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**Dominique Auvray**, *Marguerite: A Reflection of Herself*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: First Run / Icarus Films, 2002. VHS, 61 minutes. Color and black and white. \$390.00 U.S.

Review by Catherine Rodgers, University of Wales, Swansea.

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This is an engaging portrait of Marguerite Duras who died ten years ago, in March 1996. Dominique Auvray edited several of Marguerite Duras' films in the seventies (*Baxter*, *Vera Baxter*; *Le Camion* and *Le Navire Night*) and was also one of her friends.[1] At the beginning of the film, Auvray recalls how Marguerite Duras gave her a copy of *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* in 1991 with this message: "To my friend Dominique Auvray, in remembrance of the wonderful time, one of many and not so long ago, of our working together at the cinema." [2] From the outset, this portrait breathes an atmosphere of friendship and kinship of spirit. It is therefore not surprising that there is a great affinity between the approaches of Auvray and Duras. Like Duras, Auvray deals with the essential, but also lets the apparently anecdotal have its say.

In a comment on *Moderato Cantabile*, [3] Duras once said: "Dépeindre un caractère en son entier, comme faisait Balsac est révolu. J'estime que la description d'un signe, d'une partie seulement d'un être humain (...) est beaucoup plus frappante qu'une description complète. (...) J'appelle cette méthode qui est la mienne description par touches de couleurs." [4] This is also Auvray's method. The credits open onto a collage of photographs pertaining to Duras' life, which calls to mind Duras' own photographic composition that she used to have on her writing desk at the rue Saint-Benoît, [5] as well as the structure of her best known text, *L'Amant*. At first *L'Amant*, a partially autobiographical tale, was supposed to be a photo album, and the finished product has conserved something of this original project, in its refusal to present the story of the author's life ("The story of my life does not exist" [6]) and in its preference for juxtaposition and gaps over continuity. Auvray's portrait proceeds in a similar manner. Although her presentation of Duras does mention the salient biographical facts in chronological order, she avoids the often depressing curve that a traditionally chronological biography frequently entails. [7] In fact, even when we see Duras in her later years—when she appears as a shrunken, fragile, elderly lady, whose beautiful voice has been destroyed by the tracheotomy she had to undergo—no allusions are made to her health problems, to her alcoholism or her death. The images of the older Duras are scattered throughout the film, side by side with a younger Duras, and we can see that her conviction and determination have remained intact. Her commitment to writing was not eroded by time, nor was her anger at injustice and global misery.

Auvray juxtaposes television interviews, home-movie footage, still photographs, extracts of films—both by Duras and on Duras—and her own filming. [8] Black and white alternates with colour, the quality of the image varying; but what might have been chaotic is cleverly ordered by a loose thematic approach. Although the documentary covers the better known and public aspects of Duras' life—Duras as communist, journalist, film-maker, dramaturge, interviewer and of course writer—it insists particularly on the private dimension: the woman, mother, friend. Auvray is non-judgemental: at no point does she comment on anything directly. Her choice of material in itself indicates her intention: to offer a friendly portrait that presents an intimate and loving view of Duras. Her work is more poetic and allusive than analytical. Her emphasising the personal over the public persona means that Duras' attention to household necessities—such as the need always to have adequate supplies of apples and rice—is given as much attention, if not more, as her writing. Auvray incorporates readings of extracts from Duras' texts, but curiously avoids the better known and arguably more accomplished ones, such as *Le Ravissement de*

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*Lol V. Stein* or *Le Vice-consul*.<sup>[9]</sup> However, the woman presented is so fascinating that viewers who have not yet read her might well prefer to form their own judgements anyway. A surprising omission is that of Yann Andréa, the much younger homosexual man who shared Duras' life from 1980 until her death and who became one of the main generative elements of her writing. Although he appears in some of the photographs at the beginning—he is the young man who Duras, wearing a brown panama, looks at through a window, and is also at her side during the rehearsal of *Savannah Bay*—his name is not pronounced.<sup>[10]</sup> This is a shame, since Duras' love for Yann Andrea—and the new lease of creative energy their meeting brought her—attest to her vitality and her freedom from convention. These are small criticisms in comparison with the film's achievements. Auvray states her aim right at the beginning: she intends to show how Duras was “cheerful and serious, truthful and provocative, attentive and categorical, but above all young and free” and she keeps her promise. Immediately after this announcement, Duras' laughter bursts out and invades the film with her explosive joie-de-vivre. Duras could be joyful, and liked laughing, but for her gaiety arose out of a background of despair—she titled one of her short texts “La voie du gai désespoir.”<sup>[11]</sup> Auvray does not linger on Duras' darker thoughts, although an intimation of them surfaces here and there, as in her reflections on the home—as a place of comfort and safety, but also as the place where people harbour suicidal thoughts and wish to return to, to die.

Laughter is all the more precious in that it is a moment rescued from life's anguish; and laughter, Duras' son's laughter, provides the opportunity for Auvray to give us, in voice-over, some moving lines on motherly love. In this story, the mother captures her son's laughter when he is in his pram, so as to have it always with her, even if he were to die. The intense maternal love that this story conveys is in itself an answer to the accusatory question that Duras' son, Jean Mascolo, asks her. He demands to know why she has never written about motherly love, whereas so many of her texts are about love/desire. Duras rightly and vigorously brushes away this reproach. She comes up with some striking statements: maternal love is “one that never ends”; it is “absolutely unconditional,” and therefore “a calamity.” The period the baby spends in the mother's womb is the most perfect time of his or her life, one of bliss; and for her “childbirth is a guilty act,” the first abandonment of the child, whose first sign of life is a scream of pain. However, later in the documentary she ruthlessly attacks family life: this charming and inevitable phase of her life also corresponded to the most narrow and selfish period, and the one that was the least productive of writing.

From maternal love, Auvray moves smoothly on to Duras' childhood and her mother, and the injustice, widely publicised since *L'Amant*, of all her mother's savings being used in the buying of a concession in Indochina—one which proved impossible to cultivate, because she had failed to offer the expected bribe to government officials. Duras identifies this injustice and her childhood poverty as two of the determining influences on her writing. For her writing always starts as a “settling of scores,” as revenge. Injustice, such as the poverty of a large part of humanity—but even more, the persecution of the Jews during the war—marked her deeply. She also suffered injustice on a more personal level, in the form of her mother's preference for her elder son. While the mother would call him “her child,” she would refer to the young Marguerite as her “little wretch.”

It is this feeling of social injustice which made Duras join the Communist Party after the war; even when she left it in 1950—Auvray does not pursue that—she remained a communist at heart, even after she became convinced that the communist ideal was impossible.<sup>[12]</sup> We see an elderly Duras reminiscing about her experience as a communist, the rebukes she received while selling their newspapers, and how she was chased away with brooms like vermin. Her anger at the way she was treated is still vivid: she felt like killing them, we learn.

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As Duras explains, she experienced something of the communist dream with the Rue Saint-Benoît Group in the fifties. By then, Duras (first married to Robert Antelme, then the companion of Dionys Mascolo) had bought her flat in the sixth arrondissement in Paris in the rue Saint-Benoît. There she entertained Elio Vittorini, Georges Bataille, Raymond Queneau, Michel Leiris, Maurice Blanchot, Louis-Renès des Forêts, and Claude Roy, amongst others. Auvray, in the only sequence of her film that relies on third-person testimony, uses extracts of interviews with Edgar Morin, Jean-Toussaint Dessanti, and Jacques-Francis Rolland to recreate the atmosphere of the years of the Rue Saint-Benoît Group: the mixture of political and philosophical discussions and conviviality which revolved around Marguerite Duras' hospitality and cooking. In Dessanti's words, it was "a place of sharing and mutual respect."

Cooking and other domestic affairs occupy a large part of this documentary, as do the places where Duras lived and worked. The camera shows us the flat in the rue Saint-Benoît, as well as the house and garden of Neauphle-le-château (where some of Duras' films were shot). We do not see her flat in Trouville, in the Hôtel des Roches Noires, but we get long shots of the sea and the play of light on the clouds and water that Duras herself evoked so well. Duras' presence and her writing pervade these places, and seeing them brings a further understanding of her personality.

Auvray has incorporated very few of Duras' comments on writing, perhaps because Duras always said that she could not explain what writing was. On the other hand, she chose to include one of Duras' provocative comments on her film-making: "I make films to keep busy. If I had the strength to do nothing I would not do anything at all." Auvray's documentary does not inform the viewer about the radical nature of Duras' approach to the cinema: her wish to murder the cinema--destroy the image--culminated in *L'Homme atlantique*, where the screen remains blank for half the film.[13] Auvray includes extracts from some of Duras' other films, such as *Nathalie Granger* and *Le Camion*, but these are not really long enough to bring across the specificity of Duras' cinema. Auvray documents more fully the shooting of her films: the reduced means employed by Duras and her determination.

When it came to imposing her view, Duras could clearly be extremely forceful, as exemplified by her dealings with Madeleine Renaud during a rehearsal of her play Savannah Bay. We see her exasperated with the elderly actress, addressing and ordering her about harshly. At the same time, Duras recognizes Madeleine Renaud's genius and her uncanny ability to embody her characters, to the point that when she played Duras' mother in *Des Journées entières dans les arbres*, Duras thought her own mother had just entered on stage. Duras calls Madeleine Renaud her "theatre mother." [14]

Duras' conviction (some may say intransigence) also comes across very strongly in her thinking on happiness. She angrily condemns the "sociological stupidity" that leads some to believe that happiness can be arranged by providing better social conditions. She declares happiness to be an individual matter.

The documentary also includes examples of Duras' work as an interviewer, with extracts from television programmes such as *Dim Dam Dom*. The first is with a zoo-keeper, the second with the female director of a women's prison. Duras' direct, simple, and unorthodox questions highlight the narrow, conventional point of view of these two "keepers" and by contrast suggest her own unconventionality and love of freedom. Whereas she obviously has little sympathy for these representatives of an oppressive order, her affinity with a cabaret artist/stripper and her ability to put herself at the level of a child (in two other interviews) come through strongly. Duras' journalism was always subjective, which could lead her to take controversial stances, as in the case of the Christine Villemin affair, something that Auvray chooses to ignore.[15]

Duras' sense of injustice, her desire for equality, her sympathy for the disinherited all come together in her statement, "The world can go to hell." She explains: "we destroy everything and we start all over again." This nihilistic streak, totally in keeping with the spirit of the May '68 events in which she took an active part, runs through several of her works in the seventies, such as *Détruire, dit-elle* or *Le Camion*.<sup>[16]</sup>

The original French sound-track has been kept for the songs, interviews, and film extracts. The subtitles are accurate, albeit sometimes difficult to make out. Auvray's choice of music and songs is excellent. It is a pleasure to hear Duras' own little-known songs, as well as "La Neva," the song the mother sings in *La Pluie d'été*.<sup>[17]</sup>

Auvray's portrait remains elusive. Some of the extracts may prove enigmatic for some viewers, like the amusing snippet from the interview between Duras and Godard, where the latter is not named. The advantage is that Auvray does not stifle her subject; she lets her retain her freedom, and by the same token leaves us free to fill in the gaps, to go and (re)read Duras' texts and (re)watch her films.

This is a documentary to keep and to watch again and again. From a pedagogical point of view, I would recommend it to everybody: as an empathetic introduction to Marguerite Duras; as an accompaniment to the study of her texts (especially *L'Amant*); and as a homage to "a femme de lettres" whose work is finally gaining official recognition in France, where two of her texts have been put on the *Agrégation* list for 2006.

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## NOTES

[1] 1976, *Baxter, Vera Baxter* (film, distr. N.E.F: Diffusion); 1977, *The Truck* (film, distr. D.D. Prod.) and 1978, *The Navire Night* (Films du Losange). I give first the year of production or publication of the French work, then the translation of its title. If the work has been translated, I give the bibliographical details of the translation.

[2] 1991, *The North China Lover*, translated by Leigh Hafrey (New York: New Press, 1993).

[3] 1958, *Moderato Cantabile*, translated by Richard Seaver (London: John Calder, 1966).

[4] Bettina L. Knapp, "Interviews avec Marguerite Duras et Gabriel Cousin," *The French Review* 44.4 (March 1971): 653-64. "To depict a character in its entirety, as Balzac used to do, is outdated. I think that the description of one sign, one element only of a human being...is much more striking than a complete description. I call this method of mine, depiction through dabs of colour" (my translation, p. 655).

[5] Marguerite Duras, *Romans, cinéma, théâtre, un parcours 1943-1993* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1997) pp. 368-69.

[6] 1984. *The Lover*, translated by Barbara Bray (London: Collins, Flamingo Paperback, 1986) p. 11.

[7] Although not entirely reliable, the best biography of Duras so far is Laure Adler's, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), which has been translated into English by Anne-Marie Glasheen: *Marguerite Duras: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

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[8] Some of these films are:

- Marguerite Duras, *Nathalie Granger*, 1972.
- Marguerite Duras, *La Femme du Gange* (*Woman of the Ganges*) 1973.
- Marguerite Duras, *Le Camion* (*The Truck*), 1977.
- Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (*The Places of Marguerite Duras*), 1976.
- Michelle Porte, *Savannah Bay, c'est toi* (*Savannah Bay, It's You*), 1984.
- Benoît Jacquot, *La Mort du jeune aviateur anglais* (*The Death of the Young English Aviator*) 1983.

[9] 1964, *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, translated by Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966); 1966, *The Vice-Consul*, translated by Eileen Ellenbogen (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968).

[10] 1982 and 1983 (revised 2nd edition), *Savannah Bay*, translated by Barbara Bray in *Four Plays, La Musica, Eden Cinema, Savannah Bay, India Song* (London: Oberon Books, 1992).

[11] Marguerite Duras, "La voie du gai désespoir" in *Outside* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981), pp. 171-79; the English version, *Outside: Selected Writings*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: Collins/Flamingo Paperback, 1987), could have been translated as "The way of merry despair."

[12] See Laure Adler's biography, *op. cit.*, on the question of Duras' political engagement.

[13] 1982, *The Atlantic Man*, translated by Alberto Manguel in *Two by Duras* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993).

[14] 1966, *Days in the Trees*, translated by Sonia Orwell in *Three Plays* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967).

[15] Marguerite Duras, "Sublime, forcément sublime, Christine V.," *Libération* (17 July 1985), could be translated as "Sublime, necessarily sublime." In this article, Marguerite Duras voices her deep conviction that Christine Villemin, the mother of the young Gregory, had indeed killed him, while simultaneously exonerating her. This article was published when C. Villemin had been indicted but not yet tried, which created a scandal.

[16] 1969, film and text, translated as *Destroy, She Said*, by Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1970).

[17] 1990, *Summer Rain*, translated by Barbara Bray (London: Harper Collins, 1992).

Catherine Rodgers  
University of Wales, Swansea  
c.rodgers@swansea.ac.uk

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