

*agente
Dina*



The Darkroom





MARGUERITE DURAS

THE DARKROOM

Translated by

Alta Ifland & Eireene Nealand



With an Introduction by

Jean-Luc Nancy



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INTRODUCTION



A PASSING

that another guesses or anticipates what we can't clearly and precisely spell out. It is an image both precise and blurred, an image that keeps moving away and becoming more vague.

2. THE CONDITIONAL

The film begins with cars that speed by, intersect, turn and go on. The camera pivots to the left and there is the truck, parked, a motionless mass. Quite quickly, another shot, somewhere else: the truck, filmed from the front, starts with a roar of its engine. Its lights are switched on (it's dawn), the truck advances toward the camera and only turns at the last moment. As if we had narrowly escaped or been swallowed by the truck, which the next shot shows circling a roundabout then exiting onto the road. Then, in voice-over, Marguerite Duras begins: "It would have been a road." In the book, Duras' use of the conditional is emphasized by a quotation from the famous grammarian Grevisse, who compares it to "a hypothetical future." This would take place if... Or else: we'll pretend that... It is the tense of an irreality that can be fully realized either in reality or in fiction. One can't say which: both are involved; they can't be separated. We are, thus, the furthest one can be from metaphor: the truck doesn't represent anything, it is simultaneously an imagined story and what will happen to us if... This condition is stated

insistently later on: *if* the revolution is impossible. And *it is* impossible — this is a certainty the fictitious woman shares with the real woman and man reading the script in which a woman climbs into the cab of a truck.

What this woman *would be* is the certainty of this impossibility. What the truck *would carry* would be the enormous weight of this impossibility: the weight of a story that would move on unknown routes, never anticipated or expected.

The conditional is the tense of this story about to depart to we don't know where — or else “stopped,” as M.D. says at a certain point. The truck drives on, it passes through many terrains, industrial, commercial, deserted, grim. But the truck carries nothing other than the fact that history has stopped. It only moves through what already fills it: the void — the same void that haunts either the words of the woman in the script or the words of the woman who reads them. The void, a prelude to “the end of the world.”

Hence, another conditional, this one hidden: the woman and the man who read the script *would be* the actors assigned to play its roles as well as the real presences of the characters. The room where they talk is nothing other than the truck's cab, and since the cab is empty — it is shown as such — the room is also empty. They are there without being there. They are also in the truck, they make up its weight. If playing and acting are indistinguishable to such an extent this

THE DARKROOM

The conditional is traditionally seen as a mode. Actually, one can consider it to be a tense (a hypothetical future) of the indicative mode.

Strictly speaking, the conditional expresses a potential or irreal fact whose actualization is seen as the consequence of a supposition, of a condition. [...]

[It is also used] to indicate just an act of imagination that transports events into the realm of fiction in a way (in particular, a preludic conditional used by children in their proposals of games).

— Maurice Grevisse, *Le Bon Usage*

OPENING CREDITS

PAN SHOT: *We move from Highway 12 toward Pontchartrain (Yvelines). We arrive at a square: the truck is there. A thirty-two ton Saviem. Blue. With a trailer. Stopped.*

A ROUNDABOUT IN AN INDUSTRIAL ZONE OF PLAISIR. *Vacant lots all around. Trailers.*

In the distance, the J.D.Z. (Joint Development Zone).

The truck is there. Engine facing us. It starts up. It moves toward us, then cuts across the square. Wheels sweep the screen. The truck disappears. Reappears circling the roundabout. Disappears. An empty roundabout.

The film has started.

INDUSTRIAL ZONE OF TRAPPES (Yvelines). *Sideways tracking. Construction sites. Slag heaps. Shantytowns. Then through trees, in the distance, Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines.*

Marguerite Duras *voice-over*:

It would have been a road by the sea.

It would have crossed a large barren plain.

(*Beat.*)

And then a truck would have arrived.

It would have passed slowly across the landscape.

A white, wintry sky, also a mist, very light, spread everywhere on the land, the lands.

Silence. And then music.¹

A dark, enclosed space. The curtains are drawn. Lamps are lit. Carpet. Mirrors. It's a living room. Filtered through a white curtain, the light of day. The space has, thus, been closed to the day. A round table in the center of the place. Two people are there, seated at the table: Gérard Depardieu and Marguerite Duras. Manuscripts on the table. The film's story is, thus, read. They will read this story.

What is outside will only be visible after nightfall.

During the film the set will change but the space will remain the same. It will be the objects, table, lamps, that will be moved. But the light will remain the same. The manner of reading as well, with the sheets of paper in hand.

This place could be called a DARKROOM or reading room.

With the exception of the "voice-over," the entire film takes place in this space.

No Stage directions will explain the flow of the music in the film. Any text accounting for its presence should remain absent.

Thus here it is, THE DARKROOM is starting:

GD: It's a film?

MD: It would have been a film.

(Beat.)

It's a film, yes.

(Beat.)

1. The word indicates three Beethoven variations on a theme by Diabelli. Or Diabelli's Theme itself.

The truck would have disappeared. And then reappeared.
You would have heard the sea, far away, but very loud.
And then, on the side of the road, a woman would have
been waiting.

She would have signaled. She would have been ap-
proached.

A woman of a certain age. Dressed as they are in cities.
(*Beat.*)

Do you see?

GD: Yes. I see.

MD: There isn't any shelter around.

She carries a suitcase.

She climbs into the truck.

The truck takes off again.

And we leave the seaside.

GD: What's the landscape like?

MD: It doesn't matter:

La Beauce, maybe, toward Chartres.

Or maybe the immigrant shantytowns of Yvelines.

INDUSTRIAL ZONE OF TRAPPES.

Music (Diabelli's Theme).

Sideways tracking.

*An uninterrupted succession of warehouses, supermarkets,
billboards. Trucks passing in the foreground.*

MD *voice-over*:

It's here that she would have begun to look at the landscape,
the sea, far away,
the road,
the white sky,
the cold,
the variety of things.
And then — she sings.

Silence at the end of the tracking shot.

THE DARKROOM

MD: We would have seen the cab of the truck. Dark.
The driver and the woman who climbed in are silent.
Their coming together is arbitrary,
disparate.
(*Beat.*)
Do you see?

GD: Yes, I see.

MD: They are facing the road. The road is swallowed by
their gazes.
(*Beat.*)
There would have been music.
And, it would have been clear that the music we hear
in the film is emitted by the truck's radio.
(*Beat.*)

The light outside would have been brighter than the light inside, like snow.

(Beat.)

The driver and the woman would have watched the light outside for a long time, the road, the barrenness of the soil, of the earth.

(Beat.)

A dark mass would have been seen in the sleeping area above the seat in the truck's cab: a man, the second driver of the truck. He is sleeping. He would have slept through the whole film.

(Beat.)

This is the usual state of affairs between the driver and the woman: he is fully caught up in his work and she, she is being carried along, yet both are facing the road. Do you see?

GD: I see.

MD: Both sharing that road, that landscape. Around them, that cold, that empty wintry space.

Silence.

No rehearsal of the text would have been envisioned.

Silence.

GD: Does she speak?

MD: She will speak, yes.

GD: (*Beat.*)

Who is she?

MD: An outcast.

(*Beat.*)

Do you see?

GD: Yes.

(*Beat.*)

MD: The only thing they have in common is a certain violence of the gaze. Facing this emptiness before them, the barren winter, the sea.

(*Beat.*)

The silence at the beginning of the film would have represented the first connection between the characters. A distant, almost indifferent, mechanical connection. It would have been a sort of a setting up of a rapport to come.

GD: This connection will take place?

MD: (*Beat.*)

Maybe never.

GD: (*Beat.*)

What do you think?

MD: (*Beat.*)

Never.

EXPLANATORY TEXTS

FIRST PROPOSITION

There's no point anymore in giving us films about socialist hope. Or capitalist hope. No point in giving us films about social justice, or financial justice, or any other justice to come. About work. About values. About women. The young. The Portuguese. The Malyans. The intellectuals. The Senegalese.

No point anymore in giving us films about fear. About revolution. About the dictatorship of the proletariat. About freedom. About straw men. About love. No point anymore.

No point in giving us films about film.

We believe in nothing anymore. We believe. Joy: we believe: nothing anymore.

We believe in nothing anymore.

No point anymore in making your films. No point anymore. One must make films with this knowledge: there's no point anymore.

Let film meet its end, that's the only cinema.

Let the world meet its end, let it meet its end, that's the only politics.

DIALOGUE WITH
MICHELLE PORTE

MD: Yes, I think this is the first film I've made where the text carries everything. Maybe it's the first film ever to do so. In the Grevisse grammar book they say the *futur antérieur* is the preludic conditional used by children in their proposals of games. The children say, you'd have been a pirate, you are a pirate, you'd be a truck; they become the truck, and the *futur antérieur* is the only tense that can translate the children's game in full. Their cinema.⁴

MP: In an enclosed space two people, you & Depardieu, are talking about a truck. And elsewhere, on the road, a truck advances, tireless, it crosses the landscape...

MD: So, the truck is separate from us.

MP: Yes, this truck is a mental image: your mental image of the truck as it goes down the road.

MD: I just saw the film. I am overwhelmed by it... What I always look for in my own work is to be overwhelmed by it... I can't exactly say where the film's power comes from. It moves me greatly.

4. Translator's note: Duras states that she uses the *futur antérieur*, but she actually uses first the *conditional passé* ("toi tu aurais été un pirate"), then the indicative present ("toi tu es un pirate"), then the conditional present ("toi tu serais un camion").

MP: For me, as a spectator who has just seen the film, it's the first time I've been given so much freedom in a movie theater; it gives me the same freedom as reading does, and in this sense I think this film is something new, an altogether new direction in cinema.

MD: They'll tell you that this is not cinema. Yet there is something on the screen. Someone speaking is an image.

MP: Yes, someone speaking and narrating a story is a very strong image. And when I see the image of the truck onscreen ceaselessly crossing landscapes...

MD: In the winter, crossing in winter...

MP: Yes, the image is completely saturated with what you just said, which could happen in this truck, but I only see the container, I mean, the woman and the man in the truck are not imposed on me.

MD: They are in the truck. I see them as a relay of what I am talking about; when I stop speaking, they go on. But then, psychological narrative gets completely screwed up.

MP: A written story proposes images. When cinema reduces the story to a single image, it is kind of a power grab at the expense of the spectator.

MD: A limitation.

MP: Yes, a limitation. And there, it breaks down completely. When you made *Son nom de Venise* you said that, usually, the spectator is left creating only twenty percent of the work, while you were asking for eighty percent from him. But here it's even more.

MD: Briefly, the truck exists, the journey exists, the landscape exists through the words. Everything exists. The man exists, the woman exists... *and it's read*. It's not even memorized, it's read. This moves me greatly. This is somehow confirmed for me by the fact that I can no longer go to the movies because I get bored... I wasn't bored for a second while reading and making this movie, and neither was Depardieu; he was completely happy. The entire team was ecstatic, and yet it was always just Depardieu & me at a table reading the story.

MP: Their excitement was probably the same as what the spectator experiences while watching the film. We are being told, we are being offered, a story and it's wonderful...

MD: It would, therefore, join the great tradition of the folk-tale. The writing carrying everything, the writing carrying the image, as if the writing had been perverted, as if it had been fragmented, replaced with images, maybe...

MP: As if we had previously limited its progeny: the imagination.

MD: Yes, that's it.

MP: And maybe indeed we are joining the tradition of storytellers, who are, basically, oral writers; the storyteller has the same power as the writer.

MD: To do everything, to create the entire story on his own. Yes, when one hears directors talk about their films, they talk about them as if they were a thing foreign to themselves. This has always, always shocked me; they talk about them with shyness, with modesty, etc., you see what I mean? I have none of these feelings. I couldn't have made *Le camion* if I had had the least bit of modesty; one needs to be immodest in order to make *Le camion*, but maybe immodesty is humility.

MP: But you are a writer...

MD: As much as anyone, but not more.

MP: Many people who make movies take an already-made story and put it into images, which merely illustrate the story.

MD: Yes. And we arrive at a bastardized result where speech is no longer speech, where it no longer has power, and where the image is "forced" and tries to make up for the fact that speech is lacking... For instance, I saw *L'empire des sens*. We are being shown people who make love all day long, only to arrive, in the end, at murder,

at killing. But what struck me was that the solitude of the passion, the dramatic, tragic isolation in which one is plunged during that stage of desire is not shown... We are shown people fucking all day long, but passion is not only this. It is also the deadly isolation one feels because of it... That isn't shown. People in the film industry have said that it's a beautiful film. It's true, it's a beautiful film, but it's not about what its title says.

MP: Maybe one couldn't say it through image alone.

MD: They thought they'd found a solution in the image. There is no speech, only one type of speech happens in the moment the two bodies are coupling, but there is something missing in the film, there's an enormous lack: the external consequence of the frustration of desire. How everything is changed, all that is outside, suddenly changed, beaten to death. It is maybe a lack of words or a lack of silence — it's the same, speech or silence, in the end, it's the same. Because of this lack, it's a bastardized film, and people who are into writing cannot entirely believe in it. It has been forty years, I think, since the cinema became ashamed of words, in the same way that it is ashamed of being intelligent. You know, after I used the word "intelligence" in *India Song*, the word "intelligence," people stopped me in the street to tell me, "There's no excuse for using such a word in a film." It gives one a bit of vertigo; it makes you wonder who makes movies. It's a little scary.

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The Darkroom contains the script for Marguerite Duras' 1977 radically experimental film *Le camion* (*The Truck*), as well as four manifesto-like propositions in which Duras protests that most movies "beat the imagination to death" because they "are the same every time they are played." She also accuses the gatekeepers of traditional cinema of treating intelligence as if it were a "class phenomenon" and distinguishes her own approach: a cinema based on ideas and sensory experience. In the dialogue with Michelle Porte at the end of the book, Duras further describes her filmmaking style, discussing everything from her biography to her critique of Marxism.

Translated by Alta Ifland & Eireene Nealand, and featuring an introduction by Jean-Luc Nancy.



"*Le camion* is... uncompromising. [It] lets the text come through but also carries it." — Jean-Luc Godard

"For Duras, this situation [of *Le camion*] represents our modern condition: en route to who knows where, crossing desolate lands, with no other destination, perhaps, than the end of the world [...]. This text from 1977 is entirely relevant almost half a century later." — Jean-Luc Nancy



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