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Michelle Royer, *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Multisensoriality and Female Subjectivity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. viii + 133 pp. £75.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1474440547; £15.99 U.K. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1474427852; £0.00 U.K. (eb) ISBN 9-78-1474427876.

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This monograph's key question is twofold: how do Duras's films "express her female subjectivity and involve viewers?" (p. 81). Royer argues that the two facets of this question are intertwined, as, by addressing spectators' bodies via her experimental form, Duras seeks to represent "the sensorial world of female subjectivity" (p. 4). Royer brings Duras's films into dialogue with models of embodied spectatorship, from familiar concepts such as the haptic, to terms more recently theorised in relation to film by Luis Antunes in *The Multisensory Film Experience: A Cognitive Model of Film Aesthetics* (2016), namely the vestibular (which relates to orientation and balance), thermoception (the perception of temperature), and nociception (the perception of pain).^[1] She expands this conceptual framework by drawing on concepts from neuroscience, such as the embodied simulation triggered by mirror neurons. She thus establishes an interdisciplinary approach to the sensory strategies of Duras's films, and to the diverse spectatorial embodied responses they elicit. In doing so, she positions Duras's cinema as multisensory. Yet Royer argues that "gender has to be reintroduced" to theories of embodied spectatorship (p. 6). In order to do so, Royer draws on the work of feminist philosophers (and Duras's near-contemporaries): Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous. She establishes parallels between embodied spectatorship theory and this feminist thought, highlighting a shared engagement with senses other than vision, the body, and pre- or non-verbal expression.

Royer posits that Duras's experimental formal strategies may be "link[ed] to the feminine and multisensoriality" (p. 15) in part because they reflect Duras's gendered experience, and may be viewed "as the refraction of her sensorium" (p. 17). She suggests that the films' formal innovations communicate Duras's femininity, "open[ing] a sensorial space for [Duras's] female inner experience to be expressed" (p. 5). Yet she also states that they express female subjectivity by challenging dominant modes of representation and by elaborating embodied forms of spectatorship. By dethroning the visual and establishing representational modes "in which women and the feminine are no longer excluded" (p. 90)—for example by inviting a haptic rather than voyeuristic look at the nude female body—Duras's films "ask spectators to question conventional spectatorial behaviours as representing dominant patriarchal models" (p. 89). Thus, Royer argues that "it is through the whole process of a different type of filmmaking rather than through character representation that female subjectivity can be analysed" (p. 52). As such, this

study of the expression of female subjectivity in Duras shifts our focus from the characters on screen to the films' multisensory channels of communication and the embodied spectatorial responses they elicit.

In chapter one, "Film theory, multisensoriality and the feminine," Royer offers an overview of sensory and phenomenological film theory, theories of embodied spectatorship, and the position of gender within these critical discourses. Chapter two, "Inscribing authorship," offers biographical details and describes Duras's coming to cinema and her complicated relationship to feminism, as well as offering a case study via *Nathalie Granger* (1972). This early film by Duras has been read as a feminist work (for example by Renate Günther) and has been celebrated for its representations of invisible domestic labour and forms of female resistance to patriarchal oppression (though, as Royer notes (p. 25), Duras later considered the film to be too didactic). As a less formally experimental work, it is often discussed separately from more radically experimental works produced later in Duras's filmmaking career (though Gilles Deleuze notes that Duras viewed *Nathalie Granger* as "une préparation à la trilogie qui allait suivre": *La femme du Gange* (1974), *India Song* (1975), and *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* (1976)).^[2] Royer traces the elements of the film which anticipate Duras's later style and "establish[...] her feminist thinking," including the use of silence and the passivity of the female body on-screen (p. 31).

In chapter three, "Desynchronisation, subversion and the senses," Royer turns to a discussion of one of Duras's most striking formal strategies: the dislocation of image-track and soundtrack. Her use of desynchronisation has been discussed by various critics, who emphasise the strategy as a means of challenging the primacy of the visual (for example Deleuze, Lucy McNeece) or of producing meaning at the interstices between sound and image (Laura McMahon, James S. Williams, Sarah Cooper). Royer, too, emphasises these effects, focusing on a range of multisensory effects and embodied spectatorial experiences. The chapter offers a range of readings of the embodied effects produced by desynchronisation, including the oxymoronic evocation of heat and cold in *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (1981), or the representation of pain in *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959), for which Duras wrote the screenplay. Royer's sensory framework also addresses Duras's engagement with the unrepresentable: she writes that "[t]hermoception, nociception, ocular and auditory perceptions combine to provide an embodied experience of the event but not its representation" (p. 47). Royer revisits *Nathalie Granger* here too, in a discussion of the spectator's embodied reception of inertia and passivity. In a reading which is informed by the science of mirror neurons, Royer writes that we experience an "embodied simulation" of the "lethargy and lack of action" we witness on-screen, thus experiencing it for ourselves (p. 52). Yet where the spectacle of women's inertia may trigger an embodied response, in Duras's "desynchronised films it is the entire film that instils the bodily effect of female oppression" (p. 52). For example, the affect of suffering or the experience of "lack' as a lived embodied feeling" may be communicated via the rupture of sound and image, or the refusal of representation (p. 48). As noted, Royer's critical framework here and throughout is wide-ranging, incorporating feminist theory, sensory film theory, and embodied spectatorship theory. In this chapter and throughout, the argument is at its strongest when Royer's analysis of a film is more sustained and explicitly in dialogue with multiple aspects of this complex methodology. In moments of rapid exemplification (which precludes more sustained formal analysis), the question of exactly how a specific moment addresses the body of a spectator, or how this relates to female subjectivity, is occasionally obscured. Further elaboration in such moments would be welcome.

In chapter four, “Multisensorial visuality,” Royer examines a range of multisensory visual effects across Duras’s films. Here, she examines diverse visual features of Duras’s filmic work, including the black screen, the use of the colour blue, and the representation of the nude female body. The chapter illuminates a broad range of multisensorial effects in Duras’s images, including their appeal to the sense of touch and smell, to memory, and to our orientation in space. Royer covers considerable ground here, addressing a new feature in each subsection. Royer moves rapidly through a range of visual strategies, and, as above, some readers might welcome more of a dialogue between paragraphs and with the undergirding question of female subjectivity. Yet the range of this chapter is striking. The reading of Duras’s black screens in dialogue with the visual artist Pierre Soulages’s painted black canvas series, *Outrenoir*, is particularly illuminating. Royer moves away from the dominant interpretation of Duras’s use of black screens as a destructive gesture, a rejection of (filmic) representation, viewing it instead as a generative “experimentation with the materiality of the medium” (p. 81). Royer here highlights the intermedial quality of sequences featuring black screens, viewing this repeated motif as “a multimodal aesthetic” strategy which combines “not only sound and image but also text and painting” (p. 81). Royer also revisits *Hiroshima mon amour* via a focus on images which “give the viewer a painful sensation” (p. 60), such as shots of wounds. Here, Royer focuses on the ways in which the images evoke pain without establishing any identification with the subject perceived: she writes that “[t]he close-up of skins and wounds detach the image from the sufferer, annihilating any potential sympathy, but conjure a tactile sense of pain” (p. 60). She suggests that desire in *India Song* operates in a similar way: haptic imagery “evokes desire and privileges an embodied reception” such that “desire becomes a lived experience...rather than a process of identification with characters and narrative” (p. 63). Given the subject matter of these films, these readings open up challenging ethical questions for future critics to explore.

In chapter five, “Soundscape: sonic aesthetics and the feminine,” Royer expands critical dialogues in Duras scholarship by examining the sonic aspects of her films as “received sound,” privileging the experience of the “acoustic spectator,” rather than examining the meaning communicated by the films’ dialogues, voiceovers, and other sonic elements. In particular, she explores “the significance of the non-semantic vocalisations and their capacity to engage us sensuously” (p. 83). In doing so, she asks, “[h]ow can [Duras’s] use of sound be linked to female subjectivity?” (p. 83). Yet she also examines the dialogues’ verbal content for their multisensory evocations, discussing, for example, how, through the voiceover in *India Song*, “olfaction..., [a] feeling of humidity..., dryness...and luminosity...intertwine to create a synaesthetic and embodied experience of an imaginary Calcutta, and a cinaesthetic encounter between film and spectator” (p. 88). She reads the Durassian *voix-off* via Irigaray’s description of a “feminine syntax”, which challenges notions of “subject” and “object,” “proper meanings, proper names,” and which is marked by “proximity, but in such an extreme form it would preclude distinction of identities” (Irigaray, quoted by Royer, p. 89). This makes for a compelling reading of Duras’s elliptical off-screen dialogues (characterised by “multiplicity”, anonymity, and “disrupted syntax” (p. 89)).

Throughout this study, Royer engages with a wide range of Duras’s films, and traces patterns and recurring features across her oeuvre, thereby highlighting connections between films which are formally different, which is very useful. The focus on the films’ appeals to the senses, and the concomitant embodied impact on the spectator, draws out fresh readings even of Duras’s best-known films. For example, through her research into the often-overlooked lyrical content of the Beggar Woman’s song in *India Song*, Royer brings out the olfactory dimensions of the Beggar

Woman's words. By highlighting the richly sensory dimensions of the song, she probes the "particularly complex layering of meanings, connotations and sonorities" presented by the song, and the corporeal effects of this on the spectator (p. 93).

One of the book's key interventions is the dialogue it establishes between Duras's cinema and an ambitious, interdisciplinary framework for thinking spectatorship. In her sustained focus on embodied spectatorship, Royer brings a more optimistic perspective to readings of Duras's later cinematic form, which is often framed as destructive and negative. By highlighting the radical sensory effects of the films upon the spectator's body, Royer demonstrates that strategies often understood as destructive strategies of refusal, may instead be viewed as explorations of the rich materiality and multisensoriality of cinema. As such, she contributes to critical discussions surrounding the ways in which Duras's experimental form opens up new conceptions of spectatorship (a topic explored recently by Sarah Cooper in *Film and the Imagined Image* (2019)).^[3]

Royer chooses not to examine the films via their thematic or narrative concerns: she focuses on film form in isolation in order to explore the ways in which the films are received by the body of the spectator. This allows her to bring Duras's cinema into dialogue with a wider range of phenomenological and sensory film theory than any critical study so far. Royer states that the book's emphasis on Duras's "fundamentally political, subversive" formal innovations, which constitute a "profound questioning of dominant cinema," means that an "approach that does not focus on narrative analysis is necessary" (p. 109). Yet while it is undoubtedly the case that Duras "displaces the emphasis from film narrative to film materiality" (pp. 3-4), an exploration of the events or contexts the films evoke (such as the Holocaust or colonisation) could have extended the study of embodied spectatorship and its politics in interesting and innovative ways, rather than detracting from it. Royer acknowledges that "[e]mbodied film theory, French feminist theories, neuroscience and phenomenological approaches are often criticised for negating the political dimensions of films, and cultural and racial differences" (p. 109). She makes a clear claim for the feminist value of this theoretical framework and for a feminist reading of Duras's work. She writes that "for Duras, conventional films reproduce the power structures of society" (p. 41)-structures which her work seeks to challenge. The focus here is on patriarchal power dynamics, but--given Duras's explicit and broad-reaching political engagements--Royer's reflections could be extended to explicitly consider other power structures alongside these. This would be particularly useful given the centrality of the intercultural (via Laura U. Marks's *The Skin of the Film*) to the argument at many points in the book.^[4] Duras's childhood experience of living in colonial French Indochina is extremely significant to her work, yet as Royer states, "it would not be appropriate to classify Duras as an intercultural filmmaker" (p. 27). Yet Royer goes on to read Duras's films via Marks's concept of the intercultural, and readers with interests in postcolonial and decolonial studies might have welcomed a more sustained interrogation of the positioning of Duras and her films within this framework, particularly since Marks warns against reading the intercultural as a term which denotes "politically neutral exchange between cultures."^[5]

Royer's study examines the embodied responses produced by Duras's multisensory cinema, thereby framing Duras's feminist intervention as one which is communicated via an appeal to the senses and the body. In addition to its unstinting focus on diverse formal features of Duras's work, the book is striking for its interdisciplinarity and the breadth of its scope. Royer's analysis is informed by film theory, feminist thought, phenomenology, art history, and neuroscience. By bringing Duras's work into dialogue with this wide-ranging methodology, the book

demonstrates that “[s]ensual knowledge is vital to our grasp of the power of Duras’s films” (p. 109), their experimental form and feminist strategies. Yet in its commitment to this feminist framing, the book arguably seeks to soften the sharp edges of Duras’s thinking, and thus risks missing some of the key interventions of Duras’s filmmaking. As noted, an interrogation of Duras’s engagement with other power structures could have been integrated into the discussion of the films’ multisensory strategies in productive ways. In privileging an exclusively feminist approach, there is some inattention to the thornier nuances of Duras’s work, which are worth considering here, given Duras’s multiple political engagements, and the films’ often complex and challenging articulations of her own positioning within competing matrices of power.

NOTES

[1] Luis Antunes, *The Multisensory Film Experience: A Cognitive Model of Film Aesthetics* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2016).

[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L’Image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 336.

[3] Sarah Cooper, *Film and the Imagined Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[4] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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