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Notes on *India Song**

Marguerite Duras

I make films to occupy my time. If I had the strength to do nothing I would do nothing. It's because I don't have the strength to devote myself to nothing that I make films—for no other reason. That is the truest thing I can say about the whole business.—M.D.

I am publishing the *découpage* of the first part of *India Song* without the dialogue of the *Voices* which accompany the shots. Probably only those who have seen the film and would like to “see it again” will read this *découpage*. It seems to me that a simultaneous reading of the image and the sound would interfere with the continuity of the film, with its power as a memento. And anyway, since the texts recited by the *Voices* in this first part are the same as those in the book [*India Song—texte-théâtre-film*], it's an easy matter to find them. That is not true of the texts in the second part of the film, which are written differently than in the book and are very often totally new.

This *découpage* is the one we worked with in making the film. The manuscript itself was reproduced and handed out. As one can see, it contains almost no technical notations. Some people will find it too vague, as well as too “written.” I've never been able to write a purely technical scenario. I always write it to be *read* by the members of the crew. Why should I prevent the crew from having an overall sense of my project? Why shouldn't they know exactly where I'm heading?

And besides, I always find that technique is the least useful thing to write out: *it is* the shot itself at the moment it is conceived. The size, the lighting, and the framing of a shot *are* the shot. And the director necessarily comes to the shooting with the *découpage* of the film in mind. However perfect or precise a technical *découpage* might be, it can never by itself *translate what one sees*. Only the meaning [*sens*] of the project as a whole, and a suggestion of that meaning with every shot (to say how the fragment is related to the whole, *is* the whole) can begin to effect

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that translation. Technique in the narrow sense becomes only the second translation of meaning, and more often than not it comes about by itself.

During the rehearsals of *India Song*, the texts recited by the *Voices* and the guests, as well as the texts describing the shot itself (“he enters, he looks around, he would like to see her. . .”) were read aloud and taped. When needed, a second tape recorder took care of the music. And during the shooting this oral scenario was played through in its entirety.

The shots were long, and of course we had to verify the place of the words in the shots. But we did it that way for other reasons as well: first of all, so that the meaning of the shot should be “there” for the actors (and for the camera) at the very moment when they had to express it, to make it come into being; and secondly, so that the meaning should appear and be expressed at the same time *outside them*. *Done there*, expressed *there*, and *said here*—so that the expression should partly escape them. If the oral scenario stated, for example: “Anne-Marie Stretter enters the private drawing room, looks out at the garden,” then Delphine Seyrig in fact entered and looked at the garden. *But at the same time she was listening to what was said about what she did*. She therefore entered *less*, looked at the garden *less*, but by the same token listened *more*. What was lost of her entrance and her look was compensated by the words, which expressed it at the same time as she did. The words, the oral scenario, were to be eliminated in the editing and Delphine was to remain alone to effect the entrance and the look at the garden. But the result was there: Delphine's distraction, due to her listening with her body, is part of the film. In my opinion only this distraction, this subordination of the body to the word, could be called, in the case of *India Song*, an *understanding of its meaning*. Delphine heard it said that at that moment *a woman entered and looked at the garden, but not that it was she herself* who did that; only the verbal context allowed her to feel and to express the *generality of the term*: “a woman.”

When I say “meaning” [*sens*] I mean the word. When I say “listening to the meaning” I mean listening to the word. And by “understanding the meaning” I mean its irreducibility—an irreducibility one must constantly remain close to.

When I speak of the *meaning [sens]* of a shot I mean its *direction*—the direction it has, the one it imposes on the following shot, and the one that is imposed on it when it itself is superseded. I mean nothing else.

The overall meaning of a film, I think, is both the permanence of this direction and the different intensities produced by its flow through the shots it traverses. And, of course, also, the enactment [*mise en oeuvre*] of its end: stopping the flow *here*, in the film, but not drying it up *there*, once the film is over—no, *giving it back to the world*. Like a river one might capture and then give back to the waters of the world. And this *giving back* must be seen, must be read, *in* the film. Calcutta, having left its dwelling-place, must take back its place outside the film, in the world at large. Like death. Like silence.

This listening to the meaning on the part of the camera crew is no doubt what gave the film (more than any technical notations by the author) its own “step,” its unity of movement and of light, its respiration, its body. And similarly, it made all the actors move together toward that body and become one with it. I saw all of the actors of *India Song* become, in the course of shooting, *of one kind*. Distanced from themselves by the same kind of distancing, with the same kind of reserve, all of them humble with the same kind of humility. As if they had been all similarly bound to listen to what they themselves would have to express if it were expressible, and in a place that was different from where they were, an ideal place where meaning would be reducible, for example, to play. Or if you like, in an ideal place of the word, one that has hardly been glimpsed: the cinema.

I see them, yes, absent and therefore given back to themselves in this film, purged of that self-reflexive gaze which generally hovers over the acting of a star and deprives the spectator of seeing him from the other side of himself, from his function. I see their absence as parallel to our own when we gaze at them in the film. And thus, mutually lost, we meet each other.

I think that this curious and constant tenderness, alive and enduring, which binds me to the actors who played in *India Song*, must also be due to that self-neglect in which they held themselves while making the film.

For the second part of *India Song*, that is, the reception at the French Embassy, I will publish only the text and dialogue without the *découpage* to accompany them. This is the exact opposite of what I am doing with the first part. The only exception, which I've been asked to make, is to publish two shots as examples, to allow for a comparison between the first and the last *découpage*: the one that was shot, for the most part, and the old one. This will allow one to judge the distance, created by time

(and, I believe, only by time), which separates a project from its realization in the shooting.

The reception lasts more than an hour (66 minutes and 13 seconds). I see it above all as a mass of sound that turns around a group of barely varied images, which act as fixed supports anchoring this mass to fixed places, preventing it from veering off toward illustration. There is no narrative unfolding here according to episodes, no chronology of space and time. I see it as a single event, with a single tone, as something isolated in the film. Here time must pass, and nothing but time. The sixty-six minutes taken up by the reception contain only five or six hours of the duration of that reception—from the first hours of night until dawn. On the other hand, the twenty-nine minutes taken up by the first part contain, in my opinion, several weeks or several months of Anne-Marie Stretter's daily life before her death.

Thus it will be the sound of this second part which will act as a memento for those who would like to “see it again.” The sound, that is to say the words and the music welded together: I indicate the dance beneath which the text unfolds.

Everything that is *not seen* [on the screen] during the reception was foreseen, seen, and defined. Every exit, every entrance of the five characters who in themselves “make” this reception was motivated, explained. First everything had to be logical and realistic before being unloosed, so that at no moment should the visible disorder of the evening appear to be planned as such. On the contrary, everything had to be as clear as if the reception had been filmed in its entirety. When the Vice-Consul, for example, enters the private drawing room, it's because he is looking for Madame Stretter, and if he is looking for her there, it's because, if she was heading in the right direction in the preceding shot, she must in fact be there.

To speak about the reception in *India Song* means, for me, resisting an urge to speak about it.

For us, the most important thing about the reception, its essence as it were, was the pursuit of Anne-Marie Stretter, her hunting down by death, by the bearer of that feminine element, the Vice-Consul of Lahore. All of which had to end in the final encounter between him and her at the end of the night, that is, in the fatally convincing expression of their common understanding of *refusal*. Whence the final suicide—this refusal of life in the name of life going as far as the refusal of love itself and the avoidance of its being stated. (“Love stories, you live them

with others, we don't need them," says the Vice-Consul. "We have nothing to say to each other, we are the same.") Now despite the crowd and the confusion of the reception, this pursuit had to be never lost from sight, it had to be inscribed—with the greatest clarity—in the visible disorder and never be swallowed up by secondary developments. To try and obtain this result we decided that the whole reception had to pass through a single space which we called "the rectangle," which was in fact the rectangular space of the private drawing room facing the mirror, together with its mirrored reflection. This double rectangle was filmed according to two axes in all—one bordering on the doors leading to the garden and the invisible reception, the other touching the walls of the private apartments, which were never penetrated (with two exceptions, in fact: two shots were filmed in the second-floor Chinese drawing room). This double rectangle constituted the epicentral zone of the whole film: the photograph of the dead Anne-Marie Stretter on the piano with the roses and incense in her memory: the altar. The latter had to be felt as constantly encumbering the place, perturbing it, and of course putting into doubt everything that occurred in the rectangle around it. The film was shot, the film became possible, because the story of that woman had been arrested by death: the altar was there as a constant reminder of that fact. So it was also the altar of pain—of my pain. The source of the film lay there.

Through this space of doubt, this quasi-unchangeable image of the rectangle, pass the five people designated to "make" the reception, the murmurs of the others, the various musics, the voices of the guests, the dances, the conversations, the screams of the madman from Lahore. In this internal space the story is spoken of in the present ("he looks," "they dance," he moves toward . . ."); whereas in the places we called the duplications of the interior shots—the tracking shots of the destroyed facades of the Rothschild Palace—the story is always spoken of in the past ("people had always spoken of her . . .," "the music is perhaps what she will have played behind these walls . . ."). The internal place gets filled up regularly with people passing through and no less regularly gets emptied, becoming once again the space of the altar, of the relative death of the place, a recent death—the flowers are renewed, and someone comes to relight the incense. In contrast, in the duplications of the interior shots (all except the tennis courts) there is no passing through at all—not even by the actors. They are uninhabitable, uninhabited, emptied once and for all by time, by the swallowing up of everything in death.

For these exterior shots as well, there is a barely varying image al-

ways plunged into night. Here, the skin of the image is the voice of Viviane Forrester, recovering the facades of the Rothschild Palace with slow texts, a kind of chronicle of the reception we have just left behind and of that woman's Calcutta. *The Calcutta of old, now that something can be said about it.*

It was between the two *découpages*—the one of April and the one of June 1974—that we decided to eliminate all the extras in the reception. Next, the characters of Georges Crown and of the ambassador—the husband—were eliminated. Georges Crown appears once more, very late, at dawn; the ambassador never appears again. The last to be eliminated was the Woman in Black.¹ Nickie de Saint-Phalle had refused to play the role and she was replaced by three photos of a woman taken by Edouard Boubat after the war.²

Once this decision was made, there was no going back. At that point all the eliminated characters became superfluous: if they had been put back into the film they would have crowded it, and this time artificially so. So we discovered that what had at first appeared as unquestionably necessary was simply a matter of habit, of faddishness, and that the extras would only have filled up the space—whereas we wanted it to be unencumbered—and helped to create the illusion of Calcutta and Lahore, when in fact Calcutta and Lahore were none other than she, the woman from Venice, and he, the Vice-Consul. By adding two or ten other figures to accompany them, we would have masked their essential function. Thus, what was not indispensable became positively useless, and consequently false.

She is Calcutta. Yes. With her there are the beggarwoman's ramblings, her song of Laos passing through her. There are also the slow-moving fan, the sweat on her naked body, the birds, and the dogs. That is all, I think. He, and he alone, is Lahore. We see nothing of Lahore outside of him.

Yes, the extras would have rejoined Lahore of which we see nothing, that balcony in front of the gardens of Shalimar, that beggarwoman, the faceless guests. *The voices were enough.* Visually, only what was indispensable had to remain: she, Anne-Marie Stretter, he, the Vice-Consul of Lahore, the other lover, Michael Richardson, and the two young men: the Young Attaché and the Young Guest, who are the witnesses: us. Like us, those two are not linked to her in any way, either in the present or in the past. Like us, they are uninformed and discover the story. Or rather, they look at her, they follow her with their eyes.

I thus tried to clear out the space to allow for the bare inscription of the geometry of the pursuit I mentioned earlier. This was what we had

to follow. I tried to arrange it so that the spectator had *only this* to look at, nothing else, and that if he refused, it would have to be a total refusal with nothing left over—a refusal of *the film itself*. What I am convinced of is this: if one wants to escape, one can only escape all of it. I avoided “catching-up” scenes like the cinematographic plague. No, one cannot mix different genres. With this past behind us, it is still difficult to extract, to empty out, to unbuild. Progress is when you succeed in doing it. If I didn’t believe that it was sometimes possible to succeed, I would stop making films.

I wrote somewhere in one of my preliminary working notes (before the shooting): “*India Song will be built first through sound, and then through light.*” So even then I was on the way to the final emptying out—this from the very beginning.

After this emptying out of the space around them, around the “five people,” there still remained the problem of their speech. I wanted the two long conversations, between Anne-Marie Stretter and the Young Attaché on the one hand, and between her and the Vice-Consul on the other, to be *seen* in the rectangle. I wanted the coming together of their bodies to be visible, and for that they had to be dancing and speaking in our presence (whereas in the book these dances and conversations are “off-stage”). At the same time, I couldn’t allow these conversations to counteract the fundamental doubting-effect of the film. I could at no moment allow this story to “come alive again,” just as I couldn’t allow the spectator to identify, even for a few minutes, those people on the screen—*those actors*—with *those other people of Calcutta*. Rather, what was supposed to have been said by those people in those conversations had to be *said again*, but in the presence of the concrete sign of their death—just as what was *seen* was seen in the presence of the photograph of the dead woman. So I came up with the *closed lips*: while they are speaking, their lips remain silent.

Once this decision was made, it was again, as in the case of the extras, impossible to go back. They listen to their own voices, but the pronunciation, the actual utterance of the words does not take place.

India Song is, perhaps, yes, the failure of any attempt at reconstitution. If one can speak of a success achieved by *India Song*, it can only be the realization of a project of failure. And this result fills me with hope. What can be called tragic here is, I think, not the mood of the story nor the genre it belongs to according to the usual classifications, but also the opposite: what can be said to be tragic is the place from which the story is told, that is, the co-presence of both the destruction of this story by

death and forgetting *and* of this love which, even though destroyed, the story continues to celebrate. As if the only memory of this story were that love which continues to flow from a bloodless body riddled with holes. The ground of the story is this contradiction, this split. The filmic realization of this story, the only one possible, consists in the ceaseless to-and-fro movement of our despair *between this love and its body*: in the very blocking of any *narration*.

One last remark: there are no fools in the film who speak of her, of Calcutta, nor does anyone ridicule. Why not? Because that would have been as useless as piling up the extras on the scene of the image. There remain only those who believe they are informed and are informed in turn, and those who believe they are informed and actually know something. No one really knows, and no one is really ignorant. *But everyone knows that he doesn’t know everything*. It is with this imperfect baggage, in the essential and permanent fear of lying, that I tried to create the filmed proposition of *India Song*.

Translated by Susan Suleiman

NOTES

1. The Woman in Black was both a photograph and a woman. In the first part *her photograph* appeared (from the very beginning). During the reception *she herself appeared*, alone, and looking. She was never seen by the others.
2. Two of these photographs were published in Edouard Boubat’s album, *Women* (New York: Braziller, 1973).

Marguerite Duras: Bibliography/Filmography

Elisabeth Lyon

The following is a bibliography and filmography of Marguerite Duras's novels, plays, scenarios, and films. Some of them appeared simultaneously as plays and films (such as *Le Navire Night*) or were written with various representations in mind (such as *India Song*—*texte-théâtre-film*) and are therefore sometimes listed as theater, novels, or film scenarios (such as *Détruire, dit-elle*). In some cases, adaptations of novels or scenarios have been filmed by other people without Duras's participation (such as René Clément's version of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*). Wherever possible, this has been noted.—E.L.

I. Novels

Les Impudents. Paris: Plon, 1943.

La vie tranquille. Paris: Plon, 1944.

Un barrage contre le Pacifique. Paris: Gallimard, 1950. Translated as *A Sea of Troubles*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969. Filmed version by René Clément in 1958. Adaptation for theater by Geneviève Serreau. "Un barrage contre le Pacifique." *L'Avant-Scène Théâtre*, no. 212 (January 1960), pp. 9-34.

Le marin de Gibraltar. Paris: Gallimard, 1952. Translated as *The Sailor from Gibraltar*. New York: Grove Press, 1967. Filmed version by Tony Richardson in 1967.

Les petits chevaux de Tarquinia. Paris: Gallimard, 1953.

Le Square. Paris: Gallimard, 1955. Translated as *The Square in Four Novels*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

Moderato Cantabile. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1958. Translated as *Moderato Cantabile in Four Novels*. Filmed version by Peter Brook in 1960.

Dix heures et demie du soir en été. Paris: Gallimard, 1960. Translated as *10:30 on a Summer Night in Four Novels*. Filmed version by Jules Dassin in 1967.

L'après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas. Paris: Gallimard, 1962. Translated as *The Afternoon of Mr. Andesmas in Four Novels*.

Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. Translated as *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*. New York: Grove Press, 1966.

Le Vice-consul. Paris: Gallimard, 1965. Translated as *The Vice-Consul*. London: Hamilton, 1968.

L'amante anglaise. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.

Détruire, dit-elle. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969. Translated as *Destroy, She Said*. New York, Grove Press, 1970.

Abahn, Sabana, David. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

L'Amour. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.

L'homme assis dans le couloir. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980.

II. Films

La Musica (1966). In collaboration with Paul Seban. Distribution by Artistes Associés.

Détruire, dit-elle (1969). U.S. distribution by Grove Press, 196 W. Houston St., New York, N.Y. 10014.

Jaune le soleil (1971). Adapted from *Abahn, Sabana, David*. Not in distribution.

Nathalie Granger (1972). U.S. distribution by Bauer International, 119 N. Bridge St., Somerville, N.Y. 08876 and by F.A.C.S.E.A., 972 Fifth Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10021.

La Femme du Gange (1973). Not in distribution.

India Song (1975). Distribution by Sunchild Productions, 26 Avenue Pierre I-de-Serbie, Paris 75016 France and by Artificial Eye Film Company, 211 Camden High Street, London NW1 7BT, England.

Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert (1976). Distribution by Cinema 9, Pierre et François Barat, 15 rue de Mesnil, Paris 75016 France.

Des journées entières dans les arbres (1976). Distribution by Gaumont.

Baxter, Vera Baxter (1976). Distributed by Sunchild Productions, 26 Avenue Pierre I-de-Serbie, Paris 75016 France.

Le Camion (1977). Distribution by Films Molière and Bauer International, 119 N. Bridge Street, Somerville, N.Y. 08876.

Le Navire Night (1978).

Aurélia Steiner (*Césarine*, 1978, 11 min.; *Les Mains négatives*, 1979, 16 min.; *Aurélia Steiner-Melbourne*, 1979, 30 min.; *Aurélia Steiner-Vancouver*, 1979, 40 min.).

III. Scenarios

Hiroshima mon amour. Paris: Gallimard, 1959. Scenario and dialogues for the film made by Alain Resnais in 1959. Translated as *Hiroshima*

Mon Amour. New York: Grove Press, 1961. Complete découpage and dialogue from the film published in *L'avant-Scène Cinéma*, no. 61-62 (1966).

Une aussi longue absence. In collaboration with Gérard Jarlot. Paris: Gallimard, 1961. Scenario and dialogues for the film made by Henri Colpi in 1961.

Nuit noire, Calcutta. Unpublished. Scenario for a short film made in 1964 by Martin Karmitz.

Les Rideaux Blancs. Unpublished. Scenario and dialogues for a sketch made in 1965 by Georges Franju and included in the film *Un Instant de paix*.

La Voleuse. Unpublished. Dialogues for the film made in 1966 by Jean Chapot.

IV. Theater

Des Journées entières dans les arbres, suivi de *Le Boa*, *Madame Dodin*, *Les Chantiers*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954.

Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise. Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

Théâtre I: Les Eaux et forêts, *Le Square*, *La Musica*. Paris: Gallimard, 1965.

L'Amante anglaise. Paris: Cahiers du Théâtre National Populaire, 1968.

Théâtre II: Suzanna Andler, *Des Journées entières dans les arbres*, *Yes, peut-être*, *Le Shaga*, *Un homme est venu me voir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.

L'Eden Cinéma. Paris: Mercure de France, 1977.

English translations

Three Plays: The Square, Days in the Trees, The Viaducts of Seine-et-Oise. London: Calder and Boyars, 1967.

Suzanna Andler, La Musica, L'Amante Anglaise. London: Calder, 1975.

V. Scenarios for the films and/or texts taken from the films

Détruire, dit-elle. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969. Translated as *Destroy, She Said*. New York: Grove Press, 1970.

Nathalie Granger, suivi de *La Femme du Gange*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.

India Song-texte-théâtre-film. Paris: Gallimard, 1973. Translated as *India Song*. New York: Grove Press, 1976.

Le Camion, suivi de *Entretien avec Michelle Porte*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977.

Le Navire Night, *Césarée*, *Les Main négatives*, *Aurélia Steiner*, *Aurélia Steiner*, *Aurélia Steiner*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1979.

Véra Baxter ou les plages de l'Atlantique. Paris: Editions Albatros, 1980.

Les yeux verts, special issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 312-313 (June 1980). Written and edited by Marguerite Duras.