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Duras and Blanchot in *Infinite Conversation*.

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— The first shot is still. The sun is picked up in deep orange against a green-blue sky. There is singing in a foreign language, it breaks off and laughs, chatters away to no one then begins to sing again. Two new voices are heard, they gossip in French. The strange sweet song continues, unaware and uninterrupted. The voices are from elsewhere, the landscape is empty of human activity. This elsewhere is not a single field, the voices have turned against the audience and against one another; the film works like a concertina and we are not able to see what lies within the folds. The dense unknown field rubs against the visual simplicity—the Indochinese landscape has been reduced to a horizon line and a suspended circle. The sun is fading slowly. Talk of an unnamed ‘she’ trails off and the French voices fall silent. The foreign voice (is this the mad beggar woman from Burma who walked for ten years before stopping at the Ganges?) carries on.¹ We cannot understand her language and are offered nothing by the way of subtitles, nonetheless, there is something audibly affective in the naive ignorance of her lyrical pitch. The screen is almost black now. Only a faint division between dark and not so dark is visible, this subtle differentiation is all that distinguishes earth from sky. The foreign voice has ceased and there are a few seconds of silence. The French females start to talk again. They introduce another woman into their recorded narrative; ‘she’ is

¹ The script of *India Song* in its incarnation as play, Duras tell us that ‘Characters in the story have been taken out of a book called *The Vice-Consul* and projected into new narrative regions... its insertion into the new narrative means that it has to be read, seen differently.’ (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 6. Given this explicit instruction from the author, I am hesitant to read people and things into the narrative gaps of *India Song*. It is a completely closed artistic totality and will be treated as such throughout this essay.

joined by 'the white woman.' *India Song*, begins to play and with it we float inside an unknown house.²

> In 'Speaking Is Not Seeing' Maurice Blanchot stages a dialogue but the conversation deceives since the two voices of are locked into a relationship of non-communication.³ Statements follow statements sequentially but they rarely answer as response. Any direct reply appears to be merely coincidental; it is almost as if one thought has collided with another only to rebound and turn away again. Ink on paper, physical transcription, is, it seems, the only stable unifying field.

— This first scene is an instance of fracture. The subsequent split is sustained for all one hundred and fifty one minutes of *India Song*. Sight is unapologetically severed from sound and a gap between the faculties is opened. Duras constantly negotiates this space, feeding her story through the middle, but at no point does she allow image and voice synchronise. Through her absolute separation of seen and heard, Duras seems to have discovered something specific to cinema, something that it alone may represent; the idea that speaking and seeing are non-corresponding sensuous acts. Cinema, through its formal construction, is the only environment for a material manifestation of this revelation. Duras ensures that her soundscape is created away from her landscape. The two come together, albeit in a tense and uneasy disunion, at the point of edit rather than in the event of action and so she never fails to exploit the unique representational capacity of her medium.⁴ The image world of *India Song* is loudly silent. Mouths open only to smoke or kiss or

² *India Song*, directed by Marguerite Duras (Sunchild Productions/Les Films Amorial, 1975), film.

³ Maurice Blanchot, 'Speaking Is Not Seeing' in *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 25-32.

⁴ This technique, established in *India Song*, becomes something of a signature for Duras. It is employed in *Aurelia Steiner (Melbourne)*, *Aurelia Steiner (Vancouver)* and *La Femme Du Ganges* to name but a few. Complete and untouched, the soundscape of *India Song* is recycled by Duras in her 1976 film project *Son Nom de Venise dans Culcutta Desert*. This is an extreme example of the communicative capacity of the non-visual to transcend the denotation of what is seen.

drink and so no trace of language is visually gestured at. We are thus forced to reconsider whether speech belongs to the visual world.

> Blanchot understands seeing and speaking to be unreconcilable polarities and ‘an amalgam, in any case, will not remedy the split.’⁵ His fictional theoretical dialogue uses the explicit complexity of pure language to show that the break is so total as to render any consideration of sight in relation to speech (and vice versa) impossible.⁶ Through Blanchot, the *a priori*-come-cliche, ‘seeing is believing,’ becomes sodden with a sort of sinister irony and we are invited reconsider the assumption of truth content in non-linguistic visual signs. Images are defined by clear, material referents, such simplicity seduces the consciousness and tells a lie of finite affirmation—this is it, this is real, this is all there is. For Blanchot, there are complicated and negative consequences to this line of thinking and he believes that ‘to see, perhaps, is to forget to speak; and to speak is to draw from the depths of speech an inexhaustible forgetfulness.’⁷ The subject who sees and gives privilege to sight forces human experience to adhere to the physical boundaries of the seen. Forgetfulness in this instance is an oddly aspirational attribute; it suggests that through speech we may look about indefinitely, opening up the abyss of possibility. Forgetfulness is illimitable indeterminacy and so through forgetting everything we are able to access anything. This antithetical thesis is typical of

⁵ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 29.

⁶ This singularity of expression is more difficult for Duras to achieve. Cinema, necessarily comprised of two elements; images and sounds, neatly presents Blanchot’s split but makes his definite choice more difficult to achieve. For Blanchot, the amalgam of film is not an option since pictures betray and distract from the plentitude of language. Given the obligations of her medium, Duras may never fully perform Blanchot’s radical act of emancipation—the traditional visual requirement of cinema will always be an obstacle. Duras, however, is not happy to accept this impossibility and she never tires in her attempts to overcome the constraints forced upon her medium by the canon. Through her films, ‘Duras was progressively purging cinema of its key, defining elements’ with the ultimate aim of emptying cinema so completely as to leave the audience with only a black screen accompanied by audible narration. Duras wanted to destroy cinema, suggesting a turn in favour of Blanchot’s logic. (Catherine Dhavernas, ‘Cinema and the Destruction of the Text in the Work of Marguerite Duras’ in *In the Dark Room - Marguerite Duras and Cinema* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009) pp.88-89.

⁷ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 29.

Blanchot and his explanation comes from a paradigm of negation. Cast across much of his writing (I hesitate to call it ‘philosophy’ since he constantly denies categorisation by blending fiction and theory, poetry and prose), in explicit and oblique terms, is the idea that death is not the end but rather an originating point of boundless affirmation.⁸ This paradoxical logic accounts for the praise of detour and return which we encounter in ‘*Seeing is Not Speaking.*’ Through this desperately subjective paradigm, backtracking ceases to be the residue of false starts.⁹

— The action seen in *India Song* never falters in its slow and steady progression. What we hear, however, ebbs and flows according to its own rhythm, collapsing ever further backwards into the unseen of the behind the screen. The densely layered audible landscape which Duras constructs is a symphony of human, non-human and musical sounds. The aforementioned foreign voice is not alone in nowhere with the formal French duet. Their audible expression is joined by musical accompaniment, by colonialists who talk incessantly amongst themselves, by rain and birds and painful cries. The fullness of the ‘off-stage’ environment makes the spectator acutely aware of the flattening process which seeing performs. A damningly critical *New York Times* review from 1975 (the year the film was released), could only find merit in the musicality of *India Song*: ‘The movie looks and sounds like something shot underwater, that is, everything except the fine, schlocky, thirties musical score by Carlos d’Alessio, which gives the film a life that has been carefully drained from the individual performances.’¹⁰ What was intended as a scathing comment works inadvertently to praise Duras for overcoming what she deemed to be the problem of cinema. She understood cinema to be an always aggressive art since ‘Film-making, in all its various forms, works to destroy

⁸ Leslie Hill, ‘The (Im)possibility of Literature’ in *Blanchot—Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 61.

⁹ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 26.

¹⁰ Vincent Canby, “Marguerite Duras’s ‘India Song,’ a Four-Hankie Story” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1975, accessed April 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9507E1DD173FE034BC4053DFB667838E669EDE>

the practice of writing.¹¹ Duras was first and foremost a writer, her allegiance was always with the text. By negating cinematic conventions she was able to manipulate the medium and present her film as propaganda for the superior power of literature. Her careful draining of individual performance was an active, preventative measure against the tyranny of the image. She does not allow personalities to be circumscribed by visual nuance. Instead each character is lent a transient legacy of selfhood through multiple and sometimes conflicting snippets of conversation.

> ‘Language acts as though we are able to see the thing from all sides.’¹²

— The ‘underwater’ quality of *India Song* presents seeing as a muffled and stifled form of information exchange—where images exist they are presumed to be all and so discourse is left unexplored. Duras complicates this assumption. The slight visuals of her film force the idea that there must be something else, something unseen waiting to be got at. The ahistorical characters drift listlessly in a vacuum of art-nouveau beauty but the script tells another story, one of historical contingency and social awareness. *India Song* critiques French colonialism and lays bare the banality of bourgeois existence.

> The space which sight creates is a false space that closes rather than opens. Sight, as it unveils, creates a barrier between the subject and the thing since we always visually apprehend by holding back from that which we seek to understand.¹³

¹¹ Dhavernas, *Cinema and Destruction of Text*, 87.

¹² Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 28.

¹³ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 28.

— Duras plays with mirrors throughout *India Song*. Figures appear to be becoming towards us when really the opposite is true; they are always moving further away. Closeness is just an illusion, a trick of the eye, not to be trusted. What is simply given to the audience of *India Song*, that is what we are shown by the camera, appears to be engaged in a single lateral movement towards death. This end is aurally established by the narrators from the start. The visual display is a rehearsed dance of ghosts, dead before the story has begun. They live a shadowy but uncomplicated existence. The refused, that is an anchor for the heard, works quite oppositely and is essentially a considered tangle. ‘All references to physical, human or political geography are incorrect’ and so refrain reveals itself an artistic imperative for Duras.¹⁴ The audience does not escape this model; we are denied the origin of the sound, we do not know whether the different sources of sound are aware of each other, it is unclear whether this noise is happening all at once or within different temporal zones, I could go on. The empirical disavowal which Duras inflicts is, however paradoxically, a green light for thought and, as the film progresses, it becomes clear that ‘the less one sees, the more one thinks.’¹⁵ The rich soundscape of *India Song* renders the images incidental rather than illustrative. The viewer is engrossed in the ambiguity of the *mise-en-son* which grows like a rhizome, engaging thought at each point of layered strangeness.¹⁶ The weightless sounds lock subjective imagination into a dynamic relationship with the film wherein narrative possibilities stretch out endlessly, offering more scope than any visual actuality ever could. When we see, we see one thing and so experience is tunnelled through that unified field to a single end. When we communicate with speech we may be led towards a point of comprehension only for that

¹⁴ Duras, *India Song*, 5.

¹⁵ Dhavernas, *Cinema and Destruction of Text*, 98.

¹⁶ On page 213 of the essay ‘Marguerite Duras’ Aural World’ in *In the Dark Room - Marguerite Duras and Cinema*, (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009), Dong Liang defines *mise-en-son* (a term usually reserved for theatre) as ‘the expression which refers to the orchestration of sound elements that contributes to the spectators aural experience of the play.’ It is in this sense that it is used here.

understanding to disintegrate with a word. The death of one idea allows others to form *ad infinitum*.¹⁷

> *The Infinite Conversation*, of which 'Speaking is Not Seeing' is a part, takes the form of a constant exchange between *autrui* or others. Through these others we encounter an asymmetry unknown to the free subjective world—they speak but cannot be spoken to. The gulf between us and them is, therefore, not merely physical (we are made of flesh and blood and they of letters and punctuation marks) but essentially constitutional; the others operate according to a separate modality of communication. Given that the *autrui* may not engage in interaction, their dialogue is never allowed to develop into what we term 'argument.' This peculiarity suggests that what is said is somehow secondary to the way in which it is expressed. The lack of determined direction invites a consideration of the effect that the manner of saying produces. Blanchot's listless relay of thought as told by language has an autonomous and unresting energy; it is not a means to an end so need never end. In her foreword to *The Infinite Conversation*, Susan Hanson describes Blanchot's interesting take on authorial voice as forming an 'in-between of speech, speech that in its multiple divergences gives this path an almost musical complexity.'¹⁸ Speaking may be more abstract than seeing but music pushes abstraction further still. The rare speech which Blanchot longs for in 'Speaking is Not Seeing' is a language which 'frees thought from the optical imperative that in the Western tradition, for thousands of years, has subjugated our approach to things.'¹⁹ This expression would be something like a music which makes us feel and think by colliding and juxtaposing notes that have no optical correspondent. This rare music foregoes conclusion and ending since it remains

¹⁷ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 30.

¹⁸ Susan Hanson, 'Foreword' in *The Infinite Conversation* (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), xxix.

¹⁹ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 27.

suspended even when instruments have fallen ostensibly silent. Blanchot, with ‘no idea of a goal... still less stopping’ seems to be recomposing language in the model of music.²⁰

— The surface of *India Song* reads as a typical emotional drama of unrequited love and adultery. The lack of subjective interiority and authorial perspective, however, complicates this cinematic stereotype by stripping it of an important formative feature; the moral imperative. The disembodied voices pass audible judgement on the affairs of the colony’s elite but their utterances never come together long enough to offer a comprehensive take on the proceedings. While the film is a rigorously formal demonstration, the emotional landscape is almost derelict. The narrative, therefore, does not retain the meta-position it would do if this were a work of prose. Plot merely facilitates structure and Duras embellishes her film through a relentless atomisation of the constituent parts of cinema. Oddly, this lack of plot does not make speech secondary. Eschewing sentence structure and conversational norms allows words in their most primordial form to own the platform of *India Song*.

> ‘The speech we are trying to speak of is a return to this first turning—a noun which must be heard as a verb, as the movement of a turning.’²¹

— ‘India Song,’ it is played in its entirety so that it occupies time—always long—for the spectator, the reader to leave the common place where it is played, when the spectacle and reading begins. Still ‘India Song.’ Still. Now, ‘India Song’ stops. Farthest away from the first time, as if it were played far from the present place.²²

²⁰ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 25.

²¹ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 31.

²² Marguerite Duras, *India Song (texte, theatre, film)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 13.

> ‘The absence of work in which discourse ceases so that, outside speech, outside language, the movement of writing may come, under the attraction of the outside.’²³

²³ Blanchot, *Speaking is Not Seeing*, 32.

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