminine*. Cixous violently denounces her personal oppression and the oppression of all women by

⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

⁹ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 74

¹⁰ Duras, *l'Amant* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 14.

the binary system posited between dominant discourse and the Other in the patriarchal system. She reminds us that, according to the Lacanian model, woman is "hors de l'ordre symbolique et hors discours"¹¹ because she lacks the privileged signifier and the creative force derived from the fear of castration. Cixous transforms this theory of "lack" into anger, using explosive discourse to describe women's marginalized role and her own Algerian-Jewish background in particular. Because Cixous's *écriture féminine* is polemic in nature, it will be considered feminist within the context of this study, a definition that some critics may find ironical given Cixous's definition of woman as lack rather than agent.

Duras formulates woman as absence through a series of discontinuities. In her most convincing works, the female characters display a split subjectivity which characterizes them as both desiring subjects and objects of desire, an effect which clearly parallels Deren's approach in *At Land*. Thus Duras further emphasizes the division within her female subject, by accentuating the split between the site of production and the scene of fiction and by highlighting the ambiguous space of enunciation between the reader/spectator and the writer/director. A striking example of this technique occurs in *Hiroshima mon amour*, which I will discuss at greater lengths later in this chapter. In this film, actual footage of the modern city provides the backdrop for the female protagonist's film production about a nurse in Hiroshima, just as the bombed city is the backdrop for her love affair. In my later analysis of individual texts I will point out how, paradoxically, Duras

¹¹ Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa, Women's Voices: Visions and Perspectives* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1990), p. 483.

the author/filmmaker deliberately appropriates the cinematic apparatus of the "male gaze" to re-situate the way spectators look at cinema.

These discontinuities are further developed in Duras's own ideological approaches toward feminism. Duras's relationship to feminism in the 1970s, as to other political movements, has been at once supportive and evasive. In 1971 Duras signed a pro-abortion manifesto in which three hundred and forty-three well-known French women attested to having had an abortion and demanded legal access at no cost to contraception and abortion. Although she often spoke out to defend the legal and political rights of women, many feminists believed that Duras's perception of "woman's experience" remained embedded in the doctrines of a patriarchal society. Duras differs from French feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir who reject the essentialist position that one is born a woman. Many feminists such as Cixous and Irigaray are dismayed by the fact that Duras equates femininity with motherhood, but it is clear that Duras's attitude is deeply rooted in her personal experience of losing a child and brother, as well as raising a child. In an interview with Suzanne Lemay in 1981, Duras said, "Je sais que si on n'a pas d'enfant on perd la moitié du monde."¹² It is impossible to categorize her as either an essentialist or an anti-essentialist, to use the two opposite readings of femininity proposed by Mary Anne Doane. On the one hand, Duras's fiction avoids a confrontational stance and expresses an "essential femininity" that transcends discourse; on the other, her journalism in particular takes a distinctly feminist position, reading femininity as a social and

¹² Ibid., p. 66.

cultural construct that fluctuates, depending on its specific context. In her essentialist mode, Duras claims that women do not write from the same place as men, and that women's writing is a translation of the absent, but true, original of feminine desire.¹³ As a feminist, Duras has often fought to minimize the difference between men and women. Even at her most outspoken, however, Duras ascribes a transcendental quality to femininity. In her 1985 article on "l'Affaire Grégory" in *Libération*, for example, Duras transformed Villemin, who allegedly murdered her child, into the victim of the media gaze, thus enraging some feminist readers because of her essentialist position. Nonetheless, literary critics like Marilyn Schuster have applied feminist readings to her work. Because Duras's writing places women in an innovative subject position, these interpretations can be very valuable, but Duras herself is more concerned with expressing female desire and *jouissance* than defining woman's role in relation to the patriarchal order. By celebrating woman as absence, she undoes the patriarchal interpretation of transcendent, redemptive meaning, and she uses techniques of the *nouveau roman* and *le théâtre de l'absurde*¹⁴ to question the illusions of logocentricity, such as lucidity and linearity.

¹³ This process is well captured in Jane Gallop's translation model: "Translation, like metaphor, is imbued with the difference within, for it is never simply itself, but must represent another text and thus includes another within its identity. Not only is literature at the heart of sexual difference, but sexual difference is at the heart of literature, as the absent original to which the translation must refer." See *Writing and Sexual Difference* (New York: Cornell University, 1984), p. 289.

¹⁴ I am referring to such non-linear texts as Beckett's *En attendant Godot* or Ionesco's *La Leçon*.

Moderato Cantabile

Moderato Cantabile can be called a *Madame Bovary* adapted to the twentieth century, since it deals with a similar subject, but it is written in a minimalist style rather than in the elaborate style of nineteenth-century realism. The narrative, as in Flaubert's much lengthier novel, focuses on a woman caught in the boredom of her bourgeois role in a small provincial town. Rather than the "stream of consciousness" technique used in early twentieth-century novels such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Duras uses the *nouveau roman* technique of representing individual thoughts, not necessarily linked, which seem immobilized in time. Like Mme. Bovary, Anne Desbaresdes brings about her own destruction, a process that Duras evokes by a multiplicity of narratives which center on an incident that occurs when Anne Desbaresdes takes her young son to his weekly piano lesson. From the window of the piano teacher's apartment she hears the scream of a woman being murdered. In another *nouveau roman* technique borrowed from one of its most important literary models, namely the mystery novel, the off-stage reality (the scream) triggers the character's response and the story. Inexplicably drawn to this murder, she returns to the café that is the scene of the crime. There she meets a man who supposedly witnessed the crime. As readers we cannot verify this "*récit*," which is one of many that Duras weaves at the same time. Anne Desbaresdes imagines an adulterous affair with the "witness," Chauvin, an ex-employee at her husband's factory, but this *récit* remains a non-reality. Through identification with the murder story, Anne tries to rewrite her own version of the story with the help of Chauvin, and succeeds in murdering her

own life as she knew it. As in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), each of the three people involved in the same narrative "writes" a completely individual version. Duras emphasizes the importance of point of view for each character who wishes to write a personal story.

The similarities between *Madame Bovary* and *Moderato Cantabile* occur not only at the narrative level of Anne Desbaresdes's life and her consciousness of desire. Flaubert's famous *style indirect libre*, in which the narrator is able to reveal Mme. Bovary's thoughts without attributing them to her directly, is paralleled by the frame narrator in *Moderato Cantabile*. The narrator represents the "ever-supposed presence of an observable off-stage reality."¹⁵ Although Duras's writing style is minimalist with sparse dialogue, the dinner reception in the fourth part of the novel is reminiscent of Flaubert's nineteenth-century realism: "Sur un plat d'argent à l'achat duquel trois générations ont contribué, le saumon arrive, glacé dans sa forme native. Habillé de noir, ganté de blanc, un homme le porte, tel un enfant de roi, et le présente à chacun dans le silence du dîner commençant."¹⁶ Duras recreates a world that Flaubert's Mme. Bovary could only covet: the magnolia pressed between Anne's breasts, the large mansion protected by the park where Anne lives—secluded from ordinary people, and classical music, connoting feminine discipline and harmony regulated by society. By using flowers, mansions, music, and other nineteenth-century female signifiers, Duras simulates a romantic novel that never really

¹⁵ Nelson, *Causality and Narrative in French Fiction from Zola to Robbe-Grillet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), p. 176.

¹⁶ Duras, *Moderato Cantabile* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1959), p. 125; all references hereafter will be cited in the text.

takes place. Like Maya Deren, Duras introduces the additional genre of the detective story or *film noir* to add another level of intrigue to this story that is not really a story. Finding out the motivation for the murder becomes the basis for the relationship between Chauvin and Desbaresdes, but the reader knows no more at the end of the novel than at the beginning about the reasons for the murder.

By allowing her traditional protagonist, a bourgeois woman, to try to rewrite her own story through the pretext of solving a crime, Duras creates a new space for her fiction and her representation of woman. Anne Desbaresdes's desire and frustration in attempting to fulfill her role as wife and mother remain similar to the problems encountered by nineteenth-century women as depicted by Flaubert. She has no identity of her own. Although she shows sincere maternal love toward her child ("Quel enfant j'ai là, dit Anne Desbaresdes joyeusement, tout de même, mais quel enfant j'ai fait là..."[15]), she does not seem at ease with the role society has created for her. She may be reluctant to make her son practise the piano either because she is an indulgent mother or because she sympathizes with his resistance to discipline and authority. Yet she is able to kill herself textually in a twentieth-century way, a more rapid and more effective death than Madame Bovary's by humiliation and poisoning. In the *nouveau roman*, the search for the suspect doubles as the search for meaning in general. In neither case is there a solution. Mme. Desbaresdes's textual suicide takes place because she is not able to "write" her own story, the story of the romantic and exciting love affair that she would like to embark upon.

Moderato Cantabile, in musical terminology, means "moderately and in a melodious way"¹⁷; in Duras's mind it represents both the controlled and expressive sides of femininity. The behavior for the respectable role of the wife and mother is *moderato*. But the plot of the story is based on Anne Desbaresdes's desire to sing (*cantabile*), to free a primitive voice. In the movie adaptation of *Moderato Cantabile* (1960) by Peter Brook, the Sonatina is played throughout the film. Usually, the right hand would play the melody (*moderato* and in control), but in the film the left hand, the subversive expression of feminine desire, often sings the melody. Rather than perform its usual accompaniment, it takes over from the right hand.

Anne Desbaresdes lives on Boulevard de la Mer; as in many of Duras's works the sea plays an important part in the story. Anne can see the sea from her room, but in the summer the hedge blocks her view. Her house and garden, society's gilded cage for her and the other factory owners' wives before her, prevent her from seeing the freedom that the sea represents. I have noted in the previous chapter that Maya Deren and other feminine writers use the sea to represent rebirth after death. In French "la mer" is linked to its homonym, maternity (*mère*). French feminists use the words interchangeably to represent the source of life, the ensuing "lack" caused by separation and the strong appeal of a violent return "à la mèr(e)" through suicide. As Chauvin tells her, "Beaucoup de femmes ont déjà vécu dans cette même maison qui entendaient les troènes, la nuit, à la

¹⁷ Defined in Webster's *Third New International Dictionary*, 1980.

place de leur coeur. Toujours les troènes y étaient déjà. Elles sont toutes mortes dans leur chambre, derrière ce hêtre qui, contrairement à ce que vous croyez, ne grandit plus"(79). By not seeing the sea and not listening to the "music" of their hearts, these women could no longer feel the passion of their desire. Like her "foremothers," Anne seems destined to die as she lived, a prisoner of boredom.

The dominant voices in *Moderato Cantabile* are the man and the woman, each telling his or her story. However, Chauvin's character, whose story is told only as it intersects with Anne Desbaresdes's, is not as developed as hers. As an unemployed worker, he is the socially marginalized male. Chauvin embodies male desire as his name "Chaud vin" suggests, since hot wine can be considered emblematic of hot blood. Likewise, "chauvin" implies admiration (of her) which is the role Mme. Desbarnes wrote for him in her imaginary romantic narrative. The characters construct their story between what they know and what they desire. She wishes to feel the passion of the woman who was killed; he wishes to possess the image of the unattainable, beautiful matron. The story told in this "gap" between imagination and narrative is only textual because Duras creates a narrative out of the characters' desires. Although they both try to act out their desire, Chauvin fantasizes about a social persona, while Desbaresdes desires the recklessness of an illicit love, unacceptable to her in society. Desbaresdes and Chauvin never have a real love affair. Fiction itself becomes an instrument of desire and consequently leads to death, the death of the wife and mother Anne Desbaresdes has been.

The female characters in *Moderato Cantabile*, other than Anne Desbaresdes, act as guardians of the social order and of the patriarchal system. Referring to an important role law plays in the patriarchal system, Sharon Willis points out that "woman embodies the law; the maternal body is the site of law's inscription. Woman is therefore the embodiment of law as well as its inscription."¹⁸ For example, the piano teacher seeks to discipline Anne Desbaresdes's son. When she sees the mother's indulgence of the son and her ambivalence to discipline, the piano teacher suggests the boy come alone: "On pourrait essayer, dit-elle, qu'une autre que vous l'accompagne à ses leçons de piano, Madame Desbaresdes. On verrait bien ce que ça donnerait"(102). This vague threat is to become reality—the mother's punishment at the end of the novel. Likewise, the proprietor of the café first welcomes Anne Desbaresdes as a respectable client, then starts to disapprove when she sees that she is drinking and carrying on with a man, like the victim of the murder. By provoking these societal guardians, Anne indirectly makes the decision not to conform, which then leads to her loss.

Duras portrays the societal view of women as either social guardians or objects in *Moderato Cantabile*. For example, at the reception they are associated with the *canard à l'orange* that is being served: "Le service du canard à l'orange commence. Les femmes se servent. On les choisit belles et fortes, elles feront front à tant de chère" (134). By objectifying the women in this scene and comparing them to the dinner fowl that is to be consumed, Duras indicates the value society gives to Anne and the other women of her circle. But her imagined

¹⁸ Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 139.

lover also objectifies Anne in his fantasy of desire. After Anne loses her status as the bourgeois wife and mother, she is treated as a sexual object by the men in the café: "Les hommes évitèrent encore de porter leurs yeux sur cette femme adultère"(155). Her name, Desbaresdes (bas restes) signifies her degradation as a consequence of her affair with Chauvin, imaginary as it is.

It is questionable whether Duras succeeds in creating a split subjectivity in the character of Anne Desbaresdes, one in which she is both object of desire and subject of the narratives. Although Anne tries, she does not become an effective subject of her own story; while she bears the societal role of the wife and mother and tries to take on the persona of the woman who was murdered, she is not able to write the narrative as subject of an illicit love story in which she is the desiring female. In this novel, Duras exposes the male patriarchal system, but does not yet give woman the power to rewrite her "histoire" (the French word appropriately has the double meaning of "history" and "story"). By contrast, in *Hiroshima mon amour*, written the following year, the female protagonist is able to "re-vision" (Judith Mayne, 1984) her *histoire* and become the subject of the narrative. Duras makes the point that before her female protagonists are in a position to control their destiny, they must rewrite their personal history. By confronting her personal experiences through memory in *Hiroshima mon amour*, the female character is able to write her own story, and presumably, her future.

Hiroshima mon amour

By the time Duras wrote the scenario of *Hiroshima mon amour* in 1959, she had published several literary works. *Hiroshima mon amour* was her first experience with cinema, a collaboration with the established filmmaker Alain Resnais, who was so impressed by her works that he invited her to write the scenario of a film he was planning on Hiroshima. *Hiroshima mon amour* was an early landmark in the *nouvelle vague*. Produced the same year as *Quatre cents coups*, it edged out François Truffaut's film by one vote in the top ten *Conseil des dix* listings in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* of 1959.

In cinematic form, *Hiroshima mon amour* expresses the narrative concerns (expression of memory and desire using fragmented discourse) of Duras's novels in the late 1950s. In a 1961 article, Fereydown Hoveyda expressed an extreme version of *auteur* politics in cinema: "*Hiroshima mon amour* is proof, if proof be needed, that regardless of how much collaboration or co-operation there may be, the director remains the only master of the ship. *Marienbad* and *Hiroshima* are films by Resnais and by Resnais alone. Only those with scant regard for the cinema could couple the name of the author of *Nuit et brouillard* with that of Marguerite Duras or Alain Robbe-Grillet."¹⁹ Duras herself became a director to have the freedom to manipulate both image and text, to be literally the "master" of her own ship (*Le Navire Night* [1979] uses this imagery in the title).

¹⁹ F. Hoveyda, "Cinéma vérité ou Fantastic Realism?" *Cahiers du Cinéma* 125 (November 1961) in *Cahiers du Cinema Vol. 2: New Wave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood*, Jim Hillier ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), p. 248.

Nonetheless, Hoveyda's judgement seems too severe since thirty-five years later *Hiroshima mon amour* continues to display Duras's signature as clearly as Resnais's. As screenwriter, Duras created the multiplicity of narratives within the same story/film in *Hiroshima mon amour*. This multiplicity is significant to my present analysis of feminine writing since I claim that many women write from several simultaneous points of view.

Why Hiroshima as a setting for a personal love story? A modern city rebuilt on the site of catastrophic ruin reminds us of the elusive nature of memory, with its power to erase and recreate. According to Duras, each new lover in any relationship in Hiroshima is an engineer or architect who rebuilds on the ruins. Duras also provokes us through the English word play: "Never(s)" again. She uses English words in several titles during her career: *Le Navire Night*, *India Song*, *Savannah Bay*, and *Le Square*. Duras reminds us that it is the Americans who dropped the bomb with the hope of "never again" and subsequently joined the Europeans as peace ambassadors in Japan. Yet, rather than presenting a depersonalized historical episode, "Nevers, again" is the actress's own love story as relived by her and viewed for the first time by the spectators of the film. Each new love provokes Nevers again and thus "never" becomes "always."

Several interwoven narratives can be identified. The first narrative is at the public level, or what I call the male sphere, since it centers on the male character and deals with historical events represented by the place names of Hiroshima and Nevers. This sphere includes important aspects of the Second World War, such

as the bombing of Hiroshima and the German occupation of France. Since the only true love of the actress's life is attached to her hometown of occupied Nevers, Duras uses these two historical backdrops as the setting for the personal story, which I refer to as "her" story. In the third narrative, "his" and "hers," the public and the private stories intersect. This intersection forms the film's "present" narrative, although it is a projection into the future. In this synthesis of "their" story, desire overcomes destruction, as it did in Nevers and does again in the rebuilding of Hiroshima. Duras emphasizes the universality of these levels through the anonymity of the two characters, "Lui" and "Elle." The two protagonists are linked by their physical desire for each other and the fact that they have both lived through a great catastrophe. All three narratives are joined in two words, two place names, Hiroshima and Nevers.

Desire and destruction are two closely related themes in *Hiroshima mon amour*. The first shots of lovers' bodies alternate with documentary footage of the horrible maiming and destruction in Hiroshima after the explosion of the A-bomb at the end of the Second World War. In context, we cannot tell if the lovers' bodies are in ecstasy or in pain. In the "present" story, set in 1957, a French actress (Emanuelle Riva) plays a French nurse who comes to Hiroshima to make a film about peace. The imagery of healing through the making of a film plays an integral part in this project. The day before she returns to France she has a brief affair with a Japanese man, an architect or engineer, as the scenario indicates. (Although neither of the main characters is named in the script, Duras mentions "Riva" in her personal notes after the actress Emmanuelle Riva.) Each

protagonist can only know his or her story; "Elle" claims that she has seen everything: the hospital, the museums, artifacts of the bombings, though "Lui" claims that she has seen nothing in Hiroshima. Their short love affair, and her efforts to "see," that is, to understand Hiroshima as he sees it and has experienced it, take place during the twenty-four hours before her departure. Her story takes place fourteen years earlier as she tells of her love affair with a German soldier which was unacceptable and thus unspeakable in her hometown of Nevers. This love affair went nowhere as the name indicates (ne...vers), because her German soldier was shot on the eve of the liberation, and she spent hours lying on top of his dying and dead body. She explains that when her crime was discovered by her provincial town, her image was destroyed figuratively and literally; her head was shaved and she was locked in an underground cave: "Ils me tondent avec soin jusqu'au bout. Ils croient de leur devoir de bien tondre les femmes."²⁰ In other words, although men fight the wars, women are scapegoats for the suffering in history. Finally, when she is considered sane, she is sent off to Paris during the night. Upon arrival in the capital, she reads the headlines of the bombing of Hiroshima, thus establishing Duras's circular linkage between Nevers and Hiroshima in the past and in the present. However, the silent story of Nevers finally becomes her verbalized story in Hiroshima, a story which has never been told to anyone. Only this new "impossible" love affair in Hiroshima allows her to speak and, at the same time, to forsake her former lover/silence. The action takes place within the feminine subject who "tells" her story, using "Lui" to act as witness and catalyst. Here "Lui" takes on what is a traditionally feminine role

²⁰ Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 96; hereafter all references will be cited in the text.

of support and listener. The Japanese lover's possession of the actress's *histoire* is much more intimate than the possession of her body. Later, in the hotel room, she repeats her newly told story while looking in the mirror. "J'ai raconté notre histoire. Je t'ai trompé avec cet inconnu. J'ai raconté notre histoire. Elle était, vois-tu, racontable" (110). As "Elle" looks at herself in the mirror she tells herself a story; but at the same time she is speaking to us, the spectators, when she says, "Regarde-moi." As in Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the protagonist speaks to us through her reflection in the mirror, thus using the mirror to reflect her "own reality." This cinematic technique makes us the addressee of her discourse. Telling us the story allows her to admit the death and to acknowledge the moment of loss of her German lover: "Tu n'étais pas tout à fait mort." She stops speaking at the moment she says "tu." We hear her voice, but her mouth no longer moves. By listening to a voice-over during the monologue, we are assimilated into the process of the female subject's remembering. Dialogue gives way to interior monologue, speech to thought. Her thoughts become our own.

The scenario moves back and forth among these three levels of narration, revealing the private and public suffering at all levels. Personal loss and historical catastrophe are never completely separated: "J'aimais le sang depuis que j'avais goûté au tien" (89). The blood of her lover is also the blood shed during the war. The memory of the loss is the same for her personal love affair in Nevers and for the public catastrophe in Hiroshima. Between Hiroshima and

Nevers, many similarities exist: the horror of war and death and an impossible love.

The spectator of *Hiroshima mon amour* finds herself enmeshed in the "fantasmatic" web²¹ of three simultaneous narratives, and her task is complicated by the ambiguity of her position. The spectator is constantly making aesthetic and moral choices while viewing the film, choices about "the gaze" as a source of pleasure or as a source of guilt. Duras refuses to bring the spectator of *Hiroshima mon amour* into an assigned place, a comfortable vantage point from which to witness the unfolding of cinematic spectacle.²² The stories unfold simultaneously and non-chronologically, through flashbacks and voices we hear on and off screen. The film thus imitates the fragmented and disjointed structure of memory and dreams. Also, the point of view changes constantly from the first person of the actress to the spectator to the scénariste. Duras is creating an effect of *mise en abîme*, creating a film in Hiroshima about a film being created in Hiroshima about the effects of the war not only on Hiroshima, but also on Nevers. She emphasizes the endless repercussions of personal tragedy (her story) and public catastrophe (his story) that repeat themselves during each war. As in her later films, when she is director as well as screen writer, Duras uses off-screen voices to disorient the spectator who watches from a fixed camera position, rather than viewing comfortable reverse shots. According to Lacan, the gaze itself symbolizes a lack, while at the same time it is the cause of desire.²³

²¹ Willis uses the word "fantasmatic" [sic] in *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body*, p. 52.

²² Ibid., p. 52.

²³ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 540.

However, "lack" causes schism between the gaze and the eye, or between looking and seeing. As Sharon Willis explains, "It is this particular inscription of 'lack' that takes on a central obsession that is persistently elaborated from the opening sequence through this scene structured around a gap in memory."²⁴ Who is the viewer presumed to be? Duras aimed her film at Western and probably European spectators, privileging French-speaking audiences, although the film is a French-Japanese co-production. We see Hiroshima through the French female protagonist's gaze, but we also see the incidents at Nevers through the camera's impersonal eye as it assumes the role of memory, bringing the past into the present. By the end of the film, "Elle a tout vu à Hiroshima"(22). As the subject and controller of her gaze, she can see all three narratives: her story, his story and their story. Here, the Japanese lover espouses the traditional role of male control in response to a traditionally female manifestation of emotion, but, paradoxically, he uses his male authority to entrench her firmly in what becomes her new power position. Madeleine Borgomano points out: "Jusque là, c'est lui, l'homme, qui est la force qui fait avancer l'action. Jusqu'à la fin de la troisième partie, le Japonais-l'homme-dirige, oriente, choisit: il commence à poser des questions insistantes sur l'aventure de Nevers. Et quand la femme demande 'pourquoi parler justement de Nevers?', il répond: 'entre les milliers et les milliers de choses de ta vie, je choisis Nevers. 'Je'-sujet masculin-choisis."²⁵ He also slaps her back to reality when she becomes delirious.

²⁴ Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body*, p. 46.

²⁵ Borgomano, *l'Écriture filmique de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Éditions Albatross, 1985), p. 45.

Yet, "Elle" is also a split subject/object. While she acts as the object of desire for the Japanese lover, she simultaneously learns to tell her own story. "Lui" gives her her voice, primarily by taking the place of, and thus evoking, the German while she relives the incidents of Nevers. If they are male/female, subject/object lovers at the beginning of the film, they later change roles. She can refuse his desire for her toward the end of the film. Duras exploits the traditional idea of the male subject, as one who chooses his objective to set the narrative in motion as if the man were in control. However, by helping "Elle" unleash her story, he unwittingly empowers her instead of controlling her. He comprehends only the story of public disaster; he does not have narrative control of either her story or their story as he follows "Elle" around the city and asks her to stay in Hiroshima. By portraying the male protagonist as disoriented in his own environment as he walks around Hiroshima pursuing "Elle," Duras implies that the male control of history is weakened to the same extent as that in which the memory of feminine personal experience is articulated.

Judith Mayne explains how Duras inscribes the split subjectivity of the female protagonist in *Hiroshima mon amour*. "Elle" becomes both the central focus of the narrative and an observer: "Like the Japanese hospital patient who looks at the camera with distant interest, the Frenchwoman becomes both the central focus of the narrative and an observer who witnesses flashes from her past as a film over which she has no control."²⁶ Duras fully mines the rich potential of film rich for this kind of juxtaposition. Shots of the horror of Hiroshima are

²⁶ Judith Mayne, "*Hiroshima mon amour*: Ways of Seeing, Ways of Telling," in *Annual Film Studies* (1978), p. 51.

superimposed on shots of the modern, rebuilt Hiroshima. Likewise, flashbacks of Nevers are interspersed throughout the second part of the film. Duras gives "Elle" the ability to watch her own reactions during the flashbacks. She is like the heroine of Deren's *At Land*, who is both the participant in and observer of the odyssey of her film. In other words, "Elle" possesses a controlling gaze over herself as object when remembering the events at Nevers, while at the same time acting as the feminine subject of the present story. Her story is intimately related to Nevers. In Duras's script, Nevers, which the imprisoned heroine cannot see from her cave, is compared to the sea. This metaphor does not appear in Resnais's film: "La place continue. Où vont ces gens? Tout remue sur place. Parfois c'est la mer. C'est même assez régulièrement la mer" (88). But we remember the lost sea of freedom glimpsed from *Moderato Cantabile's* garden hedge prison. To the imprisoned girl in Nevers, the sea is once again a signifier of both death and rebirth, the death of the love story with the German and her rebirth after her madness.

At several points in her script, Duras takes advantage of the editing and framing possibilities in the cinematic medium to create a different effect from what would appear under the eroticized "male gaze." In Maya Deren's film we saw how parts of the female body are fetishized to represent the whole female, not the female as individual, but as object of the "male gaze." The opening image of two nude shoulders in *Hiroshima mon amour* uses the same technique, treating spectators as voyeurs and making their involvement in the classic cinematic apparatus, that is, the relationship between the spectator and the screen,

more complicitous than a distant documentary point of view would be able to. The shoulders are separated from the rest of the body and are covered in ashes, rain and perhaps sweat. Initially, we are to think, in our role as spectator/voyeur, that this is a scene of lovemaking, until we realize that we are witnessing scenes of agony. In particular, the ashes evoke the atomic fallout, but with our participation as spectators, the camera itself has mutilated these bodies through framing and close crops to recreate the vividness of the physical horror. Eroticism and mutilation are blended, as are the public and private spheres. Maya Deren makes the spectator conscious of the cinematic apparatus by using the signifier of the female body part in order to create a new, defamiliarized meaning. Duras and Resnais go farther by disfiguring the body with the camera and with the editing, both within the context of Hiroshima. During these scenes the spectator keeps the perspective of the "male gaze," anticipating the diversion of voyeuristically observing an intimate love affair. The viewer cannot forget either the cinematic apparatus or its role in the production of the film. Rather than confronting us through a horrible, painful or romantic cinematic representation, in which we are assigned a given place as spectators, Duras uses her power as film writer to remind us that we are watching a film. By doing so, she places the responsibility to educate people about war and to instruct them to avoid future Hiroshimas not only on the creators of media, but also on the spectators who watch their films.

Marguerite Duras earned relatively little money from her collaboration with Resnais on *Hiroshima mon amour*, since she received a flat sum for her script.

Technically and financially, it was Resnais's film. However, Duras's innovative script succeeded in initiating the multi-level narrative, split female subjectivity and the juxtaposition of private and public spheres; Duras introduced these elements in *Moderato Cantabile*, but they were more successfully implemented in her first film collaboration. *Hiroshima mon amour* allowed Duras to consider film as discourse and it remains her most famous film in North America. Although she continued during the sixties to create visual images through her writing, she did not return to cinema full-time until the 1970s. Then she determined to direct her own work, mainly because she did not like the film adaptations of her writing. More broadly, in 1981 Duras explained in an interview: "Je fais du cinéma parce que je n'aime pas le cinéma qu'on me fait voir."²⁷

²⁷ Duras, *Duras à Montréal*, p. 25.

Chapter 4

Duras's Cinema: In Pursuit of Memory and Desire

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Duras's Cinema: In Pursuit of Memory and Desire

India Song

Aucun homme n'aurait pu faire India Song. J'ai l'air de me vanter, mais c'est vrai, j'en suis absolument sûre.

Marguerite Duras

1981

In the above statement Duras speaks authoritatively about a unique femininity in *India Song*, claiming that no man could have created the film. In this chapter I will explore Duras's expression of femininity in the film, *India Song*, and in the texts, *Le Navire Night* and *L'Amant*, and demonstrate the ways Duras affirms her authorial position and the expressions of her personal experience in these later works in her career.

According to Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, the image of woman holds a crucial position in the functioning of cinema as an institution: "Within the context of psychoanalytic film theory, woman is the pivotal figure which allows the entire machine to operate."¹ In *India Song*, Anne-Marie Stretter, the idolized "heroine," can certainly be considered the pivotal object of the film. My previous chapters on Maya Deren and Marguerite Duras have analyzed split subjectivity as the essential attribute of the female protagonist. In *India Song* I continue to study the "splitting" at the narrative level.

India Song fits into the *Lol V. Stein* series, called the *India cycle*. It was written in 1973 and filmed in 1975 (subtitled *texte-théâtre-film*). The story is that of Michael Richardson breaking off his engagement with Lol Stein at a ball, for love of Anne-Marie Stretter. Duras's decor of fantasy (in this case the exotic location of India) and the "displaced subject" (Anne-Marie Stretter) evoke Duras's earlier novels (*Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, *La Femme du Ganges* and *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*). Although Duras's film also stands on its own, it gives a privileged place to those of her readers who are familiar with Lol V. Stein, Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter. As initiated participants in Duras's universe, these viewers enter *India Song* in *media res*. They are able to appreciate the intertextuality with other works by Duras in the *Lol Stein* series, including fragments of memory such as that concerning the beggar woman from Calcutta, which appear throughout the film. As a result, this film's enunciation process resembles in many ways that of a text, rather than

¹ Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently*, p. 11.

evoking the traditional relationship between spectator and cinema. For example, off-screen voices "tell" the story. Instead of passively receiving the film, the spectator must actively work out the connections between the visual and the sound and the complex interplay between memory, desire and reality.

Although the film can be divided into three parts (the prologue, the reception scene and the epilogue), there is very little action, with a total of only seventy-two shots in the two-hour running time. Anne-Marie Stretter is already eulogized in the prologue when a servant comes to light incense on the piano beside her picture, signifying that Anne-Marie Stretter is dead and her memory hallowed. Off-camera voices ask about Anne-Marie Stretter and the banished Asian beggar woman who sold her ten children to survive. Male guests, all with attentive desire for Stretter, arrive for the reception. The "off"² voices narrate the life of the Vice-Consul, emphasizing the incident when he shot lepers from his balcony in Lahvore. He announces his love and desire for Anne-Marie Stretter at the reception and asks to spend one night with her. When she refuses, he scandalizes the party by calling out her Venetian maiden name, "Anna-Maria Guardi." As Marilyn Schuster points out, this name emphasizes her status as "spectacle," "Guardi" meaning "look."³ In the epilogue off-screen, a man's voice discusses with Duras's voice the events that followed the reception. We are told that Anne-Marie Stretter walked into the sea to her death. After several female voices have told the story off-screen, the female authorial voice now places the story in

² Indicates voices heard off-screen, unattached to characters on-screen.

³ Schuster, *Marguerite Duras Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 86.

historical context in 1937. Through close-ups of the map, the camera retraces the Asian beggar woman's return to Savannakhet.

Following a decade of *auteur* films by directors such as François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Jean-Luc Godard, Duras gives a renewed definition to the *auteur* film in *India Song*. In addition to her distinctive filmmaking style, she redefines what constitutes a "film." A Duras film seems primarily to be an extended literary text. *Auteurship* is replaced by a "libidinal coherence" created through a unique texturing of the film at the visual and sound levels.⁴ Generally, in Duras's films where the dialogue is not synchronic, a male narrator takes over the authoritative voice and "tells" the story. However, female subjectivity and desire are produced through the progressive substitution of the female filmmaker's gaze for the male narrator. This new model does not represent a radical departure from the figure of woman as absence; instead, it represents a variant in which "woman" speaks her subjectivity instead of acting as an echo chamber or, following the Lacanian model, simply acting as an expression of female "lack."⁵ Duras establishes a new system in which she neither speaks through synchronic dialogue attached to the female body, nor through a male narrator, but rather through female voices created off-screen.

⁴ Kaja Silverman, "Disembodying the Female Voice," *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane et al. (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), p. 14.

⁵ I refer to a discussion on female "lack" in *Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982), pp. 132-3.

According to Kaja Silverman, this technique gives the spectator a new way of looking at the female subject: "Thus (with the exception of music), there are no instances within mainstream cinema where the female voice is not matched up in some way, even if only retrospectively, with the female body."⁶ In this respect, *India Song* deviates from mainstream cinema by creating the disembodied female voice. By making Anne-Marie Stretter the ideal object of the "male gaze" (an idolized *femme fatale* who attracts all men), while disembodifying her voice and removing all dialogue, Duras creates a film which is at once an extension of male vision and discourse and the liberation of the female voice. Both the subject and the author experience this liberation.

In addition to liberating the female voice, Duras simultaneously appeals to both the scopic drive (the desire to see) and the invocatory drive (the desire to hear). According to Lacan, both these desires, inherent in the cinematic process, are perceptions of passion and are associated with sexual longing.⁷ Because of their links to memory and imagination, they cannot be satisfied, unlike other finite human drives such as hunger or thirst. They incur a process which is defined as desire, a searching out of the impossibility of pleasure—a process independent of the amount of pleasure obtained. By separating the sensual visuals and the nostalgic sound track, Duras makes the spectator conscious of the separation of the two forms of desire. In isolating the recollection of the senses, Duras is able to imitate the personal experience of memory, as well as the pleasure of imagination. Through this innovative form, the sound track becomes

⁶ Ibid., p. 135.

⁷ See Lacan's comments in *Feminine Sexuality*, *ibid.*, p. 34.

as important as the visual images, thus redefining the conventional cinematic experience in which the "male gaze" is usually supported by the sound track. For example, the voices tell Anne-Marie's life story while we watch her dance.

Among Duras's works, *India Song* is most accomplished in separating the sound track from the visual. Although the two are linked to separate narratives, they do intersect. In a departure from conventional cinema, the voices do not belong to the characters' bodies. Janine Ricouart emphasizes that the dichotomy between the Vice-Consul's hysterical cry of despair in longing for Anne-Marie Stretter and the serenity of Anne-Marie Stretter and her admirers parallels the dichotomy between reality and memory.⁸ Through this process Duras also affirms the primacy of text and sound track. Another example of the interlinking of the sound and visuals occurs when the camera views the crumbling façade of the Consulate while the voices speak about the death of Anne-Marie Stretter. According to Borgomano, "Le film des voix se présente souvent comme un décodage de l'image."⁹ Multiplicity is achieved through several narratives being told simultaneously by many voices. The writer Duras works with the filmmaker Duras, but she never relinquishes her dominance as writer. Duras's personal voice is heard with the other voices off-screen and again with the male narrator in the epilogue. The female authorial voice is more authoritative than the other voices, and in the epilogue it has the same status as the questioning male voice.

⁸ Janine Ricouart, *Écriture féminine et violence: une étude sur Marguerite Duras* (Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications: 1991), p. 122.

⁹ Borgomano, p. 121.

How does the use of female narrative voices affect Duras's representation of woman as both subject and object of discourse in *India Song*? The feminine voices off-screen have been freed from their physical existence, from their bodies, which define them as objects of desire. This "freedom" highlights the captivity which allows woman to tell her *histoire*. Janine Ricouart makes the significant point that the voices try to recreate the past, not only of Anne-Marie Stretter, but of the common feminine past shared by subject, author and female spectator—one that is fragmented and in ruin: "Leur désir pour le passé de cette femme est un désir de redire l'histoire, de recapturer son passé, ce qui peut être considéré comme le désir de se rappeler son propre passé."¹⁰ By allowing us to desire the past of the female protagonist, Duras encourages female spectators to evoke their own memories of personal experiences as well as to contribute, through the enunciation process, to the creation of a feminine heritage. Male spectators, on the other hand, can covet the image of Anne-Marie Stretter who is represented by the camera as a sensual object of desire.

In contrast to the multiplicity of the narrative voices, the characters' silence accentuates their phantom-like quality, and supports Duras's use of music to portray the memory of desire. Even in her title, using English to highlight the exoticism of the decor, Duras emphasizes the importance of music in the unleashing of both desire and memory. The characters are held in suspension; they float through scenes driven by the thematic music. Notably, the repetitive blues refrain, the most vibrant element of *India Song*, echoes the richness of the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 125.

colors and the sensuality of the decor. At the beginning and the end of the film it is played on the piano; during the reception the nostalgic melody is played by the orchestra. Also during the reception, the orchestra plays several dance tunes, many of which represent a time period before the setting of the film. However, as well as being nostalgic, the music can be very upbeat: the charleston and the rhumba are examples. By using dance music, Duras associates music with life while the phantom-like appearance of the rest of the film is associated with death. All aspects of life—happiness, despair, passion and melancholy—can be transmitted at the sensual or Dionysiac level,¹¹ since the music changes to represent all these emotions. For example, in Beethoven's variations of a waltz by Diabelli, we hear an echo of the mirror-like representation of Anne-Marie Stretter's universe and the importance of music as the principal theme in her life as a pianist. The score allows the spectator to understand the story when the narrative pieces are still unclear. Since Anne-Marie Stretter was a pianist and the piano is at the center of the room throughout most of the film, the piano is an objectification not only of the music, but of Anne-Marie Stretter herself. (A more recent film by the Australian filmmaker Jane Campion, *The Piano* [1994], uses the piano as the signifier of the female protagonist; the piano music becomes her voice since she has chosen to be mute.) Duras also chose to have music replace the voice of her heroine. The score of *India Song* makes her silence more powerful than sound. In short, Duras uses music to represent the importance of non-verbal representation, evoking Lacan's pre-symbolic order before the child has developed language. Furthermore, music signifies

¹¹ A concept developed by Nietzsche in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872) in which music is associated with rapture and physical intoxication.

expression in the feminine world of the imaginary in a world in which the language of the male symbolic order does not exist.

Music, therefore, has a central role in *India Song* rather than a background function. "Loin de jouer un rôle de remplissage ou de simple commentaire, la musique, ici, s'intègre au film; tout autant que les images et les paroles, et de façon plus sensuelle, elle contribue à la signification."¹² If the piano is the signifier of Anne-Marie Stretter, the music of *India Song* represents both memory and Anne-Marie Stretter's femininity. Through its domination of the film, the music itself takes on a controlling role instead of the conventionally subordinate role of the "feminine" in relation to the dominant discourse. Music is removed from its marginality as background; it is placed as the dominant unifying factor of *India Song*. Meanwhile, the narrative element of the Other symbolized by the beggar woman or the lepers is presented totally outside the film screen at the sound track level. Music is at the center of many of Duras's films (*La Musica*, *Moderato Cantabile*, *Une aussi longue absence*, among others), but nowhere else is it as dominant as in *India Song*.

Although the sound track is extremely important in *India Song*, the medium of film is normally defined by the use of visuals, and it is interesting to note how Duras visually creates the fantasy universe of desire and memory. After producing several black and white films in the sixties, Duras unleashes a sensual palette of colors in *India Song*. Warm tones and hues of red evoking life and

¹² Madeleine Borgomano, *l'Écriture filmique de Marguerite Duras*, p. 123.

death dominate the scene of the reception; Anne-Marie Stretter's gowns harmonize with the luxurious, but decadent, decor (the red ball gown, the red couch, the pink lampshade, the red tones in the Persian carpet). In contrast, the historical implications of a photograph taken in the past are achieved with the black and white of the men's suits and Stretter's white gown. The characters sit around the table after the ball, as if posing for a period photograph. Although Duras uses rich color to express desire in *India Song*, she employs a stark cinematic style in the film with little variation in the *prises de vue*. As the camera remains distant without close-ups or changes of angle, the spectators are at the upper angle of a triangle in which the two other angles are *le regardeur* and *les regardés*.¹³ As spectators we watch the characters watch each other. Michael Richardson watches Anne-Marie Stretter dance with the Vice-consul and receive a kiss on the hand from the young attaché. The scarcity of close-ups emphasizes the distance between the characters as well as their lack of communication. The distance is multiplied through the use of mirrors and the multiplication of angles. The reflection in the mirror often precedes the image, creating a temporary sense of disorientation; however, as spectators, we also know that the image itself is a projected cinematic image. By indicating that the image can appear before the real object, Duras questions cinema as a form of mimesis. Duras's film creates images and mirrors that exist in the spectator's mind through memory or desire.

In *India Song*, Duras uses several techniques to distance us from the characters. As in *Hiroshima mon amour*, Duras employs *mise en abîme*, in

¹³ Ibid., p. 113.

which, through the reflection of reflection, the notion of "reality" is lost. Duras asks the fundamental question of whether cinema can represent reality; she wants the spectator to be aware of the cinematic apparatus. Cinema, like mirrors, provides a reflection of ourselves as spectators by presenting characters who have the same life experiences as we do and a "lifeless" reproduction of predetermined reality. Consequently, the visual representation in *India Song* is not as "real" as the text and sounds. Although other experimental filmmakers, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, have used the reflection in mirrors to question the representation of reality, Duras expresses a distinctively feminine viewpoint through this technique. As I emphasized in the chapter on Maya Deren, mirrors have historically been signifiers of women—they reflect the physical attributes by which women appeal to the "male gaze." Cinema, which acts as a "mirror" of reality, represents female sexuality as traditionally defined by male desire. Thus, an important aspect of Duras's cinematic apparatus in *India Song* is the reflection of woman's identity through the "male gaze." Does Anne-Marie Stretter only exist through the eyes of the Vice-Consul and the spectator's gaze? Several times in *India Song* we are not certain whether we see the woman or her reflection. In addition to questioning the mimetic power of cinema, the smooth transition between the "real" cinematic image and the mirror image also exemplifies Duras's obsession with life and death, with presence and absence. The slow rhythm of the film confirms the absence/presence translated into a calculated lethargy which resembles the automatic responses of the living dead. Duras purposefully leaves her desired effect ambiguous. *Folie*? Sleepiness? Death? Or the elusiveness of memory? Both the mirrors and the pace contribute to this

feeling of numbness. *India Song* represents a world that the spectator cannot consider reality, but it represents one in which we are drawn from our own real world. Duras can represent her themes of desire and memory visually, in the psyche of her characters, through their appearance in the mirror before their actual appearance. In films, both the character and the reflection are equally shadows/images/projections. If the reflection of Anne-Marie Stretter represents the Vice-Consul's desire for her, the desire becomes more real than the character.

Together with mirrors, the point of view of the camera in *India Song* further contributes to challenging the traditional "male gaze." A vivid example occurs in one of the few close-ups: a long still shot on Anne-Marie Stretter's breast when she is sleeping on the floor in the company of Michael Richardson and his friend. This scene is erotic, linked with the heat of the tropics in Calcutta. The close-up of the breast is taken laterally, as if the spectator were lying beside her. Yet, paradoxically, the flattened breast, showing beads of sweat from the sultry heat, is in many ways asexual. The fullness of the breast as a classic sexual symbol is replaced by a purity of line and study of the irregularities of the nipple. The point of view changes when Anne-Marie Stretter sits up and covers her chest with her knees; we return to a more traditional "male gaze" in which partially covered breasts are the erotic symbols of the feminine.

By diverting the traditional "male gaze," in what ways does Duras create a feminine universe in *India Song*? While recreating the decadence of the colonial system, Duras represents the female modernist's viewpoint of the role of woman.

Like Djuna Barnes, Anaïs Nin and Jean Rhys, Duras reveals a world in which female characters embody social and metaphysical crisis. As in the modernist works by writers of the 1930s, such as *Nightwood* (1938), males are portrayed as weak non-subjects and female subjects, like Anne-Marie Stretter, use sexuality to establish their identity. Duras plunges the spectator into a world of madness, a Sartrean *huis clos* in which death resembles life as much as life resembles death: "Cet univers de folie, c'est aussi un univers sinon de mort, du moins de non-vie, vie ralentie, réduite, glacée, vie inverse aussi: Mort fantasmatique, qui ressemble encore à la vie, mais dont la différence subtile provoque l'angoisse."¹⁴ Like Sartre, Duras creates a gilded purgatory where characters must see the image of themselves reflected in the eyes of others: they are in a world from which there is no exit. The slow rhythm and repetitiveness of the dance sequences of *India Song* contribute to the feeling of doom. The setting in the past with anachronistic allusions, such as the men's suits from the seventies, makes us question if this is not a dance of the phantoms. From her 1975 vantage point, Duras recreates the crumbling world of the status quo before World War II.

The grounds of the French Embassy in Calcutta establish the physical boundaries of the location. Duras points out that the French Embassy does not really exist (it was filmed at the Hôtel Rothschild in Boulogne).¹⁵ The crumbling façade and luxurious interior are emblematic of the confinement of Anne-Marie Stretter. Duras, like many writers of romance, deems the park in front of the house woman's territory and the forest, forbidden to women, men's territory. She

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁵ Duras, *Marguerite Duras à Montréal*, p. 131.

says, "La forêt communique avec le parc. Le parc est la prémice de la forêt. Le parc l'annonce. La forêt, c'est l'interdit."¹⁶ At the end of *India Song*, the camera traces the path that Anne-Marie Stretter takes to leave the park—and eventually to drown herself. (Likewise, in *Moderato Cantabile*, the wife has to escape the house and the park; then, through the imaginative representation of her desire, she has to cross the forest to the dangerous area of her imagined love affair.) The embassy in *India Song* is protected by the peace and tranquility of the greenery which surrounds it, but as a French monument which symbolizes the colonial order, it is almost in ruins. The crumbling palace contributes to the impression of fragmentation: the decor, the story, the visuals, the sound track, and, finally, Anne-Marie Stretter herself. *India Song* represents the decline of the colonial empire in 1937 and the demise of the glories of history. This ominous disintegration foreshadows the Second World War and the inevitable public atrocities which Duras represented in *Hiroshima mon amour*.

Earlier in this chapter I raised the question of the implied spectator of *India Song*. Marilyn Schuster concludes that Duras the filmmaker is first as the possessor of the "gaze" and "female subjectivity," as imagined by Duras, is second.¹⁷ Based on my analysis, I propose a more complex enunciation process in *India Song*, which draws on the reflection effect of mirrors, on the play between present and past (1970s versus 1937), and on the intertwining of memory (the tribute to Anne-Marie Stretter) and desire (the male sexual longing for her). We look at Anne-Marie Stretter through the "male gaze" of desire as

¹⁶ Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977), p. 15.

¹⁷ Schuster, *Marguerite Duras Revisited*, p. 76.

defined by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). The camera also looks at her with the "male gaze," but does not always "see" her because she is a phantom or a reflection. The other characters (all male) look at her as an object of desire, but are themselves represented in the spectators' objectification of desire. In the specific scene where they look back at us from their dream-like state, they confront us through the music and the visuals, provoking the memory of our own desire. Meanwhile, the storyteller's active feminine voice is divided between the author and the other feminine voices off-screen which, while recreating Anne-Marie Stretter's past, create multiple feminine subjectivities in the film. As a result, Duras's work in *India Song* fits Elizabeth Cowie's definition of woman in representation: "We must be able to see 'woman' not as a given, biologically or psychologically, but as a category produced in signifying practices...or through signification at the level of the unconscious."¹⁸

In *India Song*, Duras changed the signifying practices in the 1970s of both avant-garde and mainstream cinema by separating woman's voice from her body; this procedure enables the spectator to substitute personal memories and desires for the conventional cinematic narrative as spectacle. Music, with its creation of desire through its appeal to the senses, emerges as a non-narrative feminine voice, a clear melody rising from a crumbling past of patriarchal standards. The effect of this haunting music with the sensual visuals and the nostalgic voices

¹⁸ Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign," *m/f* 1 (1978): p. 60.

off-screen is to reproduce the irrational world of love, passion and desire, which is linked to the personal experiences of the spectator, subject and author.

Le Navire Night

In *Le Navire Night*, even more than in *India Song*, Duras disembodies the voice from the characters, completely eliminating the body. The desire detached from a specific human form (as represented in *India Song* by Anne-Marie Stretter) is evoked in the text of *Le Navire Night*. Maintaining her authoritative narrative role of the seventies, Duras validates the story by confirming its truth, as she would a news story, and by maintaining her presence throughout the text by using "discours indirect:" "Il dit avoir noté beaucoup de choses..."(24); "Elle dit avoir aussi remarqué..."(77). Rather than letting the narrative lapse into the control of J.M., from whose point of view the story is written, Duras's role—as the female subject/narrator who discovered the story—remains firmly established. We know that the real F., the female object of discourse, has a name and a voice that exist with a body somewhere outside the text of *Le Navire Night*. The enigmatic F., so defined by Duras for reasons of privacy, has no voice and cannot tell her own story of desire, the story that F. experiences with J.M. Duras said that she could not film the characters of *Le Navire Night* because they are in the *gouffre* or "black hole" of the telephone. Portraying the image of this *gouffre* is the basis for her film, *Le Navire Night*. As in *India Song*, Duras uses English in the title to make us think of exotic and faraway places, a feeling reinforced by

Athens and its monuments, to represent the "other" story. Moreover, the use of both French and English within the title suggests Duras's exploration of the binary relationship between dominant discourse and the Other. Like Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, Duras's *Le Navire Night* highlights women's "absence" by using the word "night" to represent the absence of light: "Ce territoire de Paris la nuit, insomniaque, c'est la mer sur laquelle passe le Night" (36).

The characters (F. and J.M.) have a relationship that takes place over the telephone, yet it goes through all the phases of real, but forbidden love. They declare unending love for each other, but F. keeps avoiding an actual meeting with J.M. She continues, however, to profess sincere devotion while misleading him every time she is to meet him physically: "Elle dit qu'elle l'aime à la folie. Qu'elle est folle d'amour pour lui. Qu'elle est prête à tout quitter pour lui. Par amour pour lui, elle quitterait sa famille, sa maison à Neuilly. Mais il n'est pas nécessaire pour autant qu'il se voient" (32). Their contacts continue over three years; F. discloses to J.M. that she is dying of leukemia and that she is hopelessly in love with him. J.M. insists on meeting her face to face, but F. does not appear, explaining that her father, a wealthy businessman, keeps her secluded. They continue their conversations and plan other meetings, but none takes place. Trying to learn more about F., J.M. meets her washerwoman and former servant who claims to be her mother. The story ends with F.'s imminent death from leukemia; her new husband (the surgeon who was treating her) ends their final telephone communication.

The telephone, with its technical ability to separate the voice from the body, is often associated with lonely women in the genre of romantic thriller in films such as *Sorry Wrong Number* (1948) and *Dial M for Murder* (1954). On the one hand, the telephone replaces letter writing as the means of communication in a romantic relationship where there is no physical contact. On the other, it offers a way in *Le Navire Night* to achieve the simultaneity and the reality of a relationship that exists through voices only, without each partner knowing what the other looks like. In addition to providing a contemporary inflection of romantic communication, the telephone facilitates the active imagination in formulating desire. Jean Cocteau's play *La Voix humaine* (1930), is another example of twentieth-century literature in which the telephone transmits the passion of a relationship while we hear exclusively the woman's side of the conversation. Duras increases the dramatic and imaginative intrigue of her story by giving only the first letter of the names of her characters. However, we cannot assume that the relationship remains platonic just because the lovers do not see each other. As in Cocteau's monologue in which the female protagonist clutches the receiver during her emotional tirade, the conversations of J.M. and F. last as long as eight hours and culminate in "l'orgasme noir" in which they lie holding the receiver next to their bodies. The text of *Le Navire Night* has voices without faces, voices separated from bodies, yet the passion signified is just as great: "Leur jouissance atteint le meurtre"(72). By relating this intense passion through telephone communication between two people who have never seen each other, Duras demystifies the visual image of the cinema as the ultimate provocation of

desire. Likewise, touch can be replaced by imagination, and lovemaking can become a "personal experience," based on the memory of the body.

A central question Duras raises in *Le Navire Night* is whether the image kills the text. On one level, the "story" almost ends when J.M. sends the photo to F. who, upon viewing possible images that could be attached to the voice, no longer wants to continue the relationship. On another level, the film that Duras created almost simultaneously with the novel, was rejected by Duras herself as an impossible film to make. She calls it the "désastre du film" in her introduction. "J'ai commencé le tournage du *Navire Night* le lundi 31 juillet 1978. J'avais fait un découpage. Pendant le lundi et le mardi qui a suivi, du 1er août, j'ai tourné les plans prévus dans le découpage. Le mardi soir, j'ai vu les rushes du lundi. Sur mon agenda, ce jour-là, j'ai écrit: film raté"(11). Duras met the impossibility of representing the *néant* by creating visuals that do not correspond at all to the story of *Le Navire Night*. The roaming camera recreates the abyss of Paris at night, the ocean on which the vessel "Le Navire Night" sails: "On trouve dans ce film, mis en abyme par l'histoire même, un deni de représentation plus radical et plus violent que dans les films précédents: en refusant l'image destructrice du désir, le cinéma rejette une part de lui-même, se sépare de sa propre histoire et se lance, à la dérive, 'sur la mer d'encre noir.'"¹⁹ It is significant that Duras's cinema, by rejecting the visual, rejects the most important element of cinematic enunciation. It was during the filming of *Le Navire Night* that Duras began to think about returning to writing. With each successive film in the seventies she

¹⁹ Bergamono, *L'Écriture filmique de Marguerite Duras*, p. 147 .

seemed to reduce the importance of visuals that correspond to the narrative and the sound track.

In *Le Navire Night*, for example, the narrative and sound track are totally separated. Since the female protagonist has no real physical body for J.M. or the reader/spectator, can she still be the object of desire? Silverman proposes that male subjectivity is most fully realized when it is invisible—when it approaches a kind of theological threshold—while female subjectivity is achieved when it is most visible (Silverman, 1984). However, in *Le Navire Night*, although the reader/spectator does not have an image of the female protagonist, the enigma of how she looks makes her more desirable to J.M. (and perhaps the reader). She creates a desirable image "avec les grands cheveux blonds," one that she changes at will: her first description of herself is with black hair. She remains an imaginary object of desire, but becomes the subject when she writes her own story and controls her own destiny. Yet, does she write her own destiny, or is Marguerite Duras herself playing with the split subjectivity that has become a part of her female characters? F. is too evasive to be a fixed subject and we are never sure if she is controlled by outside forces or whether she herself does not want to be discovered. When J.M. sees the image in the photos that could make her the object, he is dismayed by the banality of F.'s looks and no longer wants to use the privilege of the gaze. He quickly returns the photograph to the "real" mother, the one who would be biologically responsible for the physical features of F.

The woman in the story controls the man's ability to see her by creating and recreating her image, by proposing physical encounters and then denying them. The forbidden aspect of the story is relayed through modern telecommunications, the woman's illness and the limiting nature of her social status. Perhaps F. is reacting against the patriarchal hold of the father ("nom du père")²⁰. The father is depicted in vague terms as the stereotypical patriarch: "Le père. Redoutable et vénéré. Vénéré par tous. Craint par tous" (65). The *nom* of the father is also the patriarchal "non," which as in many historical romances, forbids the relationship of desire. Her new husband, who is also her surgeon, continues both physical and social control of her taking over from the father. F. is placed in the situation of many female protagonists in "woman's films" of the 1940's, such as *Possessed* and *The Snake Pit*, who were controlled or cured by their male doctors. Thus, the doctor represented the male authority over the female body and the normative "curing" of abnormalcy.

F. is always defined, even by name, by the men who create her, cure her and marry her. Her "true love," the man of her erotic desires, remains invisible or undefined in societal terms. Controlled and controlling because she sets up meeting times and places, and then cancels the appointments, she fits into another type of split feminine subjectivity. With Duras narrating F.'s story, F. is the object of desire of J.M. and the reader, but is the subject of Duras's authentic story, the story she exposes before *Le Navire Night* begins in the introduction. Elusive in her physical representation, her identity and her relationship with J.M.,

²⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 552.

F. is constantly being reproduced through the imagination of the reader/spectator and Duras's innovative signifying practices.

L'Amant

The first of Duras's acknowledged autobiographical works, *L'Amant* reworks many of the themes explored during her thirty previous years of writing. Yet the "packaging" of autographical details in a new narrative mode made *L'Amant* an instant success. It is the first work since *Le Boa* (1954) in which biographical detail coincides with the "I" of the narrator. *L'Amant* is perceived by readers as confessional literature more than autobiography, that is, as "revelations about the scandalous interracial adolescent affair of a famous woman writer."²¹ Duras's story about her affair when she was only fifteen with a rich twenty-seven year old Chinese businessman from Cholen once again speaks about forbidden, obsessive love and its representation in memory. In addition to the story of sexual awakening, there is the vivid description of her hellish existence in her family: "C'est une famille en pierre, pétrifiée dans une épaisseur sans accès aucun."²² Duras uses the symbol of petrified stone to describe her family and to explain the lack of human warmth, communication and growth during her youth. The narrator's role is that of "archaeologist," shedding light on the present Duras through the "fossils" of the past. By distancing herself from the object of her

²¹ Schuster, *Marguerite Duras Revisited*, p. 117.

²² Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 34; all references hereafter will be cited in the text.

study, which is separated by time and history, Duras can research her past as if she were a spectator seeking information. At the beginning of *L'Amant* she tells the story of the man who found her aged, wrinkled face more interesting than her smooth face as a young girl: "Je suis venu pour vous dire que pour moi je vous trouve plus belle maintenant que lorsque vous étiez jeune, j'aimais moins votre visage de jeune femme que celui que vous avez maintenant, dévasté"(1). Duras places this statement at the beginning of *L'Amant* to illustrate that, although the narrator is separated from Duras's past, Duras the writer bears the "history" of her personal experience as a woman. By claiming that she is more beautiful with her "devastated" face, the male admirer, like the Japanese lover in *Hiroshima mon amour*, validates not only this story, but all her stories and experiences.

Marguerite Duras, as the autobiographer, is both the "real" subject, the narrator, and the object of desire at which the narrator looks through the "male gaze." The narration itself moves back and forth between the first and third persons (je, elle) and the past and future. Thus, the narrative voice is split into two: the past self (spectacle) and the present self (spectator). It is clear from the onset of the novel that the present and the past selves are born from the same original entity, but are no longer the same person. But as the narrator, Duras assumes the "male gaze" to contemplate her former self, she "sees" what made her attractive to men, especially the Chinese lover: "Cette robe est sans manche, très décolletée. Je trouve qu'elle me va bien"(18). The narrator still claims to remember what things felt like when she uses the first person: "Je revois encore le visage, et je me souviens du nom. Je vois encore les murs blanchis, le store de

toile qui donne sur la fournaise..."(48). She writes in the present tense to make memories as real as the present (a technique similar to the actress's evocations of Nevers in *Hiroshima mon amour*). As the narrator distances herself from the events, her voice returns to the look of the societal "male gaze"; she describes herself as a young prostitute, using the third person to distance herself from the subject and juxtaposing both past and present tense: "Il a arraché la robe, il la jette, il a arraché le petit slip de coton blanc et il la porte ainsi nue jusqu'au lit" (49). But she is also a desiring subject portrayed in the present tense: "Elle ne le regarde pas. Elle le touche. Elle touche la douceur du sexe, de la peau, elle caresse la couleur dorée, l'inconnue nouveauté" (49). Duras moves freely from the past tense to the present tense, intertwining the past and present in the narrative.

Duras uses the split feminine subjectivity of her other fictions also in this autobiography. However, the female subject of the story is Duras herself, a public figure whom the readers already know. Although she is portrayed through the third person as the Chinese man's object of desire, she is also desired by the narrator who looks at herself and watches the love scenes as a voyeur, unobserved, from a secret vantage point. Duras switches back to the first person to show that she, because of her age and her experience, has become the subject not only of her writing, but of her life. In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* she refers to her former self as "l'enfant," and she puts even more distance between the narrator and the object of desire. In the context of this study the narrator's relationship with the younger version of Duras's self is especially interesting.

Duras seems to speak as much about her future in the past as about the past itself. She contrasts what her family thought she would become with her present status as a famous writer: "La mère dit: celle-ci elle ne sera jamais contente de rien. Je crois que ma vie a commencé à se montrer à moi-même"(126). Duras returns to the past to analyze her future; thus, she creates the kind of intertextuality found in *India Song*. In *L'Amant* she seems to validate the personal choices she made throughout her life, as if communicating these decisions to her deceased mother.

The elliptic, non-linear style of Duras's *L'Amant* is typical of most of her works. She always underplays narrative to represent memory and desire through simple, fragmented and disjointed statements which seem to undo the rhetorical patterns of the dominant discourse. Blank spaces or silences become structural elements of her writing, since her sentences and paragraphs are short. There is very little specific detail in *L'Amant*. We are not told the name of the Chinese lover; the time parameters are vague. Also, the correlations between the narrating and the narrated self are more visual than temporal. By designating the male lover in the title of the work, Duras makes the book the woman's memory of him. Yet, despite the title, it is the autobiographer herself who is the subject of *L'Amant*. The "I" of the young girl who first knows the passion of desire is also the "I" of the woman as writer, however the title once again depicts the man as agent, who changed the innocent child to the desired object—the "girl-woman."

When she leaves the "lover," Duras realizes that she will be a writer. According to Philippe Lejeune²³, there is a pact between the reader and the writer when dealing with autobiography. When reading a text which claims to be an autobiography, the reader "believes" that what the writer states is true. Yet everything Duras states in *L'Amant* is neither precise nor absolute fact. Some of her story is contradicted or retold in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Does this variance invalidate *L'Amant* as an autobiography? Lejeune says that the category of autobiography known as "mentir vrai" and "autofiction" is often difficult to classify clearly. According to Angela Carter, many works by the French writer Colette are examples of Lejeune's classification, since "she gives the impression of telling all, in a literary form unclassifiable except as a version of what television has accustomed us to call 'fictionalized documentary'."²⁴ Lejeune acknowledges the genre of "roman autobiographique littéraire," whose distinction from autobiography is sometimes difficult to discern.²⁵ Originally, Duras was going to put the subtitle of *roman* after the title *L'Amant*, but decided against it. Did she consciously choose to stay on the autobiographical side of Lejeune's demarcation?

The style of the *nouveau roman* seems relatively incompatible with the singular narrative of the autobiography. Both Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute wrote autobiographies in the eighties as the disclosure of self seemed to

²³ See Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 24.

²⁴ Angela Carter in *Women's Voices: Visions and Perspectives*, ed. Hoy, Schor, Diyanni (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), p. 25.

²⁵ See Aliette Armel's discussion on this topic in *Marguerite Duras et l'autobiographie* (Paris: Le Castor Astral, 1984), p. 19.

offer a key to former texts that were theoretical and anonymous in nature, such as Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous* (1965) and Sarraute's *Les Fruits d'Or* (1963). Although many of Duras's earlier works and interviews revealed details about her childhood, she offered, with *L'Amant*, the key to understanding her earlier works. Her readers were thrilled: "Enfin Marguerite Duras raconte Marguerite Duras...On va pouvoir lire sans inquiétude les oeuvres durassiennes à l'envers, on a enfin la clef."²⁶ The question remains, however, whether we really do have the key to understanding Duras and her works, or whether the author has just provided another perspective on a personal life that has been represented in many different ways during her career as an author.

Duras was to collaborate on a film version of *L'Amant* with Jean-Jacques Annaud (director) and Claude Berri (producer), but the project broke off in the pre-filming stage. She wanted her long-time cinematographer, Bruno Nuytten, to direct the film. In the same year as the release of Annaud's film, she wrote a new version of the book, a mixture of scenario and novel, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. In 1993, Molly Haskell asks in a review of Annaud's film if it is contempt for the film, for the filmmaker, or for herself caught in the exigencies of big-budget filmmaking that drove Duras to write *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* with addenda indicating screenplay directions for the reader or "hypothetical director."²⁷ With Annaud, Duras became involved in a process that was incompatible with her own style of filmmaking. Writing *L'Amant de la Chine du*

²⁶ Marcelle Marini, "Marguerite Duras," *numero spécial de l'Arc* 98 (1985): p. 9.

²⁷ Molly Haskell, "You Saw Nothing in Indochina," *Film Comment* (Jan-Feb.1993): pp. 31-33.

Nord (1993), almost ten years after *L'Amant*, allowed her to re-visit the memories of her young love affair and her recollections of childhood. Duras seemed to write the newer version, in which some facts are changed and new information is added, to keep her myth of *L'Amant* alive, and to challenge the different image *L'Amant* had assumed in the film adaptation. Annaud's *The Lover* was filmed in English and produced by Metro-Goldwyn Mayer. It is not surprising, therefore, that with such foreign elements as a multi-national production company and the use of a language that was not her original language in the text, Duras could not agree with the basic concept of the film. Jeanne Moreau, who starred in Peter Brook's adaptation of *Moderato Cantabile* (1960) and Duras's *Nathalie Granger* (1975), provides Duras's voice as narrator. With a deep, gravelly voice like Duras's, Moreau was well cast. She is also one of Duras's own contemporaries. However, the casting of an actress to play the role of Duras reduces the writer to another character in a story she can no longer control rather than allowing her the role of unique author of her text.

Annaud's spectacular film shot in Indochina seems too conventional when compared to Duras's own films. As Haskell objects, the young girl who plays Duras as an eighteen-year old, is too chic, projecting the allure of a magazine model rather than an awkward French girl in Indochina. The Chinese lover, as portrayed by Tony Leung, is bigger, more powerful and better looking—in a word, more conventional—than in the book. Although Annaud may respect the "facts" of the Duras story, he abandons the simplicity and rhythm of Duras's writing. Annaud's lush cinematography romanticizes the period of Duras's life,

but misses the tension produced by Duras's richness of feeling juxtaposed with her sparse writing style. As spectators we see the story from the outside; we witness the seduction of the older man by the younger girl; we watch them make love barely hidden from the clamor of the *ville chinoise*. Consequently, we identify with the pain that both lovers experience at the end of the relationship. Annaud effectively uses the dynamics of mainstream cinematic narrative: he portrays woman as spectacle to the "male gaze," a perspective that Duras reformulates from her own point of view in her work. A singular narrative line, strong characters for spectator identification and the glossy, Hollywood romance transform Duras's text from an erotic recollection of a personal love affair to Annaud's monumental film. American critic Vincent Canby praises the film: "Mr. Annaud demonstrates real authority in his treatment of this material. The film stays within its prescribed bounds. It is so beautifully controlled that even the love scenes, though steamily photographed, have a kind of innocence about them."²⁸ While Duras's *L'Amant* was hailed as an expression of feminine eroticism, a description of lovemaking and sexuality from a feminine point of view by some feminist critics such as Julia Kristeva,²⁹ Annaud's technical "authority" does not capture this expression of feminine experience. According to Jacques Morice of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Annaud has made a completely impersonal film:

Annaud semble avoir compilé, rassemblé, recollé et centralisé tous les signes du roman pour les introduire dans une super-banque de données cinématographiques. Seulement, voilà à force de tout montrer (le petit

²⁸ Vincent Canby, "The Lover," *New York Times*, 28 October 1992: p. 454.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, "The Pain and Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras," *PMLA* 2 (1987): pp. 138-152.

frère, la mère, l'exotisme, le cul), on ne voit plus grand-chose, en tout cas rien qui puisse laisser voir l'ombre d'un soupçon de mise en scène."³⁰

Although Annaud's version affords us glimpses into the young girl's desire through close-ups of hands touching lingeringly before the love affair and facial close-ups of her *jouissance* when they make love, Annaud represents only the scopophilic drive of the relationship. Conforming to Hollywood conventions, the young girl is seen in full frontal nudity while the lover is seen from behind or with his genitals discreetly concealed. In one creative scene, flashes of skin and body parts indicate a flirtation with non-linear representation set to atonal Oriental music. In general, however, the soundtrack provides only the traditional support, and there is little of Duras's blending of past and present. The narrator remembers the story as she is writing, but the two stories are not interwoven as they are in Duras's book. Moreover, Annaud represents the sea in terms of the vessels and people who travel upon it: the boat traffic on the Mékong River, the ferry where the young girl first meets the Chinese man, and the ocean liner that takes her back to France and away from him. Here, the sea represents travel, change and separation between individuals and between cultures. This is a far cry from the sea as emblematic of a unique femininity as it is described in Duras's and other female writers' texts. The multiple nature of Duras's *L'Amant* comes from the simultaneous narratives (past, present, and future) as well as the overlapping stories of her family, the school, Hélène Lagonelle and the illicit meetings of the love affair. The simplicity of her writing, her elliptical sentences

³⁰ Jacques Morice, *Cahiers du Cinéma* (mars 1992): p. 453.

flowing with the rhythm of the waves of the sea, gives Duras's memories a quality wholly missing from Annaud's film.

Despite her "self-revelations," Duras remains in many ways an enigma to her readers as she enters her ninth decade. Although Annaud tries to make a definitive version of Duras's personal story in his film, Duras continues to rework the facts of her biography. I have pointed out in the last two chapters that while her personal story provides the female experience for all her narratives, Duras refuses to reveal a "single truth" about her own life. Rather, through the multiplicity of experience, she tries to provoke the spectators' memory to recreate desire.

Chapter 5

Margarethe von Trotta: Beginnings in the Political Sphere

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Margarethe von Trotta: Beginnings in the Political Sphere

Das Private ist das Politische und das Politische deformiert das Private.

Margarethe von Trotta

While both Maya Deren and Marguerite Duras were writers before they became filmmakers, von Trotta's entire career has been related to cinema, first as an actress and a script writer and then as a co-director. However, von Trotta went through much the same process as Deren and Duras when she worked with a male partner before expressing her distinctive voice in filmmaking. Through her successful collaboration with Schlöndorff she realized that it was her personal experience as a woman that she wished to communicate in her films. The independent films that she has made have assured her one of the prominent places in New German Cinema.

Von Trotta's Life: a personal and political story

Margarethe von Trotta was born during the turmoil of the Second World War to an aristocratic mother and an artistic father in Berlin, Germany, on February 21, 1942. Her father, Alfred Roloff, died when she was very young, leaving her mother and Margarethe quite poor. Like Rainer Fassbinder, Helke Sander, and other *cinéastes* of the New German Cinema, von Trotta thus became one of the *Trümmerkinder* (ruble children), a generation of Germans born around the time of the Second World War and raised without a father. The effects of a single-parent matriarchal family influenced this generation's viewpoint on women and the family; both male and female filmmakers of New German Cinema have focused on women as subjects of discourse to help understand the post-war period they experienced as children.

Von Trotta completed her school education in Latin, Romance languages and German literature. However, her mother encouraged her to go to Handelsschule (business school) in order to find a secure job. Von Trotta, employed as a secretary, stayed in Germany only a short time after completing her studies (Phillips, *New German Filmmakers*, 1984, 283). Seeking adventure, she went to work as an *au pair* girl in Paris where she joined the Cinémathèque, a dedicated group committed to the viewing, analysis and discussion of films. In France, von Trotta met many people involved with cinema, including directors and scriptwriters related to the New Wave. She educated herself about film by joining in discussion groups and participating

in a film collective. During her stay in Paris, von Trotta began her cinematic career by co-scripting several short films with a group of friends.

In the early sixties von Trotta would have liked to start her career as a director, but had no role model as there were not any female directors in the Federal Republic. She explains: "That was the beginning, years ago. I had no idea at that time I could ever direct a film. It was beyond my reach, really, as a woman then."¹ As an alternative, upon her return to Germany, she decided to attend acting school in Munich. A successful actress, she performed in theaters in Dinkelsbühl, Stuttgart and Frankfurt. She claims that her political consciousness was first awakened by the 1968 political movement of the Left and she participated in the Leftist Munich demonstrations of the early 60s. She was also active in the women's movement, which later gave her confidence to make her own films. In 1964 she temporarily interrupted her career and had a son, Felix, with her first husband. In 1967 she returned to acting and began to work in films with directors such as Klaus Lemke, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Claude Chabrol and Volker Schlöndorff. Von Trotta divorced her husband three years later, while working on the script of *Der plötzliche Reichtum der armen Leute von Kombach* (1968) with Schlöndorff. However, her husband did not relinquish custody of their son and the ensuing court battle is the subject of *Strohfeuer* (1972), a semi-autobiographical film directed by Schlöndorff, co-scripted by

¹ Margarethe von Trotta in "A Great Woman Theory of History: An Interview with Margarethe von Trotta" *Cinéaste* 15:4 (1987): p. 24; I have used quotations in English when they are not available in German.

Schlöndorff and von Trotta, with von Trotta playing the lead role of a young divorcee trying to make a living in a male-oriented world. Her sensitive portrayal of a woman trying to keep her child brought her several acting awards. As early as 1972 von Trotta had already seized the opportunity to transpose her personal experience as a woman and mother to the cinematic medium.

Von Trotta married Schlöndorff in 1971 and continued to work as an actress for television and cinema until 1975. She also began to develop her own themes using strong woman protagonists for her first truly collaborative effort at co-scripting and co-directing, *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*. According to E. Ann Kaplan, this film was the most popular German film of the mid-1970s (Kaplan, 1983). In addition to its overwhelmingly positive reception in Germany, it brought the von Trotta/Schlöndorff team international recognition. Their final collaboration was *Coup de Grâce (Der Fangschuss)* (1976) adapted from Marguerite Yourcenar's novel. Von Trotta played Sophie, who, although motivated by love, engages in actions and reactions that reflect the freedom she seeks from society's expectations. Both of these last two collaborative projects made strong statements about women protagonists seeking to liberate themselves within a patriarchal political framework, but *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* prefigured many of the techniques von Trotta would use in her independent films. Her distinctive "style" in *Katharina Blum* was only acknowledged once spectators were exposed to her independent productions.

After ten years of cinematic partnership with Schlöndorff, von Trotta decided to cut professional ties with her husband and embark on her own filmmaking career. To justify this separation she explained, "I prefer the so-called private topics, problems of living together. How do women get out of restricting situations? Those things can't affect him, can't interest him."² However, several of her projects continued to be financed by Schlöndorff's film companies, Bioskop and Hallelujah Film. For her first film, von Trotta continued working in a collaborative way, but this time with a female colleague, Luisa Francia. Rather than adapting a literary work, Schlöndorff's favored genre, she based her script of *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* on a true story about a female kindergarten teacher from Munich who robbed a bank to obtain money for a day-care centre.

Trotta continued to explore the domain of personal female experience in cinema. Her films would ask the following questions about women: How do they relate to one another and to their environment? How does their personal life affect their public life? *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* was well received by both critics and the public, and obtained the West German Filmband worth 300,000 marks. Von Trotta made her second film, *Schwwestern oder die Balance des Glücks* in 1979, at about the same time Schlöndorff was filming *Die Blechtrommel* (1979), the Academy-award winning film adaptation of Günter Grass's novel. In *Schwwestern oder die*

² Quoted in "Transcending the Genres," *New German Filmmakers*, ed. K. Phillips (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), p. 285.

Balance des Glücks von Trotta analyzes the symbiotic relationship between two sisters, a theme which she continues to develop in *Die bleierne Zeit* (1982). In the latter film, her personal view of the Ensslin sisters, one of whom was a terrorist, is set against the historical background of the Red Army Faction and the Baader-Meinhoff gang. In 1984 von Trotta directed *Heller Wahn* and wrote the script for Dagmar Hirtz's *Unerreichbare Nähe*. In 1986, *Rosa Luxemburg*, a film about "Red Rosa," an early twentieth-century socialist revolutionary in Germany, received popular acclaim, but mixed critical reviews. Too mainstream for some feminists and too feminist for some "traditional" moviegoers, von Trotta's historical film has a different message for different groups. Von Trotta has, nevertheless, developed her own niche in the market. She now creates popular, mainstream films about women that still express her personal convictions in a political context. She continues to direct films about women and some of her recent works, such as *l'Africaine* (1991), are European co-productions.

New German Cinema

To understand von Trotta's importance as a German filmmaker and a woman director, it is important to place her in the context of the post-war film movement called New German Cinema. Many of the distinctive features of von Trotta's filmmaking style can be linked to a generation of moviemakers involved in films that allowed Germany to come to terms with its past.

After the debacle of the Second World War and then the division of Germany into East and West with two separate governments, a period of American influence began in the Federal Republic. Although "Zero Hour" for German society and industry seemed also to be true for film after 1945, in actual fact, the American directive to allow only anti-communist companies to be licensed resulted in an opposite extreme. Many directors, writers, actors and technicians who were qualified to make films had in some way been involved with the Nazi party. Directors who had made films under Hitler became adept at producing the "problem film," a realistic, socially critical genre associated with such directors as Helmut Käutner, Kurt Hoffman, Wolfgang Staudte, Gerhard Lamprecht and Rolf Thiele (Pflaum, *Germany on Film*, 1990, 59). Because the "problem film" engaged the audience and provided catharsis, it was able to compete with Hollywood films for pure entertainment value. However, production was divided between Berlin, Hamburg and Munich due to the American "divide and rule" policy. This meant that distributors rather than producers became the real force of the

industry (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*, 1989, 15). By 1970, not a single commercial distributor who was not under American control had survived. In the 1950s, '60s and even '70s, West German producers had to approach an American company in order to get their films distributed in Germany.

An ever-popular German film genre, the *Heimat* film, served National Socialism, the postwar years, the 1950s and even New German Cinema in the 1960s and '70s. These films featured German geographical regions typically appreciated by tourists, such as the Black Forest area, the Lüneburger Heide, or the Rhine River. The genre typically portrays an unproblematic way of life and an idyllic countryside before urbanization and the effects of war. Von Trotta and other participants in the New German Cinema were to reject this genre, although some filmmakers reworked it as a new form of national identity and social criticism with such films as Schlöndorff's *Der plötzliche Reichtum der armen Leute von Kombach* (1971), Herzog's *Herz aus Glas* (1976), and Reitz's *Heimat* (1980-84), a four-part, eight-hour series made for television.

In the 1960s, German cinema suffered from a general decline in attendance, as television became an important player in the media market. Talented young filmmakers produced features for television, reconciling the difference between commerce and art. The made-for-television productions reached an arts audience abroad and a television audience at home. While television tried to capitalize on the appeal of cinema, the export market for

German films had greatly decreased since its heyday during the war when the occupied European territories were a natural market. The reduced budgets also made for lower production standards. A heavily bureaucratic credit system between the government and the banks contributed to the lower quality of films and made the film industry directly dependent on the State. In the early 1960s, Volker Schlöndorff, who had spent several years in France, pushed for the French model of export, so that Germany could enter into the world market: "This is one of the things wrong with the German film industry ever since the 1950s. One always started from the assumption that a film had to earn 80 to 90% of its money at home."³ In 1961 no film received the "Best German Film Award" because there were no appropriate entries; the other categories honored films that had a definite anti-Communist and pro-NATO disposition. The period between 1962 and 1967 saw a struggle for New German Cinema. The advocates of Young German Film signed the Oberhausen Manifesto (1962), in which they put forward a program of professional and ideological demands involving freedom from commercial partners and special interest groups as well as artistic, formal and economic conceptions about the production of New German cinema (Franklin, *New German Cinema*, 1983, 26). Alexander Kluge became the spokesman for the twenty-six artists who signed the Manifesto. The Oberhausen Manifesto is considered the birth of the broad movement of film production known as New German Cinema.

³ Volker Schlöndorff quoted in *New Germany Cinema: A History*, by Thomas Elsaesser (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 17.

In 1967 the *Kuratorium Junger Deutscher Film* was formed, with the responsibility to put into place the proposals of the Oberhausen group. Through government funding and selection by a committee of independent filmmakers, the *Kuratorium* sponsored many films between 1965 and 1968. Since the established film industry felt threatened because of support for the *Kuratorium*, changes were once again made to the funding policy. Levying a tax on each cinema ticket sold (*Filmgroschen*) helped to fund a production arm. Later, the first amendment to the Film Subsidy Bill (1971) allowed for a further subsidy for films classified as "good entertainment," but was perceived by independent filmmakers as a counter-offensive against Oberhausen. Young independent filmmakers were driven to making more and more productions for television, for which it was possible to receive funding (Elsaesser, 15-40). In contrast to the ideological and social vacuum in cinema, films for television were more directly aimed at specific segments of the television audience. This policy, in turn, also led to a more open treatment of political issues and current affairs in feature films and documentaries. Meanwhile, in order to obtain funding, the Subsidy Bill and its amendments encouraged quickly-produced low-quality films, such as pornographic films and schoolboy comedies. It is not surprising that much of the early *Autorenkino* resulted from revulsion at the present films rather than from the French *nouvelle vague's* love of cinema.

The films of the New German Cinema drew on many influences; in addition to the French New Wave, these included the Italian New Wave

(Bertolucci, Pasolini) and Eastern European directors (Forman, Wajda) (Franklin, 129-30). The German films of the 1960s, such as Jean-Marie Straub's *Nicht versöhnt* (1965) and Volker Schlöndorff's *Der junge Törless* (1966), reflected similar feelings of alienation and *Angst* represented in these other movements; but because of the country's unique post-war situation the German films were different from the other European films. In the 1970s, New German Cinema produced a wave of historical films that obviously thematized the Third Reich, although often in an indirect way. German filmmakers born in the 1930s and 1940s, notably Herzog, Fassbinder and Wenders, expressed a need to come to terms with the war period and its legacy, a subject that had been previously shrouded in silence. In 1977 several filmmakers including Fassbinder, Schlöndorff and von Trotta made films based on the events stemming from the terrorist violence by the Red Army Faction, otherwise known as the Baader-Meinhoff gang. To many liberal thinkers the right-wing authoritative reaction by the State seemed to parallel the loss of civil liberties in 1933. Direct references to the Third Reich and Naziism became more and more explicit.

Although at first it seemed to be mainly men who benefited from West Germany's subsidy system, the women's movement was stronger in West Germany than in many other countries in the late 1960s, and many women distanced themselves from the male-dominated New Left. In 1972 Helke Sander and Claudia von Alemann organized the first International Women's Film Festival in Berlin. Likewise, the feminist journal, *Frauen und Film*,

established in 1974, was the first feminist publication anywhere in Europe devoted solely to film. By the late 1970s many female filmmakers, such as Margarethe von Trotta, Ulrike Ottinger and Jutta Brückner, had received critical recognition. Joined by other women in their field, female directors lobbied to obtain their share of representation among the independent filmmakers of the New German Cinema. In 1979, the Organization of Women Working in Film demanded and received fifty per cent decision-making authority on the board and fifty per cent of production and distribution resources. German female filmmakers embarked on the project of fusing the personal with the political. Thomas Elsaesser explains, in his comprehensive work on New German Cinema, the importance of women filmmakers: "The 'German Cinema of quality' presents a gallery of figures whose allegorical status in most cases invites direct identification. A great number of them are women, and theirs is a quest for self-discovery."⁴

In 1982, the death of Fassbinder, the most prolific of the New German cinéastes, was a blow to the German moviemaking industry. Also in 1982, the Christian Democrats led a coalition government which once again favored subvention of German commercial film. This development made things more difficult for independent filmmakers, many of whom had established their own film companies. However, German women directors such as Ottinger, Sander, and Brückner continued to make films, many of which were shown each year at the Berlin Film Festival. German cinema received international

⁴ Elsaesser, *ibid.*, p. 126.

acclaim in the 1980s and '90s with films such as *Die flambierte Frau* (Robert van Ackeren, 1983), *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1985), *Männer* (Doris Dörrie, 1985), *Cobra Verde* (Werner Herzog, 1987), *Zuckerbaby* (Percy Adlon, 1985), *Die Deutschen und ihre Männer* (Sander, 1988).

A Feminine Voice in New German Cinema

With a strong reputation at home, Margarethe von Trotta is also the best known female filmmaker of the New German Cinema internationally. There are several reasons for her popularity. Unlike many other directors, her films appeal to both a mainstream and an avant-garde audience. Likewise, her films deal directly with contemporary political subjects pertinent to the sociological and political problems of German society as a whole. Finally, unlike many feminist filmmakers, von Trotta remains primarily within the dominant culture's idea of cinema, retaining traditional narrative rather than showing her vision of life and film through the deconstruction of the cinematic process. In an interview in 1988, von Trotta said, "What women say in public and what they believe in private tends to be one and the same thing and what results is that others will believe I'm being honest. I'm always being given credit for being so courageous. I don't look at it like that. I'm not in favor of such detachment of the analytical film."⁵

⁵ Margarethe von Trotta (video), "Interview with Margarethe von Trotta," *Three Women Filmmakers* (Köln: Oregon Public Broadcasting Station, 1988); this quotation is not available in German since the original television production was dubbed.

While the works of Marguerite Duras investigate woman's cinematic representation within the imaginary realm, von Trotta addresses woman's political and personal roles within the symbolic order. Although she uses more conventional cinematic techniques than Marguerite Duras and Maya Deren, von Trotta's films represent personal themes within a political framework, thereby placing personal expression within the symbolic realm. Whereas Deren's image of woman, much like Duras's, is still an idealized one of feminine beauty and strength for the female spectator to idolize, von Trotta breaks away from this representation, refusing to create such unrealistic images of women in her films. Her characters are ordinary women seen as "engaged in a struggle to define their lives, their identities, and their feminist politics in a situation where the dominant discourse constantly undermines their effort."⁶

Since von Trotta is concerned about the ways in which discourse undermines women's efforts at self-determination, she attributes great importance to the personal relations between the women she portrays, analyzing relationships between sisters and close female friends more often than heterosexual bonds. According to H.B. Moeller, "the power and structure of the patriarchy has pervaded the private as well as public sphere. Trotta contrasts the antihierarchic perception of matriarchy to specializing, fragmenting and differentiating male thinking. Even the merely personal thus

⁶ E. Ann Kaplan, "Female Politics in the Symbolic Realm," *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 105.

tends to be radically altered."⁷ By representing ways in which women relate to each other, von Trotta creates a paradigm shift in the spectator's way of looking. Rather than identifying with patriarchy unproblematically, or opposing it systematically, the viewer sees how patriarchy itself defines and limits femininity. Von Trotta's films are personal portrayals of women caught in the German political framework of the 1970s and '80s. She does not, however, focus on her political statements over personal feminine characterizations, despite the influence of a strong feminist film industry in Germany. In *Rosa Luxemburg*, von Trotta herself tries to bridge the gap between the personal and public spheres, as she explains: "I hold the view that when we study historical personalities private life is as politically important as public life."⁸ A close study of von Trotta's collaboration with Volker Schlöndorff in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* introduces the questions of a woman's personal sphere of action and expression when confronted with the political discourse of society.

⁷ H.B. Moeller, "West German Women's Cinema: The Case of Margarethe von Trotta," *Film Criticism* 9.2 (Winter 1984-85): p. 53.

⁸ Karen Jahne and Lenny Rubinstein, "Great Woman Theory of History: An Interview with Margarethe von Trotta," *Cinéaste* (1987), p. 26.

Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum

Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta co-scripted *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, based on Heinrich Böll's novel (1974) about the distorted coverage by the West German *Bild-Zeitung*, a sensationalist tabloid newspaper, of a Baader-Meinhoff gang bank robbery. After the appearance of the novel, Böll was labelled a terrorist sympathizer and the police searched his house. He sent proofs of his novel to Schlöndorff and von Trotta when it was still unpublished in the hope of collaborating on a movie script as soon as possible, since the immediate political effect would be most pertinent. The filmmakers dropped another project they were working on with him to pursue *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (Magrett, 1982, 283).

Katharina Blum is a shy housekeeper, nicknamed the "nun" (and appropriately dressed in black and white at the opening ball scene), who meets Ludwig Götten at a party; she is romantically attracted to him and spends the night with him in her apartment. In the morning, a massive police force breaks into Katharina's apartment, tries to capture Ludwig, only to find that he has escaped. Katharina is taken for questioning and eventually they put her in prison. The story is reported by the journalist Werner Tötges, who also ruthlessly interviews members of Katharina's family and community. The published stories distort all aspects of Katharina's life and privacy. Even her sick mother, hooked onto a breathing apparatus, is mercilessly questioned in her hospital bed. When Katharina moves in with her aunt, her phone is tapped

and the recording of her conversations with Ludwig leads to his arrest. Katharina asks the journalist to meet her at her apartment, where she calmly shoots and kills him after he makes sexual advances toward her. He is eulogized at his funeral as a "martyr for the free press." The film ends with the same disclaimer as the one found at the beginning of Böll's book, but like Böll, Schlöndorff/von Trotta let the viewers draw the conclusion that similarities are inevitable:

Personen und Handlung dieser Erzählung sind frei erfunden. Sollten sich bei der Schilderung gewisser journalistischer Praktiken Ähnlichkeiten mit den Praktiken der "Bild-Zeitung" ergeben haben, so sind diese Ähnlichkeiten weder beabsichtigt noch zufällig, sondern unvermeidlich.⁹

While the reader of Böll's text is distanced from the events through a fragmented time-line with flashbacks and a running ironic commentary by the narrator, Schlöndorff/von Trotta's film takes on the linear progression of cause and effect in a suspense film that involves the spectator emotionally. The directing team has chosen to make a suspense-filled narrative film to draw attention to a pertinent contemporary political situation: "Furthermore, their [Schlöndorff/von Trotta] rendering exploits the broad appeal of the archetypal Hitchcockian situation: the innocent bystander suddenly caught in a nightmare intrigue."¹⁰

⁹ Heinrich Böll, *Heinrich Böll Werke: Romane und Erzählungen 1971-1977* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1977), p. 385.

¹⁰ W. Magrett and J. Magrett, "Story and Discourse," *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation* (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1981), p. 283.

Although the directors of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* use the conventions of the thriller to augment viewer identification and entertainment, they do not depend on scopophilia (pleasurable looking at an object of desire) as the driving force of the movie. On one level, as in Hollywood suspense films, the pivotal object of the movie is the female protagonist. If one applies Laura Mulvey's definition of the three levels of "looked-at-ness,"¹¹ the female is gazed upon on three levels. The male characters in the film gaze upon the female; the camera, in turn, projects the "male gaze" of the female object of desire, and the spectators look at the female protagonist as the object of desire: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote 'to be-looked-at-ness.'"¹² However, the female character, Katharina Blum, is not the erotic object of the gaze of the camera or the viewer because von Trotta/Schlöndorff try to disorient the spectator from a comfortable viewing position. By not embellishing or glamorizing the female protagonist as the object of desire for the male viewer, the directors are making the audience more aware of the scrutinizing process Katharina Blum has to endure. The camera, rather than projecting the gaze, pretends to act as a neutral recorder of the events and interactions of the story. In reality, however, it reveals through its relentless presence, how the male characters in the film, such as the police

¹¹ L. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* (Autumn 1975): pp. 14-17. Coincidentally, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was written the same year that *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* was produced.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

inspector and Tötges, look at Katharina Blum as a sexual object, one that is degraded as the film progresses.

Rather than allowing their camera to objectify Katharina Blum by creating an erotic female image, Schlöndorff/von Trotta reveal how the "cinematic apparatus" itself contributes to the objectification and eventual degradation of Katharina Blum. This degradation is achieved through the construction of spectacle by men and the media. The active/male-passive/female dichotomy in traditional cinema is avoided in our gaze on Katharina Blum. For example, close-up scenes of Blum and her police interrogator involve Blum facing the camera (an active position) with the police officer speaking to her from behind. However, the active/passive dichotomy of the patriarchal society is depicted when the fascistic police and the manipulative *Zeitung* reporter victimize Katharina Blum. Although the men in the film transfer onto Blum the passive characteristics of the female object of desire, the camera allows us, as viewers, to watch not the object, but the process of the "gaze." Furthermore, Blum, and the camera's representation of her, change by the end of the film: she no longer plays the role of the victim. Blum fills the screen and looks at us, the spectators, as she waits to assert herself.

In *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, von Trotta introduces several of the techniques she later uses in her independent films, such as flashbacks, scrutinizing close-ups and a choice of colors to represent the political or personal ambiance. In addition to co-scripting, von Trotta was responsible for

directing the actors, notably the extremely sensitive portrayal by Angela Winkler. For example, the long close-ups of the female protagonist locked in her inner anguish and psychological trauma foreshadow von Trotta's later psychological studies of female characters. These close-ups are interspersed with long shots where several people in the police stations or prisons (bastions of male power) are in focus at once, thus distancing the characters from each other and the viewer. Von Trotta also uses flashbacks to illustrate the protagonist's feelings, rather than as a narrative device. Finally, the dominant von Trotta theme of the female psyche's personal response to oppression by the patriarchal system is represented through the use of colour. The monochromatic effect of blue and white (black and white in *Heller Wahn*), representing political oppression, is contrasted by the "gayer" colors symbolic of Katharina Blum's feminine point of view. The sequences of color evoke a personal escape from the political system through holidays (usually in a southern place) or, in the case of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, the memory of a happier time.

Katharina Blum is portrayed with many of the characteristics of the male cinematic hero: genuine strengths and virtues and the will to override the dictates of society. In addition to her strengths, she displays industriousness (she is hard-working and responsible at work), integrity (she does not denounce Ludwig or her personal principles in the face of interrogation and humiliation), loyalty (she is loyal to Ludwig and her former employer), and cleanliness (painfully pointed out as she cleans the toilet upon arrival in the

prison cell). We respect her resistance to authority and sympathize with her attempt to protect Ludwig. At the same time, through the role of cinematic spectator as voyeur, we have intimate access to Katharina as a woman and to her personal life. Katharina Blum's femaleness is associated, however, with her personal life and portrayed as a vulnerability that society can exploit. When the police arrive to search her apartment, she is nude in the shower. This scene eventually appeared on the cover of *Der Spiegel* (1975), real-life proof of Böll's point about the media exploitation of woman as the object of the "male gaze." There are other examples of how Blum's femaleness is used against her, as in her own apartment when she is accused of "parading around" in front of the police because she is in her bathrobe after they storm in. Similarly, she is "violated" when she is given a rectal examination by a policewoman (an almost identical scene appears in *Rosa Luxemburg* before Rosa is admitted into prison). The incident as spectacle is emphasized when the policewoman comments on how nicely Katharina has "fixed up her bathroom," immediately after the invasion of Katharina's person, as if small talk was appropriate and on the same level as abuse of the basic individual rights of bodily privacy. When Katharina returns to her apartment after her prison stay, her sexual reputation is attacked by anonymous letters from her neighbors who, once the story has broken, treat her as a slut. Through the media gaze the "nun" has become the whore; she has lost her "honor," reinforcing society's traditional categorization of female roles. An emancipated woman who had her own apartment and lifestyle without depending on a man, she was sarcastically labelled a "nun" because of her lack

of sexual activity. Through no change in her own behavior, her classification is reversed to serve the purpose of the state. Von Trotta/Schlöndorff reinforce the media's lack of sensitivity in the representation of woman. The slippage between the two stereotyped roles available for woman in patriarchal society has nothing to do with Blum as a person; rather, it is a female image constructed by the media. Von Trotta emphasizes that the importance of women's private lives does not exist for a society conditioned to praise or condemn their (constructed) virtues or vices.

As in all her films, von Trotta uses space symbolically to represent the feminine condition. We see Katharina Blum either in the personal, domestic space of her apartment or in the confining institutional space of the patriarchal society, represented by the police station and the prison. Seeing Katharina Blum in her own apartment, rather than "outside," we recognize that while she originally had control over this domestic sphere, even the space of her own person is now penetrated by the forces of power. Both at the police station and in the prison she is the victim of the system, unable to control her own destiny in the public sphere. She remains unable, however, only until she decides to destroy her domestic space by breaking things, smattering the walls and ruining her apartment. By disrupting the comfort of her personal sphere she is able to move into, and act in, the public sphere, and she does so by killing Tötges (whose name foreshadows his death). As in *Heller Wahn*, von Trotta's female protagonists achieve an alarming empowerment, one whose violence matches the oppression of the patriarchal system.

Before the murder of Tötges, Katharina's only crime was falling in love. Like von Trotta's protagonists in her later films, the heroine of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* does not bring her fate upon herself. Yet, at the end of the film she gains the power to determine her own destiny. Katharina is attracted to Ludwig not because she is "liberated" and used to picking up men and having sex with them, but because Ludwig's tenderness has touched her. For example, she says that no man has called her by her first name in a long time. The short flashback scenes of their love story, as when her memory of the party is triggered by the piece of confetti she finds in her clothes in prison, are the only lyrical and romantic moments of the film. Von Trotta equates these moments with the pleasure of a personal love affair, but purposefully inserts very few of these scenes to keep the spectator aware of how difficult it is for a woman to achieve a satisfying personal life.

Does Katharina Blum fail because she turns herself in at the end of the cinematic narrative? Or has she actually outwitted the system by staying in prison while Ludwig serves his time? Molly Haskell represents von Trotta's perspective in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* and *Strohfeuer* during her collaborative period with Schlöndorff: "For a woman to cultivate an area of that self that owes nothing to men, as these heroines do in vastly different ways, is an offense against patria and patriarchy and as both films show conclusively, doomed to ridicule or failure."¹³ In *Strohfeuer* von Trotta was

¹³ Molly Haskell, "Katharina Blum Loses Honor and Finds Sainthood," *The Village Voice* (January 7, 1976): p. 280.

also accused of giving in to the system (because the heroine who represents von Trotta remarries to be able to keep her son). Von Trotta responded that to give in is not to give up; her independent productions continue to emphasize this distinction. Von Trotta's heroines do not "win" against the patriarchal society in the traditional sense of the word, but they are placed in a position in which they can subsequently win by coming to terms with their selfhood and their power or lack of it.

In *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* there is a film within a film, a frequent approach in new German Cinema because of its attention to the damaging effects of the media on people's private lives. The inner film is the police's video of Ludwig's activities. The black and white "documentary," with shots of the police filming Ludwig, as in the beginning of the film when he arrives by boat, comment on the "framing" ability of the media. They choose what to exclude in the presentation of their image. The media and police will capture and frame Katharina Blum in much the same way they have filmed Ludwig. The manipulators of media are compared to hunters shooting their prey or targeting their victim, and the film brilliantly engages our participation as spectators in the hunt. The overlapping of the suspense/thriller genre with documentary techniques leaves the viewer caught between the representation of reality and cinema as entertainment spectacle. This self-reflexivity shows how, through the gaze, cinema can potentially promote the same relationship between viewer and film as the unchecked fascistic tendencies of the police or written media. Von Trotta/Schlöndorff

emphasize the transformation of Katharina Blum from victim of society's fascistic tendencies to manipulator of her own destiny. Likewise, cinema is transformed from a means for entertainment to a vehicle for social awareness.

The directors create the atmosphere of fascism through special effects which implicate the viewer in the stalking and degradation of the victim. An insidious blue light creates a feeling of institutionalization which permeates the scenes at the police station and the prison. The search of Katharina's apartment is shot in the bluish haze of the morning light; it eerily evokes documentaries of the Weimar Republic and of the fascism of Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. Likewise, the grotesqueness of the helmets and overtly military police uniforms, as well as the sheer numbers needed to search for one man, are ridiculed: forty years earlier such militarism had also been considered normal. The few bright and vibrant moments of color occur in the personal love story of Katherine and Ludwig. These short segments, creating brief moments of nostalgia, reinforce the potential pleasure of the "gaze." The true juxtaposition of the two genres in the film occurs when Katharina and Ludwig cross paths in prison and kiss spontaneously: documentary and romantic entertainment overlap for one fleeting instant. In this scene, von Trotta creates the opposition central in all her films through two simple but contradictory signifiers: the kiss, emblematic of personal love, and the prison, bastion of male power.

The original music is by composer Hans Werner Henze, noted for his contemporary, innovative styles of music in opera, ballet, and symphonic works. His electronic score reinforces the tension created between the two genres of documentary and suspense. The atonality of the music parallels the traditional harmony, and consonance associated with the release of tension is notably absent. As viewers, we feel unsettled as there is no comfortable stability of a tonal centre. Although the film attempts to validate its news-like statement about the German state in the 1970s by using its documentary techniques, the music represents the many forces at work within the film. Extreme elements—manifested in totalitarian police techniques, lewd and invasive media tactics, terrorist activities and even betrayal by the Church, represent a dissonant society; they evoke images of another German society on its way to catastrophe in the 1930s. The "music" at some points turns into real-life sounds that are simultaneously dissonant and harmonious, thus emblematic of the excessive order imposed by patriarchy. The blaring of police sirens reminds us of the excessive order imposed by a patriarchal state, while the church bells, harmonious and musical, can celebrate the culmination of a personal love affair through marriage or else underline the Church's powerful role in patriarchy.

The unique texture of the music, produced by a musical saw which creates a high-pitched vibrating sound, also gives expression to Katharina Blum's voice, squelched by the authoritative sounds around her. Like Marguerite Duras, the Schlöndorff/von Trotta team carefully orchestrates an alternative

form of music in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*. The score stands for the traditional musicality in which the melody represents the male dominant order and the female voice is associated with the harmonic accompaniment.

After *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, Margarethe von Trotta continued to focus on a female protagonist while revealing implicitly that the excesses of patriarchy are those that lead to fascism. Wishing to confront the personal in the political, however, she decided that representing the patriarchal society and woman's place within it, as she had effectively done through her collaborative efforts with Schlöndorff, was no longer the chief motivation for her writing and directing (Magretta, 1984, 282). Rather, she wanted to portray the personal struggles which women have to undergo in order to achieve personal expression, as well as the independent role they develop with other women. According to E. Ann Kaplan, "In a film movement already interested in combining the personal and the political, von Trotta's influence rendered the 'personal' more intimate, emotional and less distanced than it had appeared in the films directed by men."¹⁴ In the next chapter I will study four of the films von Trotta scripted and directed on her own: *Die bleierne Zeit*, *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Heller Wahn*, and *l'Africaine*. Starting with *Die Bleierne Zeit*, these films reveal von Trotta's belief that not only can the feminine personal experience be as significant for women as their political affiliation, but the personal is the political. Each of the heroines in these films learns

¹⁴ Kaplan, "Female Politics in the Symbolic Realm," p. 106.

about herself in different ways, but in each case she achieves selfhood through a personal confrontation with the patriarchal society.

Chapter 6

Von Trotta's Films: The Politics of Personal Commitment

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Selbstdenken ist der höchste Mut.

Bettina Brentano, 1839 (quoted in *Heller Wahn*)

This chapter will explore the ways in which *Die bleierne Zeit*, *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Heller Wahn* and *l'Africaine* represent von Trotta's distinctive feminine authorship as a scriptwriter and director. My analysis will investigate von Trotta's individual style and ways in which it signifies women's personal sphere. I have pointed out that her collaborative films with Schlöndorff were devoted to revealing fascistic tendencies of past and present political regimes. It is important to consider the production factors, both ideological and economic, that keep von Trotta's directing in the realm of mainstream narrative cinema. Since her professional separation from Schlöndorff, von Trotta has continued to explore feminine subjects while her

films have remained a box office success. Although von Trotta is committed to studying woman as subject in the face of patriarchal oppression, such feminists as Charlotte Delorme do not consider von Trotta's films explicit and radical enough to count as examples of feminist filmmaking. Von Trotta has chosen to work from within the system, however, and according to my definition, her films are examples of uniquely feminine texts. Von Trotta reveals the characters' motivations and actions through cinematic techniques that explore their personal experience.

Die bleierne Zeit

After the success of *Das Zweite Erwachen des Christa Klages* (1977) and *Schwestern oder Die Balance des Glücks* (1979), Margarethe von Trotta directed her third independent production, *Die bleierne Zeit*, in 1981. Critics' reaction to this film was varied. Barton Byg felt that the topic of terrorism in modern Germany was no longer relevant and that *Die bleierne Zeit* was just a "depoliticized aesthetic form"¹ of cinematic representation, namely an entertainment film. Charlotte Delorme wrote a scathing critique of *Die bleierne Zeit* as an "anti-feminist 'authentic' distortion of reality."² On the

¹ Barton Byg, "German History and Cinematic Convention harmonized in Margarethe von Trotta's 'Marianne and Juliane'," *Gender and German Cinema* 2 (1992): pp. 259-271.

² Charlotte Delorme, "On Marianne and Juliane," *Journal of Film and Video* 37.2, (Spring 1985): pp. 47-51.

other hand, Ellen Seiter found *Die bleierne Zeit* to be a sensitive, insightful film, with its "emphasis on psychology, its sustained emotional intensity."³

I do not agree with Charlotte Delorme's dismissal of *Die bleierne Zeit* as marked by anti-feminist bias because Delorme considers the film as a strictly political statement, choosing to ignore von Trotta's representation at the personal level. Nor do I agree with Barton Byg's claim that, since women spectators derive pleasure from the film, it fills the same role as melodramatic "woman's films" in the 1940s and 50s.⁴ In response to Byg's position, it is important to point out that the characters in von Trotta's film are not the strong, beautiful prototypes represented in these films. Nor is the narrative in *Die bleierne Zeit* a confirmation of patriarchal values by female heroines, as were the Hollywood "woman's films."⁵ The "pleasure" for the spectator of *Die bleierne Zeit* is achieved through the viewing of the personal experiences (past and present) of the two sisters. Von Trotta does not project the "male gaze" or solicit a strong identification by the female viewer with an ideal character on screen. As spectators, we are expected to break the pleasurable experience of identification at several points in the film and analyze why Marianne and Juliane, that is, Gudrun and Christiane Ensslin, have turned out the way they are, and how Marianne was killed.

³ Ellen Seiter, "The Political is Personal: Margarethe von Trotta's 'Marianne and Juliane,'" *Screen* (Spring 1985): p. 41.

⁴ Byg, "German History and Cinematic Convention," *Gender and German Cinema* 2 (1992): p. 264.

⁵ For an interesting feminist analysis of "woman's films" of the 1940s and 1950s see *Revision: Essays in Feminine Film Criticism*, Eds. Mary-Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (New York: University Publications of America and the American Film Institute, 1984).

The title of von Trotta's film, *Die bleierne Zeit*, is taken from a poem by Hölderlin and represents Germany in the 1950s during the dull, dreary period labelled by von Trotta as the "leaden" times. Von Trotta makes reference to the early Romantic poet, Hölderlin, who had used the expression to describe the atmosphere in Germany as a result of the war with Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By using this quotation von Trotta reveals her humanistic affinities. This title was changed for the English language version of the film to *Marianne and Juliane*, taking away the historical and political connotations. The new title was more accessible to North American audiences and it focused on the psychological study of women. The film won the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival in 1981 before opening in Western Germany. It received great acclaim internationally, but caused much controversy among Germans. Having just emerged from the terrorist period in the 1970s, they focused on the historical accuracy of the film. North Americans, on the other hand, saw the historical events as a backdrop to the main drama which dealt with women's self-identity as grounded in the nuclear family and social institutions. The various readings of the film ranged from categorizing the film as feminist (in the intellectual press such as *Die Zeit*) or anti-feminist (in feminist journals such as *Frauen und Film*), to labelling it as sympathetic to terrorism (by factions of the Right) or supportive of the status quo (by the political Left).⁶

⁶ Jennifer K. Ward, *The Films of Margarethe von Trotta and Their Reviews: A Feminist Critical Analysis* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1992), p. 90.

The film is presented from the points of view of Juliane, the sister who enacts her feminist beliefs within society, and her terrorist sister, Marianne. Marianne represents Gudrun Ensslin, a woman notorious in 1970s Germany when, after having been imprisoned as a member of the Red Army Faction, she died in Stammheim prison. While the official cause of death was suicide, her sister and supporters of the political Left suspected murder by the authorities. Von Trotta focuses her film on the point of view of the sister, Christiane (Juliane), whom von Trotta had met at the filming of *Deutschland im Herbst* (Kluge, 1978), a collectively produced film which discussed parallels between the Nazi past and the terrorist present in Germany. (Seiter, 1985, 45).

At the beginning of *Die bleierne Zeit* we see Juliane in her apartment and discover that she has been involved in a long-term heterosexual relationship. Childless, she puts her energy into working for women's causes and legal reforms within the framework of society through a feminist newspaper. "Ich habe meine Arbeit," she says, to justify not wanting children. Her live-in partner, Wolfgang, is supportive, but fairly weak. Marianne has deserted her husband (Werner) and child for her involvement in "the cause." Werner appears at the beginning of the film, before we meet Marianne, and asks Juliane to take care of his son while he is going on a trip. Instead, he commits suicide and Juliane must find the child a foster home. Juliane considers her sister selfish. All scenes involving Marianne, such as her ransacking of Juliane's apartment with terrorist friends in the middle of the

night, confirm this view. However, the flashbacks of Marianne show a sweet, obedient child and a "daddy's girl" who often defends her more rebellious older sister, Juliane. The personal and political differences have been reversed now that the sisters are adults. Marianne seems hard and impatient, despite her supposedly benevolent espousal of a cause for the good of humanity. She refuses to see the father she once adored; only her mother and sister are allowed to visit her in prison. When Marianne dies in prison, Juliane fights what she considers to be the injustice of the system on her dead sister's behalf. In this totally absorbing process, she loses her mate of ten years and reports her findings to the deaf ears of the media, who in the meantime have focused on "hotter," more recent issues. Finally, she accepts the responsibility of caring for her sister's young son, who has been seriously burned in a fire caused by arsonists who knew that Marianne was his mother. At the end of the film Juliane has painfully reached an understanding about herself and her relationship with Marianne, about her responsibility in terms of the family and society and about her need to integrate qualities of her sister's personality into her own.

The integration of the two sisters' qualities is important in understanding why von Trotta perceives the root of an important historical moment in Germany within the context of the nuclear family. By superimposing historical events on psychological family drama, von Trotta reinforces a German literary and cinematic tradition. Bertolt Brecht's *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (1941) and Helke Sander's *Deutschland, bleiche Mutter*

(1979) are two twentieth-century examples in which Germany is compared to a mother whose children carry the burden of individual political, social and economic woes. Critics who read *Die bleierne Zeit* as either exclusively an historical account (that, they protest, is not true-to-life) or an emotional drama that is too melodramatic, have ignored the importance of the duality in von Trotta's narrative. As in Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour*, the same "story" is described at two different levels: in the personal sphere, delving into the relationships of a patriarchal family, and in the public sphere, representing the struggles of a country under a fascistic regime.

To begin my analysis of *Die bleierne Zeit* I explore how von Trotta examines the purely psychological influences of the nuclear family, and how she uses a traditionally German motif, the *Doppelgänger*, or mirror image, in which the character is self-duplicated by an alter-ego of repressed qualities. If Marianne is the forbidden other half of Julianne, are we to believe that Marianne's actions are Julianne's repressed desires and *vice versa*? This "mirroring" of good and evil also occurs in Deren's surrealistic representations of *Unheimlichkeit* and in Duras's representation of the psychological Other through memory and desire. This opposition of good and evil and the widespread use of the "double" was a common theme in Romantic literature from Goethe on; strengthened by the influence of Freud's psychoanalytical theory, the motif has become the basis for both fantastic literature and the horror film through the influences of Freud's psychoanalytical theory of repression and sexuality.

According to Barton Byg, von Trotta uses this opposition between the characters to represent an ideological view of self-alienation. Marianne would represent the Other, usually emblematic of the feminine and "evil": "This 'Other' in literature, as well as in film, often possesses formerly ideal traits that become evil when taken to an extreme and in order to preserve the integrity of the narrative and the narrating subject, it must be destroyed or sacrificed so that its energies can be harnessed for good once more."⁷ For the purpose of this study on femininity and authorship, it is important to note that if the subject and the Other are both feminine, the feminine itself cannot be singled out as good or evil. Whether the Other is destroyed or assimilated (both processes take place in *Die bleierne Zeit*), the remaining subject is feminine. Rather than a female "Other" playing off a male protagonist, Marianne and Juliane represent two sides of the female subject. This interdependence of the sisters' lives is graphically represented by von Trotta's camera when the reflection of the two sisters is superimposed as one in the glass that separates them in prison.

In *Die bleierne Zeit*, von Trotta places her female characters within the symbolic order. In Lacanian terms, she makes the female protagonist, Juliane, who dominates the point of view of the film, part of the symbolic rather than the imaginary, giving her an active voice within the dominant order. Although the sisters are polarized, they do have a symbiotic

⁷ Barton Byg, "German History and Cinematic Convention," *Gender and German Cinema 2* (1992): p. 267.

relationship in which they depend on each other for survival. The death of Marianne leaves Julianne totally imbalanced until she can integrate aspects of Marianne's personality into her own. Their interdependence and closeness during their youth carries on in their adult opposition, as revealed in the flashbacks of their intimate moments. According to E. Ann Kaplan, the film can be read as an effective dramatization of the feminist slogan "the personal is political" because the sisters' relationships in the family determine the roles they play within and outside the male patriarchal society. The flashback scenes help illustrate the ways in which the personal has helped to create the political: "The theme of sibling rivalry and the debate about Left strategies that German terrorism has evoked are treated in the context of the German Nazi and Christian past which shaped the personal, political and social development of the sisters and accounts for their tortured, conflicted lives."⁸ Trotta, once again using the family to represent political situations, underlines that fascism and terrorism are parts of the same whole: the generation associated with the second World War has created offspring who have in common political extremism of the left or the right.

Neither of the two sisters is a complete female subject who can function independently and successfully at a personal or political level. Julianne does not have a child, but is committed to her work as a feminist. Marianne has had a child, but she does not nurture him, nor does she have a male life-partner because of her terrorist activities. Marianne's husband tells Julianne

⁸ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p.107.

that Marianne left him for other men who could do more for her sexually and that she was no better than any other "whore." Von Trotta once again reveals the dichotomy of female representation introduced in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* to show the limited choices a woman has when trying to establish her voice in society. If Marianne has rejected the traditional role of the nurturing mother or saint, the patriarchy labels her, like Katharina Blum, a whore on a path of self-destruction. The only family ties she has maintained are those with her sister and her mother. Thus, her personal life has become an extension of her political life: patriarchal responsibilities are renounced through denial of father, husband and son. The mother, oppressed by her husband's authoritarianism, is ineffectual. Von Trotta depicts mothers in this way to show how patriarchy prevents women's empowerment. Juliane is the only family member who can hold out a life-line to Marianne. The Oedipal struggle of traditional cinematic narrative is reversed to show the struggle of two sisters against the patriarchal society, one promoting change inside society (Juliane) and the other trying to destroy the patriarchal society from the outside (Marianne).

Von Trotta's technique of juxtaposing the personal and the public makes *Die bleierne Zeit* stand out as "one of the major works in the West German Cinema."⁹ Critics do not consider this film in a separate category as a "feminist film," but rather as an important mainstream feature film of early eighties New German Cinema. Von Trotta deals with the problems of the

⁹ A. Harris and R. Sklar, "Marianne and Juliane," *Cinéaste* 12.3 (1983): p. 41.

German past, as do many of her contemporary German filmmakers. Yet, von Trotta's style of filmmaking deals with this past in a feminine way. Much of the action takes place in domestic settings such as the kitchen, bedroom and living room of Juliane's apartment and the girls' family house in the flashbacks. The use of flashbacks not only links intimate details of the girls' personal lives with the past and advances the narrative, it recreates the emotion of the "leaden times" of their childhood in West Germany. Black and white film clips of gruesome wartime scenes reveal personal suffering that jolts the spectator, much as war scenes of Hiroshima in *Hiroshima mon amour* prevent the "male gaze" of pleasure. Another representation of the leaden times are the courtyards of the girls' youth, enclosed spaces where the only vitality comes from the girls themselves. These are linked with courtyards of the present, to the gloomy spaces of the prison and the sisters' present reality. The courtyard, like the garden in Duras's *Moderato Cantabile*, is associated not only with the confines imposed by society, but with the restrictions of femininity. The flashback to the past of these courtyards portrays the girls as they are seen "inside," just as Maya Deren recreated the representation of woman inside the window. Though she has escaped the "confines" of her childhood education and relation to the family, Marianne has been recaptured by society through imprisonment. Fragments of her cultivated past and her previous life reappear in prison. For example, she asks Juliane to bring her cello as well as several items of makeup. Juliane moves from her present-day apartment (a liberated domestic space) to the flashbacks of the courtyard and to the courtyard of the prison. Unlike

Marianne, Juliane, who was originally the rebel, remains a free agent. Although von Trotta does not sanction women's oppression by patriarchy, she gives a realistic portrayal in *Die bleierne Zeit* of the difficulties encountered in making political changes. Von Trotta emphasizes the importance of educating the new generation, who, like Marianne's boy, Jan, are scarred by the political excesses of the German past and present.

A variation on the courtyard is the museum yard where the two sisters meet in front of enormous stone sculptures and high walls. The ominous weight of history is represented by the overwhelming size of the statues and their historical connotations. The two women, with their imperfections and their fragile human condition, are dwarfed by the "great" patriarchal and Christian heritage the sculptures represent. Von Trotta's camera superimposes a monumental past onto the present through backgrounds that evoke history or through flashbacks, such as the one of the girls watching a film, horrified by the corpses in the Second World War concentration camps depicted in Alain Resnais's film *Nuit et Brouillard*. We have a direct view over the girls' heads as if we too were in the room witnessing the atrocities. In von Trotta's film, the German heritage is inevitably a fascistic shadow lurking behind the present. The right-wing political movement, represented by male authority, is linked inextricably to the Western patriarchal system.

In the flashbacks, von Trotta connects the girls' father directly to the authoritarian heritage of religion and the war, linking his education to the

girls' personalities as adults. When we see Marianne on her father's knee, we realize that she is over-eager to please him and to negotiate privileges for her sister. In this, the longest of the flashbacks, von Trotta reveals Juliane's rebelliousness against the authority of her father, breaking the dress code and smoking in school. But, as in the six other flashbacks, the most important single element to each of these scenes is the emotion about either personal or historical events and the importance that Juliane attaches to each of them. When the sisters meet in the cafeteria of the museum, a close-up of their coffee cups cuts to a flashback of cups of cocoa with skin on the cocoa while their father says his morning prayer off-screen. The two women burst out laughing at the shared memory of their complicity as children against the authority of the father. Von Trotta describes the scene in her screenplay as follows:

Währenddessen bildet sich auf den beiden Tassen Kakao von Marianne und Juliane eine dünne Haut. Sie sehen sich an, sehen die eklige Haut, machen ein angewidertes Gesicht. Die Mutter bemerkt es, schnell schliessen sie wieder die Augen zum Gebet.¹⁰

Memories of fear also provoke flashbacks, such as Juliane remembering scenes of being woken up at night to be taken to the air-raid shelter by their mother. Juliane and Wolfgang, on the other hand, do not have the same emotional bond as the two sisters. Marianne refuses Wolfgang (as well as the camera and spectators) the "male gaze." However, when on holiday in Portugal, Wolfgang takes pictures of Juliane in her nightgown on the sunny

¹⁰ H.J. and I. Weber, *Ein Film von Margarethe von Trotta* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1981), pp. 25-6.

balcony of their hotel room. During this colorful reprieve, in which the pleasure of the gaze is emphasized through Wolfgang's look and his camera's eye, Juliane temporarily takes on a more traditional female role. Von Trotta uses the next scene to show male insensitivity to female emotion. Wolfgang follows the distraught Juliane to the telephone booth just after she has found out about Marianne's death. He pauses inappropriately and casts an admiring look on an attractive young woman in a long white dress. A little later, he becomes violent in his frustration with Juliane and he leaves the relationship. Von Trotta implies that if women pursue their political beliefs, their personal lives in relationships with men will suffer. In *Rosa Luxemburg* and *Heller Wahn* she develops this thesis even further.

Although not chronological, the narrative of *Die bleierne Zeit* tells a story, once again based on the suspense/thriller genre. Von Trotta has us ask the question, "Who killed Marianne?" But in the analysis of von Trotta's film, this question serves as a focal point for the audience for many other themes. Von Trotta, like Duras and Deren, maintains interest through suspense. The outcome of the scenario is merely a pretext for airing von Trotta's views on German history and contemporary life through specifically feminine viewpoints. Jennifer K. Ward explains:

Marianne and Juliane discuss their childhood in the repressed 1950s, but they also discuss state policy, the usefulness of radical action as opposed to intellectual debate for the purpose of achieving social change, etc. Thus, their debates serve a narrative function, but also

constitute a meta-narrative about issues facing Germany and its relationship with the past.¹¹

Die bleierne Zeit, like *Hiroshima mon amour*, is primarily a work about memory. From the initial shot of Juliane at the window, most of the film is a flashback. The childhood scenes are actually flashbacks within flashbacks. Von Trotta uses the mimetic function of cinema and its ability to recreate memory to juxtapose the past and present, creating some of the effects Duras achieves in *Hiroshima mon amour*. As I pointed out in the chapter on Duras, the past is also the present since history repeats itself through emotional reactions (the personal sphere) similar to historical events (the public sphere). Jan, scarred at the end of the narrative through no fault of his own, looks like many of the war victims shown in the black and white documentary of the Second World War earlier in the film. In *Die bleierne Zeit*, von Trotta looks at the personal tragedy to individual victims of political excess. While acknowledging the loss of millions of victims in the holocaust of the war, she focuses on the single drama of one scarred victim left without parents. Juliane takes on the responsibility to care for this damaged life that Marianne has left behind, much as von Trotta's generation has assumed the legacy of the physical and moral burden of its parents' generation. The public or societal links which von Trotta makes between the 1970s and the Second World War are clear: fascism and totalitarianism are once again forces to be reckoned with, as they were thirty years earlier.

¹¹ Ward, *The Films of Margarethe von Trotta and Their Reviews: A Feminist Critical Analysis*, p. 90.

However, the uniquely feminine perspective that von Trotta brings to her film is the emotional interdependence of the two sisters and the "revision" of the personal and public history that has created them.

Rosa Luxemburg

If von Trotta was accused of not being factual in *Die bleierne Zeit*, she caused a fiercer debate about historical accuracy with her film, *Rosa Luxemburg*. The controversy around the film is, once again, based on whether or not *Rosa Luxemburg* distorts history by putting too much emphasis on the Polish revolutionary's personal life. In my view, von Trotta's commitment to reveal the personal life and conflicts of Rosa Luxemburg does not undermine the film's historical accuracy and political representation. Anna Kuhn claims that von Trotta's holistic approach to the filming of *Rosa Luxemburg* makes it a feminine work, one that represents the "whole" woman as a historical figure in a political context: "Von Trotta was faulted both for overemphasizing the personal to what was perceived as the detriment of the film's potential political message and for failing to employ innovative cinematic techniques, i.e. for relying on traditional Hollywood-style film narrative."¹² Having completed several independent film productions before *Rosa Luxemburg*, von Trotta was confident in her statement that the personal lives of women who were political leaders were at least as important as the political ideas they espoused. By presenting her

¹² Anna Kuhn, "A Heroine for our Time: Margarethe von Trotta's 'Rosa von Luxemburg'," *Gender and German Cinema*, Vol. II (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p.174.

ideas in a Hollywood-style vehicle she was able to communicate her message to the largest audience possible.

Rosa Luxemburg was murdered in 1919 after a brilliant career: she had played an important role as a theoretician and revolutionary in the Second International, and in Weimarian Germany. She achieved cult-figure status with the Left Wing student movement of the 1960s, to whom Luxemburg represented the image of the missed opportunities of the failed 1919 socialist movement in Germany. Both a pacifist and a revolutionary, she symbolized the hope of Marxism in Germany and the failed Communist revolution, *Spartakus*, before the spread of fascism in Germany and the subsequent occupation, killings and Holocaust of the Second World War.

Margarethe von Trotta's involvement in the sixties Left-wing student movement emphasizes the importance of her personal commitment in choosing Rosa Luxemburg as a subject for a film. The filmmaker explains, "Ich habe Rosa Luxemburg aus dem Landwehrkanal geholt."¹³ Since Luxemburg was killed by the anti-socialist forces and her body was disposed of in the *Landwehrkanal*, the word "geholt" confirms that, by resuscitating or recuperating Luxemburg (literally), von Trotta saves her and carries on her message. Ideologically, von Trotta reinvests in Luxemburg's pre-World War I political beliefs by projecting them through her own political slant of the 1980s. At the same time, we are given an inside look at Luxemburg's

¹³ Irene Dölling, "Rosa Luxemburg," *Weimarer Beiträge* 33 (1987): 633.

personal life and her relationships, including her love affair with Leo Jogiches.

Von Trotta follows the public incidents in Luxemburg's life, but she did much of her research from the five tomes of Luxemburg's personal, and often intimate, letters first published in German in the 1970s, although they had appeared in Polish in 1950.¹⁴ The German edition of the letters, published fifty years after Luxemburg's death, added an important personal aspect to the Rosa Luxemburg myth. While the epistolary form is often associated with biographical and autobiographical novels, letters (and journal writing) have been the most common form of feminine written expression since the seventeenth century. The personal lives and thoughts of female writers such as Mme. de Lafayette, Mme. de Sevigné, Mme. de Staël, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf have been revealed to their readers through the publication of their intimate correspondence. By exposing her correspondence in the mass medium of cinema, von Trotta brings Luxemburg's private life into a very public sphere.

Like Elzbieta Ettinger, who uses Luxemburg's correspondence in her literary biography of the Polish revolutionary (1986), von Trotta quotes the letters in the dialogues of her scenario. In this manner, she employs a form of diegesis, or textual storytelling, to create cinematic representation, revealing Luxemburg's private feelings and thoughts while advancing the

¹⁴ *Rosa Luxemburg: Briefe an Leo Jogiches* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971), p 6.

narrative. The filmmaker achieves, through this technique, a biography that is much more intimate than those traditionally written about political leaders, usually male. Von Trotta's research methods included reading every existing letter Rosa wrote, talking to people who had known her when they were young and spending hours contemplating actual places where she stayed: "I was uncomfortable doing a film that would require a historical analysis and unexpurgated authenticity, because that usually turns into an epic, which is not my kind of film. Her private life interested me so much more than her public role, which is of interest to historians primarily."¹⁵ In this statement von Trotta confirms that she is not a historian but a filmmaker, who uses the representation of Luxemburg's personal experience to make a "feminine" statement about historical analysis.

An example of a scene created from specific comments in letters is the flashback to 1899 in which Leo Jogiches reiterates the ultimatum to Rosa to choose between being a revolutionary or a mother. This was in response to a letter written in 1898 in which Rosa expressed a desire for a small apartment and to have a baby with Jogiches. Jogiches represents the male dichotomy in the patriarchal society of having to choose between public and private, or career and personal. He tells Rosa that her political ideas are her children. Von Trotta transforms the contents of their correspondence into a full-blown domestic scene in which Luxemburg shatters a mirror in her frustration. The reflection of her head intact and her jagged body where the mirror has been

¹⁵ K. Jahne and L. Rubinstein, "A Great Woman Theory of History: An Interview with Margarethe von Trotta," *Cineaste* (1987): p. 25.

broken show with one image the relationship between the comrades/lovers. Her head remains unscathed while the left side of her body (the side of the heart) has become deformed in the relationship with Leo. Rather than using the mirror as the traditional feminine signifier of containment and reflection for the "male gaze," von Trotta uses it to reflect the "whole" image of her female protagonist: her private personality and public persona. In the case of Luxemburg, the image has been shattered and the needs of the body and heart are "broken"—given up for the intellectual cause, signified by the head. Like Maya Deren in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, von Trotta uses the mirror to reflect female body fragmentation.

The narrative of *Rosa Luxemburg*, although naturalistic and quite conservative in its cinematic strategies, moves back and forth temporally. The treatment of Rosa's life and the political situation that surrounds her question the linear presentation of reality associated with the dominant order of history. A more traditional treatment of Luxemburg's story would have been found in Fassbinder's Luxemburg film on which he was working before his death in 1982. According to von Trotta, who inherited the Fassbinder project, Fassbinder's film lacked the feminine dimension of Luxemburg's life and did not contain any of her writings.¹⁶ *Rosa Luxemburg* is, in many ways, the most straightforward of von Trotta's films because the focus on a single female protagonist gives a unified vision of the world. In addition to recreating the texts of many of her letters written between 1906 and 1916, the

¹⁶ See A. Taubin, "Von Trotta, Wanting it All," *The Voice* 12 May 1987: p.78.

film features some of her speeches, helping us to understand her political beliefs. Through her conversations with other characters, including many important socialist figures of the period and the "love narrative" of her two important relationships with men, the viewer is able to perceive Luxemburg as an individual in the context of history. However, von Trotta allows the spectator's own impression of history to play a role in the identification process, rather than imposing the character's historical importance from the beginning of the film.

Von Trotta says that she is not comfortable with the epic style of historical filmmaking, a style associated with the male domination and large budgets of the film industry represented by American films such as *Ben Hur* (1959), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Dr. Zhivago* (1965) and Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel* (1979). As a result, tragic moments of epic proportions are understated in *Rosa Luxemburg*. Several times von Trotta "tricks" the viewer into what might be an epic spectatorship, as in the opening scene when the two armed soldiers are pacing a vast snow-covered field. Instead, the camera goes "underground" to reveal the prison (which in all of von Trotta's films represents the male bastion of power) where Rosa Luxemburg is being held. Von Trotta uses the technique of long shots to capture the breadth of a situation or an imminent epic moment only to zoom in with her camera, to focus on an intimate reaction. When Rosa receives the letter telling her about Karl's death at the front, von Trotta focuses on the intimate details: the black border of the letter, the black and white photo of the young

lover and, finally, uncontrollable sobbing at night in the privacy of the prison cell darkness. Like the filmmaker Agniewska Holland in *Bittere Ernte* (1985), von Trotta has chosen to show the universal suffering incurred by war through the emotional intensity of one person's story, rather than creating scenes of death at the battlefield.¹⁷ By doing so, she reveals the personal tragedy of wartime, and through the process of identification, the film spectator can feel the pain of the loss. As in most of von Trotta's films, much of the action in *Rosa Luxemburg* takes place in domestic space. When speaking about politics in the living room (symbolic of the semi-public sphere), surrounded by men, Luxemburg is relegated to women's issues, a restriction which she refuses. After the break-up with Leo, long shots of each character in separate rooms show how Leo and Rosa no longer occupy the same space (personally) although they still live in the same house (politically). Likewise, the prison, von Trotta's perpetual symbol of female confinement, becomes a personal space for Luxemburg, one over which she can take some personal (and feminine) control despite her suppression. She has her own library and cultivates a tiny garden. She makes artistic works from the leaves of her plants, thus transforming nature into art. We even see Luxemburg taking a leisurely bath and talking to an impressionable female prison guard. In other words, during the First World War, within the confines of the prison, Luxemburg establishes her own space in which she continues the activities associated with femininity, such as reading, writing and gardening. One of the few women from whom we have a prison diary,

¹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar give many poignant examples of the "feminine" perspective of the Second World War in *No Man's Land*, Vol. 3.

Luxemburg used her writing to express her personal thoughts as well as to continue her party activities through political correspondence and communication with the outside. Von Trotta transposes this writing to visual images which allow us to identify with her life in prison.

As usual, von Trotta places her female characters within the symbolic order, allowing them a voice in dominant discourse. By doing so, she gives them power to change the existing system. Yet, Luxemburg herself was not a feminist and felt that the oppression of women would automatically be lifted with the removal of capitalistic oppression. Nonetheless, her humane socialism was not always heeded by the party leaders. Moreover, Luxemburg and her socialism are both silenced at the end of the film. It is von Trotta herself who has taken the iconographic figure of the mother of socialism (represented by the huge posters shown in the film) and transposed her from the imaginary realm of identification to the symbolic sphere of action. Von Trotta uses cinema to recreate Luxemburg's message of social democracy and anti-militarism in contemporary Germany.

Von Trotta's Rosa Luxemburg is more effective in the public realm than in her private life, in which she is not able to negotiate many of her desires and where she has to pay the price for her political beliefs. Yet, can we be sure that the image created of Luxemburg by von Trotta is an accurate one? According to Anna Kuhn, this question poses an illusory problem, since there is no true version of history: "Those who bring the critical norm of

'objectivity' to bear, who fault the film with failing to portray accurately the 'real' Rosa Luxemburg, overlook the fact that every biography is an interpretation."¹⁸ Kuhn's answer is important, however, because it validates von Trotta's belief that a personal version of history is at least as "accurate" as one that represents dates and epic events.

Yet, while emphasizing the personal, von Trotta has not reduced the film's political significance nor diminished Luxemburg's role as a political activist. Von Trotta identifies with Luxemburg as a woman and as a political figure; she combines both of these figures in her biographical project. From the spectator's point of view, the film can be considered as a "feminine" film with a political commitment to history. Feminists accuse von Trotta of employing mainstream cinematic devices to create a subjective heroine. The director does use suspense and romantic intrigue to capture the spectator's interest, which allows the viewer to slip into the comfortable position of spectator. However, by engaging the spectator to follow the story, the filmmaker communicates her own ideological views about socialism and women's role in society. As a director who avoids oppositional discourse, von Trotta may not qualify as a feminist author, but perhaps a more controversial approach would not have allowed her message to reach as large an audience.

¹⁸ Kuhn, "A Heroine for our Time," *Gender and German Cinema* 2, p. 174.

Heller Wahn and l'Africaine

The first two von Trotta films I have analyzed portray personal lives in a political context. The two other films I will discuss represent personal relationships in what appears to be an apolitical context, but which, from their representation of the feminine condition and the difficulty of maintaining fulfilling relationships with both men and women, reveal a woman's point of view in patriarchal society. *Heller Wahn* (1984) and *l'Africaine* (1991) represent von Trotta's belief that the personal is political through the analysis of relationships between women which take alternative forms from those usually accepted in patriarchal society. In both cases, the friendships between two women have an important psychological effect on them, and they produce serious emotional manifestations. The male protagonist, as in all of von Trotta's films, is fairly one-dimensional. He is especially important as an angle in a triangle: the relationship between the two women usurps the power the male character has over them. In both films, von Trotta subverts the "oedipal model" (Flitterman-Lewis, 1992, 8) found in traditional narrative cinema in which two men often compete for the love of the same woman. Thus von Trotta emphasizes the shortcomings of the patriarchal view on life and art.

Heller Wahn (*Sheer Madness* in English) is primarily a film about the friendship between Ruth and Olga and its intersection with Ruth's marital relationship with Franz. Olga, a self-confident teacher, first meets Ruth as

she is painting in a room at a mutual friend's house in Provence. The husband, Franz, who is very protective of Ruth, tries to maintain an image of her as a mentally and emotionally dependent female who needs him for survival. When, in a moment of frustration with the situation, Franz tells Ruth that Olga was friends with her only because he asked her to be, Ruth attempts suicide. After her recovery, Olga takes Ruth on a teaching trip to Egypt where she appears to flourish and become self-confident; but she quickly loses her new-found security upon her return to Franz. It is evident that Franz is jealous of the relationship between Ruth and Olga. Although it was originally he who had asked Olga to take care of Ruth, he can no longer handle the situation because he feels excluded. After a screaming fight between Olga and Franz, Ruth calmly kills Franz in their own apartment, in a scene reminiscent of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*. During her trial the only words Ruth says in her defense are that she would like to thank Olga for helping kill her husband: "Ich möchte Olga danken, dass sie mir geholfen hat...ihn zu töten." Ruth thanks Olga for helping her destroy patriarchal oppression. But at what price? Von Trotta makes the spectators wonder if either Ruth or Olga will be freer after this violent act. While Katharina Blum saved her personal life by killing her oppressor (she went to prison with her loved one), von Trotta leaves it up to the spectator to decide how Ruth's personal life will be affected by her crime.

When Olga first comes to visit Ruth, Franz sends Ruth to the kitchen, the "woman's domain," and plays host to Olga in the more public sphere of the

living room. Ruth and Franz's relationship can survive only while Ruth occupies the spaces associated with her confinement. Ruth even threatens to commit suicide with the clothesline, as she feels strangled by domesticity. When she leaves the domestic space of the house to go to school or to travel with Olga, she reaffirms her personality and seems to overcome her "madness." Franz's murder scene takes place in the living room, signifying that, through this action, she has entered the public sphere.

Ruth is a painter, but her works are black and white imitations of great male masters. When we see her painting she is in the dark, or with her back facing the window. Her artistic creative process is associated with lack of light, her canvases with a lack of color. In this film von Trotta makes a statement about femininity and its relationship to mimesis (visual representation) and diegesis (story-telling). Von Trotta feels it is visual art, and consequently cinema, that is the "higher" art form, thereby justifying her choice of cinema as a means of expression. As both the writer and director of her films, von Trotta explores femininity and literary as well as cinematic authorship in *Heller Wahn*. As Ruth's public art of mimesis is imitative and monochromatic, it confirms the lack of female role models upon which to base artistic creativity. In contrast, Olga, a university teacher of literature who tells the story of female writers like Karoline von Günderrode, has affirmed her emancipation by studying and teaching the literary exploits of other women. In other words, her voice in the symbolic order is based on the feminine voice. Ruth confides in Olga that she does paint her own style of

illusionistic color canvasses in private, but she does not dare to show them in public. Thus von Trotta portrays Ruth, not Olga, as the true creative artist. It would seem that for von Trotta, visual art, including cinema, is a natural expression of feminine creativity, but cannot survive without the support system of the feminine narrative and role models, a function that Olga provides.

Heller Wahn received more negative reviews than any of von Trotta's other films. This can be partially explained by the difficulty for mainstream critics, most of whom are male, to identify with the characters. The film is more overtly anti-patriarchal than her other films. For example, while Juliane in *Die bleierne Zeit* learns to live within the confines of society, losing her male partner in the process, Ruth kills her partner—along with her adherence to the patriarchal structure of society. However, *Heller Wahn* is a melodrama set up in a conventional cinematic narrative, and the "male gaze" has been twisted to accommodate von Trotta's feminine point of view. If we return to Laura Mulvey's model of three-tiered "looked-at-ness," von Trotta has ingeniously manipulated spectator identification. Among the characters, Franz looks at Ruth as his possession since she is his wife, but he also looks at Olga with the "male gaze"; he is attracted to her physically and treats her "as a woman." He flirts and sits close to her on the couch when she comes to visit Ruth at the apartment. Von Trotta's camera explicitly looks at Olga with the "male gaze"; for example, when she is sitting with Franz in the living room the camera frames her exposed legs. The camera opposes Olga's

coquettish look of self-confidence with Ruth's air of vulnerability, but both are objects of the constructed "male gaze" of the camera. This gaze is manipulated by von Trotta as a self-reflexive technique. On one hand we can subvert the "male gaze" and identify with the female protagonists and, even if we do not applaud the final violent act, we at least comprehend it. On the other hand, as spectators we can identify with Franz, project his "male gaze" on both females, and sympathize with him for his need to protect Ruth against herself. If this is the case, Ruth is also pointing at the spectator when she points the gun at Franz; the film turns black and white because she has "killed" cinema as an entertainment spectacle and destroyed the illusion of pleasure through the "male gaze."

Much of the basic story line of *L'Africaine*, a melodrama about the interrelationships between two women and one man, is similar to *Heller Wahn*. However, *L'Africaine* appeared seven years later, in 1991 when the political climate had changed after the end of the Communist regime in the Eastern European nations, the reunification of Germany and the forming of the European Common Market. The film was a collaborative effort between Germany, Italy and France (EuropaCinema) and appeared in French in its North American première. Germany's specific politics were no longer necessarily relevant for all of von Trotta's spectators. The story is, once again, that of a love triangle involving two women and one man. Again, the relationship between the two women becomes more intriguing than the heterosexual love interest. Both women are in love with the same journalist,

Victor. Victor has left Martha to marry Anna, her best friend. In reaction to the situation, Martha has gone to Africa, but she returns upon hearing of Anna's serious illness. Anna feels that she has become victim to some magic spell exacted by Martha. Although both women love the journalist, it becomes obvious that their love for each other is simply the other side of the hatred they sense. Their rivalry is as strong a bond as the heterosexual love for which they ended their friendship. Martha and Anna learn to come to terms with their relationship and realize that in many ways it was Victor's weakness that caused the situation to occur. The ending is the most conciliatory of any of von Trotta's films, as the three leave for Africa to live as a *ménage à trois*.

At its North American premiere, *L'Africaine* was described as both "drama and light comedy and among the best new films to come out of Europe this year."¹⁹ Although von Trotta remains concerned with the same themes of personal relationships between women and their positioning within and outside the patriarchal society, she seems to have mellowed with this film. First, like Schlöndorff, she has assumed a place at the forefront of EuropaCinema,²⁰ breaking away from the heavy political and social questions associated with post-war Germany. Secondly, she has introduced comic elements through the counterpoint plot which involves two mysterious old men who witness the narrative from a spectator position. Von Trotta has made male characters, rather than females, the subject of the "secondary"

¹⁹ *Palm Springs International Film Festival Magazine* (January 1991), p. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Felice Laudadio is cited as the Founder and director of EuropaCinema, p. 5.

marginal narrative symbolized by the counterpoint music. Von Trotta's films definitely stay within the realm of drama, and she is often criticized for an obsession with a representation of reality that borders on pathos (Ward, 1992). Von Trotta has distanced the camera from her characters with fewer close-ups; this effect emphasizes their psychological trauma. *L'Africaine* has a Hollywood look to it: the vibrant colors and magnificent outdoor shots of the mystical Celtic remains in Brittany enhance the spell woven by the narrative. Eleni Kanandrau's music contributes the mystical atmosphere.

At the beginning of the film Anna is in the hospital (another institution symbolizing confinement) with a mysterious illness. At first glance, *L'Africaine* is reminiscent of 1940s films such as *Dark Victory* in which women are silenced by their illness and the male protagonist has the power to cure them. However, Victor is powerless to cure Anna. It is, in fact, Martha who helps Anna recover. Although Victor's personality is more fully developed than the male characters in other von Trotta films, he appears attractive and weak, attributes similar to those of the classical cinematic heroine. Other than his good looks, he does not possess the qualities that would make the (male) spectator identify with him as a hero. Von Trotta may be subverting the "cinematic apparatus" so that the women, who have the power to withhold or give the male character their love, are the strong characters with whom the female spectators can identify. Yet, if the male spectator is unable to participate in the process of identification, is von Trotta not creating a situation of reverse discrimination? Perhaps she is, but in the

1990s, male spectators may have to learn to identify with the "feminine" problems of female protagonists, just as women have identified with male heroes in genres such as historic epics and war films in which women are almost invisible. Von Trotta is proposing a new genre, similar to the woman's film of the 1940s, but which, rather than supporting the patriarchal system through its ending, redefines it.

Von Trotta introduces mystical elements, such as spirituality and witchcraft, to represent a side of femininity she has not explored in the other films in this study. In *L'Africaine* she enters the imaginary order, examining the Other at a spiritual rather than psychological level. After keeping her female protagonists in the symbolic order in her other films, in *L'Africaine* Von Trotta seems to relinquish certain political strides she has made in her independent films since 1975. Her characters seek a matriarchal heritage through spirituality and mysticism. Judith Mayne analyzes this phenomenon in *The Woman at the Keyhole* (1990) in which she explores the relationship between women in the realm of "primitive" representation and the anthropological construction of the "Other." Mayne tries to deconstruct the appropriation of the "primitive," trying to read it in a "different, more complex way, resistant to the lure of an archaic femininity, a tribal past or a one-dimensional 'Third World' identity."²¹ According to Mayne, the "primitive" would be another way of expressing feminine bonding, an unconscious or unspoken heritage among women.

²¹ Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, p. 213.

If Ruth, with the help of Olga, destroys the patriarchal power controlling her in *Heller Wahn*, Martha and Anna go one step further by exploring feminine bonding. The unconventional ending removes the characters from the symbolic order and allows them to escape to Africa, which symbolizes the imaginary realm for the spectators. (Africa represents the cradle of a tribal society that opposes the logocentric hierarchical societies that were established in the Middle East, Greece and Rome.) The "happy ending" of a three-way love relationship in which all characters are integrated could not have been achieved in von Trotta's other films. Most significantly, Victor (his name is emblematic) has as much to gain in this arrangement as the two women. While Franz had already lost Ruth before she killed him in *Heller Wahn*, Victor keeps a relationship with both women, who are characterized as parts of a whole. Most importantly in von Trotta's universe, Anna and Martha keep the bond of their feminine friendship, as well as the love of a male partner.

Von Trotta's filmmaking style has changed with *L'Africaine*, as she further leaves the political sphere to explore personal relationships more deeply. Perhaps she has made her important political statements in her previous films and realizes that 1990s audiences, with a unified Germany and European Common Market, pay less attention to films with political viewpoints. I suggest that she may have chosen to leave the "political" aside temporarily, as she delves deeper into the exploration of the "personal" in her

films, emphasizing feminine bonding and spirituality. By further exploring the psychological and personal realms of femininity, von Trotta allows her female protagonists to escape to the imaginary by leaving for a geographic Other. With this entertaining film von Trotta seems to leave the documentary background of her previous films and allow viewers to enter the imaginary realm through the pleasure of the cinematic experience.

Like Duras, von Trotta has remained successful since she first became an independent filmmaker in the 1970s. However, unlike Duras, von Trotta has become more conventional in her filmmaking, imitating the glossy look of Hollywood production in *L'Africaine*, as she competes in the tighter EuropaCinema market. While emphasizing personal experience over political statement in all of her films, she has not delved into innovative filming techniques like disembodiment of the female voice (Duras, *India Song*) or superimposing multiple psychological realities through surrealistic techniques (Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, *At Land*). Instead, von Trotta uses the cinematic palette of realism: the challenge for von Trotta as a writer and director is to portray women who achieve selfhood or personal fulfillment.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Defining the "feminine" in the imaginary and symbolic

In this study I have tried to demonstrate that the "feminine" authorial voice must be identified in terms of a complex understanding of its production and its representations. While I have outlined criteria to define this authorship, I have not attempted categorical divisions between "male" and "female" or "feminist" and "feminine." Nor have I tried to embark on a thorough discussion of essentialist positions as opposed to anti-essentialist ones in feminist discourse. In reproducing the polarity of dominant discourse, these distinctions fail to provide an adequate framework for the analysis of feminine authorship (Cixous, 1981). The latter is, after all, characterized by personal experience and multiple viewpoints.

Laura Mulvey and later feminist cinematic theorists such as Elizabeth Cowie, Judith Mayne, Mary Anne Doane and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis formulate female desire through and in direct contrast to the "male gaze." These theorists have helped me argue that women do not have a fixed subject or spectator position,

but one that fluctuates and is constantly redefined. Initially placing woman in the role that viewers traditionally anticipate when viewing films, Deren, Duras and von Trotta then establish the female protagonist as a subject with whom the female spectators can identify. Although their later films tend to subscribe more strongly to the latter position, their feminine authorship incorporates both "being looked at" as the object of the gaze and "looking at" as the subject. As a result, male and female spectators of these films must establish a more complex looking position than the traditional, monolithic stance that the mainstream cinema requires of the hypothetical male viewer proposed by Mulvey.

This study analyzes the dynamics of viewership produced by individual cinematic texts. Within the theoretical framework of the thesis I have presented Lacan's theory of discourse, which draws on Freud's thesis of sexual development. Much cinematic theory is based on Lacan's "mirror phase," which explains that cinema reproduces the child's pleasurable experience when it first sees itself in the mirror. The symbolic order occurs after the "mirror phase" when the child begins to acquire language. Lacan states that because women lack the transcendental signifier, the phallus, they cannot speak in the symbolic order and are therefore relegated to silence in the realm of the male imaginary. I have applied the framework of Lacan's theory of symbolic and imaginary orders to Deren, Duras and von Trotta's explorations of the imaginary realms of male desire. In the first person female voice of Maya Deren's poems, Anne Desbasresdes in *Moderato Cantabile*, and Katharina Blum in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, woman is seen as castrated. In their earlier works, the three

authors recognize this silence associated with "lack" ("absence" is the term Marguerite Duras uses), before choosing to find a way of speaking through a new form of discourse. The writers' protagonists first try to voice their female desire within the imaginary realm where they are perceived by dominant discourse as mute objects of male desire. In this sphere feminine authors project women as objects, but as voiceless subjects as well. The poet describes herself as "voiceless" and "mute" in Deren's poem "He/To Sasha." Duras's "Elle" cannot tell her story until the end of the screenplay of *Hiroshima mon amour*. Katharina Blum stays a speechless captive of the system until she radically silences Tötges by killing him. Inevitably, the three authors move to the medium of cinema from the written text in order to try to construct a distinctly female imaginary (or female symbolic in the case of von Trotta) as described by Margaret Whitford,¹ in which woman articulates the "woman-as-speaking" subject, no longer silenced nor the object of masculine desire. In their later work, however, Deren, Duras and von Trotta refuse to categorize the feminine as the "Other" in male symbolic discourse and rework feminine representation within or between the symbolic and imaginary orders.

Deren, Duras and von Trotta, who come from different cultural backgrounds, produce very different styles of authorship. Despite these differences, there are common elements in their feminine expression. All three authors began their careers as writers. Deren wrote poetry at the beginning of her career, but discarded much of it because she found it too derivative of male Imagist role

¹ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 43.

models like T.S. Eliot. Because she was not in direct contact with other women poets or reading their work, she did not recognize the quality of original feminine expression in her poems. Deren expressed a "voice" of pain and fragmentation in her role as "woman" in patriarchal society that was similar to that of several female modernists although not directly influenced by them (Edna St. Vincent Millay, H.D., Sylvia Plath). Deren's few remaining poems and their representation of the feminine psychological unconscious allow a comparison of her poetic images with the ones she has produced on-screen. Cinematic imagery became an effective means of poetic expression for Deren because she was able to disrupt and re-arrange physical reality more radically than in the written word.

As for von Trotta, after her very successful screenplay with her husband in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, she insisted that she had to create films as an independent director because Schlöndorff's film subjects no longer interested her. This desire to shift from the representation of political interests to the analysis of women's personal psyche gave her protagonists a more nuanced role in the symbolic order. Likewise, Duras, already recognized as a writer, realized how innovative cinematic creation affected her feminine voice when she wrote the screenplay for *Hiroshima mon amour*. By disembodiment of the female voice, she was able to disassociate women from their traditional role as objects of the "male gaze" and give new meaning to the "feminine voice." She employed this technique in later feature films of her own such as *India Song* and *Le Navire Night*, in which there are two completely separate "tracks."

Film, as a medium of feminine expression, as represented by Deren, Duras and von Trotta, often more effectively represents the multiplicity of women's real and psychological worlds than the written text can.

From Text to Cinematic Image

Focusing on the process of signification in feminine authorship, I have highlighted the transition from text to cinematic image. This analysis has helped me to analyze a "gap" in feminine authorship between the dominant patriarchal discourse and an oppositional feminist stance. This gap is a broader name for what Luce Irigaray defines as "inter-dict,"² the space between the lines and between the realized meanings in "an intentionally phallic currency." Masculine discourse is represented by the lines (the written text) or the "phallic currency." The space between the lines, as Marguerite Duras points out, can be interpreted as the "absence" of feminine expression within the logocentricity of dominant discourse. After expressing frustration with the limitation of their production as female authors, all three female writers left the written page for the cinematic screen.

This movement from writing to film could indicate that there is something lacking in the "phallic currency" of the written text that does not allow some women to express themselves openly or find a voice. Hélène Cixous refers to the

² Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), p. 22.

logocentricity of the text and its reproduction of phallogocentrism: "La hiérarchisation soumet à l'homme toute l'organisation conceptuelle."³ Although Cixous herself experiments with writing rather than cinema, she emphasizes that new expression cannot take place with the words used to express old, male ideas. By choosing the cinematic medium, Duras, Deren and von Trotta divert the logocentricity of their culture to a visual and auditive experience, and the screen becomes a relatively new site for innovative feminine artistry and expression. Nonetheless, the written text does remain an essential part of their feminine expression. Deren creates "ciné-poems," in which the written text at the beginning and the voice-over are integral parts in *Mesher of the Afternoon* and *At Land*. Duras gives primacy to the off-screen female storytellers in *India Song*. Von Trotta uses dialogue and sophisticated word play in *Die bleierne Zeit* to reach the viewer at an intellectual as well as emotional level. By insisting on the primacy of the text while working with visual images, the authors create a unique discourse composed of both literary and cinematic expression.

Femininity: a need for independence

All three authors were influenced by male discourse through the legacy of their Western culture and education. Furthermore, collaboration with Hammid, Resnais, and Schlöndorff respectively changed their expressions as artists. In each relationship the woman was in the subordinate or inexperienced position at

³ Hélène Cixous, "Sorties" in *La jeune Née* (Paris: Union générale d'Éditions, 1975), p. 117.

the beginning of the partnership while the male offered technical expertise and financial backing. Each female author in this study subsequently broke away from the male/female team relationship to embark on a new path as an independent film director with distinctive ideas about her own filmmaking style.

I began my exploration of each author's work by analyzing the multiple points of view in their feminine writing: Deren's poems, Duras's *Moderato Cantabile* and von Trotta's *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* are all earlier works that begin to establish an obvious "feminine" point of view by presenting narratives about women by women. The overlapping between the female protagonist's objectivity and subjectivity dominates the earlier written works. Rather than clearly delineating the female as subject, the earlier literary texts or collaborative film productions use the written text to analyze the personal sphere of expression. For example, in her poetry Maya Deren focuses on the psychological effects of heterosexual love on the female protagonist who is "impaled." The drama in *Moderato Cantabile* consists in the mother's loss of jurisdiction over her son because of an affair that never happened, while *Hiroshima mon amour* focuses on the tragedy of a woman's personal loss while the destruction of thousands act as a backdrop. Likewise, Katharina Blum's personal agony mirrors the victimization of millions of past and present victims of fascistic regimes.

In their later independent works, each author transforms the personal sphere into another form of history. The female subject's personal story provides a new kind of narrative that combines the personal story with the public story. Deren's

At Land becomes a non-linear feminine myth and odyssey, a rebirth and a redefinition of woman as the creator of her own destiny. *India Song* and *Le Navire Night*, by separating the female voice from the body, create a unique form of discourse that appeals to the senses and foregrounds the female protagonists to such a degree that the men in the film become non-subjects. In *Heller Wahn* and *L'Africaine*, the male characters act as sounding boards for the female characters' thoughts and actions, but are not themselves overbearing characters representative of the phallic, symbolic order that would be opposed by women in feminist discourse. It even seems that in order to focus on the female subjects, the male characters are slighted. The question arises whether, by reducing the importance of the male characters, women filmmakers wish to replace the "male gaze" with a female one. Perhaps rather than simply reversing the "male gaze," the "female gaze" replaces voyeurism with intimacy, as I will illustrate in Agnès Varda's film, *Jacquot de Nantes* in the next section.

Continued research on femininity and authorship

Other female authors who work as both writers and filmmakers deserve to be studied. Deren, Duras and von Trotta may be considered the predecessors of women film directors who write their own films, like Jane Campion [*Sweetie* (1988), *An Angel at My Table* (1990), *The Piano* (1993)] and the established filmmaker Agnès Varda (*Jacquot de Nantes*, 1993). Campion and Varda, too, implement the techniques of feminine authorship discussed in this thesis, such as

spatial rearrangement, articulation of feminine desire through a split subject/object point of view and the blending of personal and public spheres. *An Angel at My Table* is the story of Janet Frame, a woman writer who spent eight years of her life in insane asylums. By choosing a woman writer's biography, Campion places herself and other women artists in the subject position. Analyzing the personal life of a woman author allows Campion to explore feminine authorship through cinema. Campion diverts the conventional expectations of the "male gaze" by portraying Frame as an obese child who is self-conscious of her body and does not even want to wash. Although firmly entrenched in the subject position, Frame is confined by the space around her until near the end of the film: in the small and oppressive house in which she grew up, in the schoolroom where she feels too claustrophobic to teach, and finally, in the mental asylum where, like Katharina Blum, she is locked up by the forces of the patriarchal society. Frame is literally liberated through her writing, as the sale of her book prevents her from having the lobotomy the authoritative male doctor assures her she needs. It is only by a trip to the exotic Other, which, in the reversed New Zealand world (down under) is the Old World of Europe, that the writer can establish herself as a woman. Exposed to freedom, artists, and a summer love affair in Spain, she is reborn. The scene in which she is swimming nude, with her lover looking on, is the first scene where she looks slim and lithe, thus transformed by the camera into an object of desire. The sea, as in Deren's *At Land*, transforms the female protagonist into the split subjectivity of subject/object, and after her disappointment in love Frame can "see" her own life from a greater distance. Because of its stark, realistic style and

subject matter, *An Angel at My Table* did not attract the same mainstream audience as *The Piano*.

Produced three years later, *The Piano* met with overwhelming international success. The female protagonist, Ada, is literally mute after losing her first husband to a traumatic accident. The music of her piano replaces her voice, a haunting original air in which both the right and the left hand play the melody, a technique of validating the feminine to which I earlier alluded in *Moderato Cantabile*. As in *India Song*, we "feel" the emotion surrounding the protagonist's life without hearing her speak; the music is her disembodied voice. The protagonist, who has been "sold" with her daughter to her new husband, cannot live without her piano. We are struck by the importance of her piano through the powerful imagery of her arrival in her new home in the New Zealand bush. A frail Ada, her daughter, and the elegant piano are contrasted with the infinite sea in the background. Like the women's films of my study, *The Piano* reenacts the gothic tale. Travelling through the danger and mystery of the forest the female protagonist has to escape the imprisonment of her new house to the site of romantic love and her beloved music. However, Campion has reworked the gothic story for film, making it a woman's story of disaster and rebirth. For example, when her future lover negotiates use of the piano in exchange for looking under her skirt or watching her take off pieces of clothing, the viewpoint conveys her mixed feelings of awkwardness and pleasure, rather than the site of pleasure for the spectator/voyeur. The texture of the subsequent love scene showing both partners' total nudity and desire simulates an eroticism similar to

that found in Duras's *L'Amant*. However, the eventual punishment for this adulterous pleasure which, as in the *Scarlet Letter* (1864) has historically been women's greatest crime, is a brutally symbolic "castration" of one of the fingers that allowed her to express herself so exquisitely on the piano. In the end, after nearly drowning as she is pulled down into the water with her piano, but experiencing a self-willed rebirth in the sea, she learns to make a new kind of music accompanied with the clicking of the metal finger. The new sound of this music is a constant reminder of her past repression: "Une main étrange, faite d'un objet (amoureux, le faux doigt fabriqué par Baines) greffé sur l'épiderme, une main qui, avec ce petit bruit sec produit par le choc du métal sur l'ivoire des touches, a une manière inédite de jouer du piano, comme est unique l'art de Jane Campion sur la gamme du cinéma."⁴ Jane Campion's unique filmmaking style is derived from the concept of woman as voiceless subject portrayed through powerful visual imagery. It has provided her with recognition in international cinema as a scenario writer and director. Like Deren, Duras, and von Trotta, Campion has taken traditional gothic themes such as the heroine's imprisonment and escape through the forest as well as the repressed side of the feminine unconscious, and rearranged them to create a unique "feminine" voice that is based on music.

Agnès Varda's approach to feminine authorship in *Jacquot de Nantes* adds new dimensions to the discussion in this thesis. Varda participated in the *nouvelle vague* and, like Duras, has been associated with the period of French

⁴ Frédéric Strauss, "Abysses," *Cahiers du Cinema* 467/8 (May 1993): p. 15.

filmmakers such as Truffaut, Chabrol and Godard. Her recent film is an intimate narrative about French filmmaker and painter, Jacques Demy, Varda's husband. Although it is a biography about a male artist, Varda achieves what I call a unique "female gaze" through *cinécriture*, a process she explains as an essentially visual texture developed during filmmaking.⁵ Through the portrayal of Demy's childhood, interspersed with his adult life as an artist, we perceive the intimate relationship between Varda and Demy, a relationship that, as Varda infers, duplicates his relationship with his mother. Varda achieves the "female gaze" by focusing on Jacquot's boyhood in Nantes and observing the tender quality of his relationship with his mother. Varda uses the endearing nickname, Jacquot, and emphasizes the personal moments at home and with his mother and family. These black and white scenes evoke a nostalgic intimacy and innocence that allow the spectator to feel the bond Jacquot shared with his mother. For example, the parents and the two brothers sleep in the same room and Jacquot quietly listens to his parents making love, content with the warmth and intimacy of sharing their bedroom. His mother portrayed in the kitchen is constantly doing domestic tasks like cooking, baking and washing Jacquot while the father works in the garage: comfortable sexual stereotypes in what appears to be a simpler pre-war patriarchal society. The relationship between the mother and the son becomes as much the subject of the film as Jacquot himself. The scenes of Jacquot's childhood are interspersed with documentary style scenes of Demy representing himself. Finally, the most creative filmmaking technique is the juxtaposition of scenes of Demy's films featuring well-known actresses such as

⁵ Defined in Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's discussion on Varda in *To Desire Differently* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 258.

Catherine Deneuve and Jeanne Moreau. Here, Varda uses a *mise en abîme* technique in which Demy's work becomes part of Varda's own work, to illustrate Demy's interaction with women. Jacquot's relationship with his mother is presented from a Freudian point of view: his first intimate love prepared him for all relationships with women, including those as a filmmaker. On the other hand, his hatred of war and the atrocities of its "male" activities are featured as Demy gives his political point of view following actual scenes of wartime destruction which parallel those in Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour* and von Trotta's *Die bleierne Zeit*. Varda, unlike the other authors in this study, presents her feminine point of view through a male (rather than female) character, who speaks about his life, the choices he has made and the importance of personal experience over political commitment. Like von Trotta in *Rosa Luxemburg*, Varda makes it clear that personal life determines political choices. However, by providing the narrative in her own voice and taking possession of Jacquot's story, she reverses the role of the cinematic convention. Varda makes Jacquot the object of her camera's gaze, first as a young boy who is doted on by his mother and then as a man who has been touched by love and war. Like Duras and Deren, Varda uses extended images of the sea at the beginning and end of her film while Demy contemplates its rhythmic and inspiring quality. Varda employs this frequently used signifier to represent femininity itself and the important effect that women have had on the life and work of a man she loves. In *Jacquot* Varda introduces innovative feminine authorship: although the subject is not a woman, the director presents a feminine point of view, based on her own experience of a personal relationship with the subject of her film.

In addition to a continued study of feminine authorship in films, I would propose another type of study that opens up questions on the sociology of film development. Such a study would focus on collaboration in filmmaking by male/female partnerships like the ones in this thesis, as compared to either the hierarchal male-dominated system in filmmaking or networking among groups of women, such as in the German film system. One could investigate how the type of film production used influences femininity in authorship, and how collaborative relationships among women differ from those of men. Unlike the solitary act of writing, film is a medium in which collaboration is required and depends on the form of partnerships that are created. Collectives and networking seem much more prevalent among women filmmakers than among men. Understanding the dynamics behind this participation may help in understanding feminine authorship and filmmaking.

Women who make films do not necessarily aim at commercial success. With the exception of a few films, women's films have tended to remain on the arts circuit, and are not economic successes. Of the three authors I have studied, only von Trotta stayed in mainstream production. In the case of both Marguerite Duras and Maya Deren, their films became increasingly more abstract and avant-garde. Duras's *L'Homme Atlantique* (1982), which presents an image of the sea through an open window with Duras's voice "reciting" her text, attracts only great admirers of Duras or steadfast participants in art film circles. Many films by feminine authors are critically acclaimed, but do not have audience appeal.

However, some directors, like Nora Ephron with her 1993 success, *Sleepless in Seattle*, aim directly for mainstream box office successes with big-name actors like Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. Interestingly, despite the film's broad appeal, Ephron repeats a genre intended for women by incorporating "feminine" techniques found in the "weepies" of the 1940s, such as the use of the telephone and the radio to determine plot.

Exoticism: Conclusions and Perspectives

Although Deren, Duras and von Trotta come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they are remarkably alike in educational and economic background. The question of socio-economic privilege arises in their treatment of the geographic Other. According to Jennifer Ward, von Trotta participates in a kind of Orientalism to which the female characters escape to solve their problems and begin the process to selfhood.

Ward argues that a weakness in the structure of all of von Trotta's films is the "escape" by the characters to a warmer climate:

The dilemmas and quests of these characters stand in for similar dilemmas faced by women in general: how to find a 'room of one's own' in the 'master's house,' particularly when the house is in such a state of internal chaos. The problem, of course, as we shall see, is that von Trotta's characters do not use rooms of their own, but rather get out of Germany altogether, in order to begin their process of self-realization⁶

⁶ Ward, *The Films of Margarethe von Trotta and Their Reviews*, p. 160.

The other two authors of my study have also resorted to what Edward Saïd terms "a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing the relative upper hand." He goes on to question how it could be otherwise "during the period of extraordinary European ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present. The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader or the soldier was in, or thought about the Orient, because he could be there, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part."⁷ Although avant-garde artists still participate in the imperial past of their countries, it would seem at first glance that the classical humanist education of the three authors in my study was the basis for a colonial attitude toward Orientalism. All three authors portray countries that represent the Other in European or American terms: Japan, Vietnam and India (Duras), Haiti and Africa (in Deren's later works) and southern regions like Lebanon and Africa (von Trotta). Because they operate from outside the society their characters may be able to resist their own countries' patriarchal values in these settings. The important question is whether these authors' Orientalism bears the same prejudices as the colonialist exploitation of the Other. Or do Deren, Duras and von Trotta in fact attempt to revise the Western patriarchy's view of this Other in the same way that the rearrangement of spatial signifiers in their works suggests a re-vision of traditionalist constellations? Toward the end of her career, a period not discussed in this thesis, Maya Deren looks for links with a matriarchal society through African tribal dancing and Haitian rituals. In *L'Amant* Marguerite Duras

⁷ Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 7.

considers herself more Vietnamese than French, and the European nurse who goes to Japan in *Hiroshima mon amour* is as wounded emotionally as the victims she sees in the Asian Other. By falling in love with men from these societies that are marginalized by the West, Duras's characters choose the realm of the Other, rather than assuming the position of superiority referred to by Saïd. As for von Trotta, her characters are too oppressed by the patriarchal system in Germany to achieve selfhood within their country. Although Trotta's representation of the Other is superficial, it serves as a space from which the characters can observe their own patriarchal society. By removing the Other from its role of marginality, these authors use it to present an important aspect of feminine authorship. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, the Other (that is, the Japanese lover) moves into the centre of the action; Duras is very emphatic about not wishing him to appear as merely "exotic."⁸ In the use of the "primitive," Deren empowers the Other, by inserting it into familiar settings, as in her use of Oriental music in *Meshes of the Afternoon*. In *L'Africaine*, the Other is least articulated, but by situating the characters in an exotic setting, von Trotta suggests a transformation of the temporary escape offered by Orientalism into a permanent solution. Von Trotta situates the characters in *L'Africaine* in the imaginary realm, away from "the master's house," allowing for an alternative viewpoint for female and male protagonists as well as spectators.

⁸ Duras states explicitly in her scenario that the Japanese actor is to look slightly Western to avoid exoticism. "Le choix d'un acteur japonais à type occidental doit être interprété de la façon suivante: Un acteur japonais au type japonais très accusé risquerait de faire croire que c'est surtout parce que le héros est japonais que la Française est séduite par lui. Donc on retomberait, qu'on le veuille ou non, dans le piège de l'exotisme, et dans le racisme involontaire inhérent nécessairement à tout exotisme." *Hiroshima mon amour*, p. 151.

The three authors' approach to Orientalism does not, of course, address the situation of women filmmakers. Although we can at least partly justify their approach to the geographic Other, this study does not explore the reality behind the imaginary. In other words, the relation of femininity and authorship needs to be comprehensively addressed in the work of new women filmmakers from non-Western, economically disadvantaged backgrounds, taking into account their social, cultural and aesthetic differences. While my study, I believe, contributes to helping women filmmakers assume their rightful place within the landscape of cinematic production, it will be for other researchers to explore women filmmakers from non-Western societies taking into consideration that the exploration of femininity may be a privilege of Western patriarchy. This is a privilege that non-Western women can perhaps not always afford.

Filmography

Maya Deren

- 1943 - *Meshes of the Afternoon*, co-directed with Alexander Hammid
- 1944 - *At Land*
- 1946 - *Ritual in Transfigured Time*

Marguerite Duras

- 1959 - *Hiroshima mon amour*, Alain Resnais. Screenwriter: Marguerite Duras
- 1974 - *Nathalie Granger*
- 1975 - *India Song*
- 1977 - *Le Camion*
- 1981 - *L'Homme Atlantique*

Margarethe von Trotta

- 1975 - *Die Verlorne Ehre der Katharina Blum*, co-directed with Volker Schlöndorff
- 1981 - *Die bleierne Zeit*
- 1985 - *Heller Wahn*
- 1986 - *Rosa Luxemburg*
- 1991 - *L'Africaine*

General

- 1940 - *Rebecca*, Alfred Hitchcock
- 1945 - *Mildred Pierce*, Michael Curtiz
- 1944 - *Laura*, Otto Preminger
- 1950 - *Rashomon*, Akira Kurosawa
- 1960 - *Moderato Cantabile*, Peter Brook
- 1978 - *Der Fangschuss*, Volker Schlöndorff
- 1985 - *Bittere Ernte*, Agnieszka Holland
- 1990 - *An Angel at my Table*, Jane Campion
- 1992 - *L'Amant*, Jean-Jacques Annaud
- 1993 - *The Piano*, Jane Campion
- 1993 - *Jacquot de Nantes*, Agnès Varda

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