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Festival de San Sebastián
OFFICIAL SELECTION



I WANT TO TALK ABOUT DURAS

A film by Claire Simon





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2021- 95' – Color – France – 1:85 – 5.1

Synopsis

A man involved in a passionate relationship with a celebrated writer of 30 years his senior needs to talk. He is fascinated by her and yet he feels he just cannot go on anymore. He opens up, in an attempt to put into words the intensity of his love.

Cast

Swann Arlaud, Emmanuelle Devos

Crew

Director Claire Simon

Screenwriter Claire Simon

DOP Céline Bozon

Editor Julien Lacheray

Music Nicolas Repac

Set Design Daniel Bevan

Costume Design Dorothée Guiraud

Sound Virgile Van Ginneken

Production Les Films de l'Après-Midi (François d'Artemare)





Director's Biography & Filmography

Born in London, Claire Simon first directed independent short films.

She then discovered the practice of direct cinema with the Ateliers Varan and made several documentaries such as *At All Costs* (1995) and *Recreations* (1998), which garnered multiple awards. She wrote and directed three feature fiction films which were presented in the Director's Fortnight at Cannes: *A Foreign Body* (1997), *On Fire* (2005), *God's Offices* (2008).

Her most recent films include "*Gare du Nord*" (2013 fiction), which premiered at the Locarno Film Festival, *The Woods Dreams Are Made Of* (2015 documentary) and *The Competition* (2016 documentary), which premiered at Venice International Film Festival and won the award of Venice Classic's best documentary.

Young Solitude premiered at Forum's Berlinale in 2018. Her latest documentary, *The Grocer's Son, The Mayor, The Village And The World* premiered at IDFA 2020 will be released in French theaters september first 2021.

- 2021 I WANT TO TALK ABOUT DURAS (fiction)
- 2020 THE GROCER'S SON, THE MAYOR, THE VILLAGE AND THE WORLD (doc)
- 2018 YOUNG SOLITUDE (doc)
- 2016 THE COMPETITION (doc)
- 2015 THE WOODS DREAMS ARE MADE OF (doc)
- 2013 GARE DU NORD (fiction)
- 2013 HUMAN GEOGRAPHY (doc)
- 2008 GOD'S OFFICES (fiction)
- 2006 ON FIRE (fiction)
- 2002 MIMI (doc)
- 1997 A FOREIGN BODY (fiction)
- 1995 AT ALL COSTS (doc)
- 1992 RECREATIONS (doc)
- 1991 SCENES DE MENAGES (fiction) (short)
- 1989 LES PATIENTS (doc)
- 1986 LA POLICE (fiction) (short)

Director's Interview

What inspired you to make this film?

I read *Je voudrais parler de Duras* (*I want to talk about Duras*) when it was published in 2016, and I was blown away. Everything Yann Andréa described in that interview was so specific; he was so intelligently insightful in his perspective; and yet never once did he complain on his own behalf... I found that remarkable. Some years later, because I have a friend who is a theatre director who was working on Duras, I reread the text and was still spellbound. I told myself: "This is completely unsuited to cinema – so let's do it!". It's certainly easier to adapt a text like that for the theatre, but I thought the conversation had potential on film. I felt a need to create this missing record. I've often done that – created documents that didn't previously exist.

Yann Andréa tells his friend Michèle Manceaux how Marguerite Duras forbade him from seeing his friends, from dressing how he liked, from eating what he wanted. How she criticized him relentlessly, belittled him, even hit him... But never stopped speaking to him about love. As a feminist, what strikes me most when I read and listen to Yann Andréa words is that he was, purely and simply, a victim of domestic violence.

Of course it was domestic violence. But it didn't stop either of them from thinking it was love. To her, it was her idealistic notions of love that engendered this violence; she dreamed of a perfect love with Yann Andréa, and she believed that he could incarnate this love. What he describes is a series of interactions that are rather banal: the domineering lover who tears you down in order to rebuild you to suit their

image. This narrative is centuries old – men subjugating women, with nobody batting an eyelid. So it's quite good if this now seems scandalous. But he was fascinated by Duras' literary, creative energy...because it was this literary experience which fascinated him and which, in my opinion, is explained by his desire for immortality: he was with Duras so he could be immortal. All the same, I sensed passion and happiness in their relationship, which lasted for a few months at the very beginning. He doesn't dare resist her determination to construct the man of her dreams, her ideal love. But then, in a way, she was the woman of his dreams, too.

There is a striking quote: "What is left of me, if I have lost my sense of self?"

I think this question rings true at a certain point in time for all couples, be they homosexual or heterosexual, with regards to the admiration and passion they feel for one another, and the psychological projection that takes place... At the end of this phase of passionate connection, both sides must ask: "What is left of me, if I am so consumed by my love for the other, that I have lost my sense of self and ceased to exist as an individual?"

They both seem caught up in the idea that "true" love implies a mutual desire to destroy one another; that it is painful, tragic, and that suffering is inevitable, but this is just a smoke screen that serves the interests of the dominant one! We cannot remove this love from its social context. For example, what Marguerite Duras describes in *India Song*, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, and *The Lover* are love stories linked





to the colonies, and the colonial State. Love was created in that world, too. And her love with Yann Andréa was caught up in a bourgeois system, teeming with dominating relationships.

What part of the text had the greatest impact on you?

It was the voice of the weaker party in the relationship: the voice of the amorous lover, the one who was chasing the other, and also the voice of the groupie. All of these aspects seemed so completely modern to me, both in the sense of celebrity (an idea which resonates with people today), but also the inversion of roles: here, a man is dominated by a woman. Yet, in spite of his masculine upbringing, he manages to articulate the weaker role (his own) with extraordinary clarity and precision, the likes of which I have not always come across when the roles are inverted. In short, he is telling the story of countless women: when someone tells you, “You do not exist in your own right, you only exist through me...” Women have been experiencing this for thousands of years! The difference is that he is a man, and he is surprised to find himself in this situation. It’s interesting when someone who should logically be in the dominant camp is suddenly relegated to a position of weakness, but still possesses the dominant culture and language to describe the experience. That is what we, as women, find very interesting about this: he has this timeless culture of male dominance which allows him to live nonetheless, and to “carry on” as the weaker one. Whereas a woman in the same position is reduced to silence, her very existence totally denied. He, however, continues to exist in spite of his circumstances. I’m grateful to Yann Andréa for articulating the voice of the weaker one in such an extremely beautiful way, with such dignity. We must realize that the voice of the dominated can be intelligent, completely rational, and filled with strength but not power.

I think that the voice of the weak (that dominators attempt to suppress) can be made heard through works of art; we can listen to the voice of those whose bodies and lives are subjected to oppression. We can bring the viewer to imagine themselves in the place of the weaker one who describes the power dynamic, who documents it... and thereby, resists

it! This is what struck me about Yann Andréa’s voice: this man, who cannot sink any lower, has the ability to think. And very intelligently at that. Therefore, the idea that the weak are stupid – a narrative created by the dominant – is blown to pieces by Andréa’s words.

In the name of art, we have justified, excused, and accepted the violence which artists and creators inflict upon others (often, their partners); but you don’t do that in this film.

I am not excusing anything, I am simply describing what happens – this psychological hold, this oppression: they aren’t just examples of domestic violence; they are accepted in the name of immortality, in the interests of creating literary work. The goal of both parties is to enter a literary trance. This is what has a hold on them. In my films, for example, I have spent time with jazz musicians who take drugs in order to enter into a trance state...to make music more beautiful than anything you’ve ever heard, and to numb the pain. For me, Yann Andréa and Marguerite Duras were in this trance: they drank in order to write, to create a text which transcended normal standards. They were also a literary couple: they accepted this appalling relationship in the name of the writing, the films, and books that they created...and therefore in the name of immortality.

There was another striking account – the very well-known episode where Marguerite Duras directed Yann Andréa during the filming of Agatha and the Limitless Readings (1981). She seemed so harsh and domineering!

Yes, she was horrible, but that’s also where we see that she’s a director: she directs him to make sure that he does exactly what she wants him to. She wants to draw something out of Yann that she knows is in there, but she’s afraid of being unable to do so. It’s emblematic of cinema, and it’s the voice of a director. If it had been Kubrick, Godard, or another male director who was filmed saying exactly the same thing, everyone would have said: “He’s amazing! Such strength of character – he really knows what he wants!”; but because Duras was an older woman directing a young man, people thought she was a monster.

Are you also troubled by the dominance that you yourself have the potential to, or do, exercise? Because like Marguerite Duras, as a powerful, well-known, older, creative female figure, you are also in a position to dominate.

Of course, I am. That's why I made this film. Some of my friends asked me, "Did you make this film because you felt oppressed?"; and I responded: "No, on the contrary... I made it to condemn the oppressive power I have the potential to exercise."

Your film is not actually a love story at all; rather, it's a film about that which love is not!

Yes, but "that which love is not" is pretty widespread! I think it's a dream about love. But as Gilles Deleuze once said, "If you are caught in the other's dreams, you are done for." I believe that there was a moment of complete happiness: those two months they spent in Trouville together when he describes their relationship as being very sexual and loving. What touched and surprised me in his account was learning that their relationship was a very sexual one. Yet both in public and in private, Yann Andréa was always considered to be a closeted homosexual who was Duras' servant, someone who basically saw her as a kind of grandmother figure. Nobody wanted to open their eyes to their desire for each other, their intense sexuality, because of narrow-minded and bourgeois notions of decency. As this sexual dimension had been obscured, I decided that I wanted to bring it to light. When Michèle Manceaux went home after the first day of interviews, she was just as surprised as I was by what Yann had told her about his sexual relations with Marguerite Duras. I wanted to show what this represented, and how their nights were consumed by this desire, this passion, body on body, and even the details of their bodies.

You portray this sexual dimension in an unconventional way – through drawings – in which we can recognize their bodies and faces. Why did you choose this technique?

I didn't want to film those scenes because I would have had to use pornography actors. And that would have meant only filming certain body

parts, genitalia and not faces, whereas drawings allowed us to show the genitals and the face in the same frame – I think that is a very important aspect of sexuality. As a director, as a feminist director, I wanted to find a way of showing their sexuality cinematographically, but without letting it be dominated by the visual codes of the sex industry, in which dominators profit.

Do you think it's important to show the body of a 70-year-old woman having sex?

Of course, I do. There are plenty of sexual drawings by male artists like Picasso, Rodin, Egon Schiele... but these images glorify the power of their gaze. With Judith Fraggi, who created the drawings in the film, we addressed so many questions: how should sex be represented? How should we portray the bodies of a young man and an old woman? How should we show the moment, the desire? I had never thought about these questions in such detail before.

We were guided by what Yann said in the interview... and by Duras' The Man Sitting in the Corridor, where she describes fellatio and other sexual acts in precise detail. Judith was successful, I think, because we managed to capture the gestures, which are never pornographic, every time; because we portray their entire bodies, because we see their faces, because we understand their relationship, because the people aren't simply reduced to their genitalia, which are only a tiny part of themselves.

Is this your way of avoiding using the male gaze?

Yes, it is. I tried to do what I thought best, not on the terms of pornographic cinema industry or from the male point of view. It's from our – that is to say, female – point of view: mine, Judith Fraggi's, Michèle Manceaux's... it's our vision, it's not the masculine vision of sexuality. These drawings aren't intended to arouse, but to tell the story of a physical, romantic relationship which seems to contradict the controlling relationship. And in any case, it's what Yann described in his interview.

What significance does this film have in your journey as a feminist artist, particularly in the context of current feminist movements, four years after the emergence of #MeToo?

For a long time, people have accused me of making "women's films", in other words, lesser films. And when it's documentary, it's even worse... I have made many films about women. When I made God's Offices, I would sometimes go into movie theatres to see who was there, and there would only be three men in the entire audience! It's insane how little interest men have in this topic, because the questions the film deals with are universal – namely, how and why do people sleep together, when there's a risk of creating an unwanted child...

But in the two films you released this year, you portrayed men: men among men in Garage, Engines and Men, and now this man who is dominated by a woman...

I find filming men really interesting! Men have filmed women for almost one hundred years, they're enraptured by this element of mystery, of submission... and I'm fascinated by the worlds of men. I want to turn the gaze back on them. With Garage, I wanted to show how happy men are amongst themselves, immersed in their entirely masculine world. It's very interesting to consider men from their own perspective, eye-to-eye. On an even footing. I don't feel like I'm competing with them; men dominate cinema: they show desire, sexuality, seduction... but I can do this too, differently. Let's just say that I like filming dominant characters, their freedom, their power, and their contradictions...

You also shine a light on another aspect of sexuality: masculine homosexuality. We're surprised at how vehemently Marguerite Duras expresses her homophobia towards Yann Andréa; Michèle Manceaux didn't seem shocked, either.

I shot that scene in the woods – about gay hook-ups – because I wanted to show how Michèle Manceaux, as a listener, portrays sexuality between men, flirtation, and seduction. It was also a way of doing justice to Yann, because when he was with Duras, she forbade him from having relations with men. And I realized that if I didn't film this scene, I was

adopting a dominant, hetero-centric gaze. That would have aligned this film with Michèle Manceaux and Marguerite Duras, two heterosexual women who refused to admit that Yann was homosexual. I could have filmed this scene in a nightclub, but I decided that the woods would provide a more mysterious backdrop. This also slightly echoes the forest which surrounds Michèle Manceaux's house...and my other film The Woods Dreams are Made of.

...and the scene on the train echoes your film Gare du Nord!

Yes, in this film there are nods to my other films.

In the film, we only see Marguerite Duras in archive images: why did you decide not to have an actress play this role?

I was impressed by Jeanne Moreau's performance in the film by Josée Dayan, but I decided to take a different path. In The Queen (a film by Stefan Frears, who I admire greatly), the only real character, portrayed through film archives, is Lady Di. In my own film, I wanted Duras to be present yet invisible, just as she was during the interview between Michèle Manceaux and Yann Andréa: we understand that she is just downstairs, that she telephoned Yann while he was giving the interview, but we never see her. However, I wanted there to be some record of her, to give the audience an idea of her incredible charm, her strength... and her love for Yann: we see at one point, when she describes him as a "modern wanderer", that she is fascinated by and madly in love with him.

It's a wonderful film about listening: we see how listening can make words endure – you film Michèle Manceaux / Emmanuelle Devos (the listener) almost as much as Yann Andréa / Swann Arlaud (the speaker).

Well, this is fundamental. For me, for a conversation to be put on film, listening has to come first. Who are we talking to, what is the effect on the listener? Talking without listening is for bad television, where we only film talking heads reeling off their opinions.

When I made God's Offices – about Family Planning, a place where they listen to women – I understood that listening is a much more powerful



tool than I had thought: listening directs speech. When I was doing my research, I did an internship with Family Planning counsellors: sometimes, I got the impression that the person there was telling the story of my life, with incredibly precise details. And when I discussed this with the counselors, they told me that they experienced the same thing all the time. It's mysterious, this effect, but I believe that even when a woman doesn't say anything, she has the ability – by the way she listens – to create a voice, and to make it heard in a specific place. When we see the listener, it adds another point of view to the one who is talking. Like the viewer, we become a listener, not only hearing what is said, but also asking ourselves: what does she think of what he said? Where is she trying to lead him? What effect does that have on her? Because of what she hears, Michèle Manceaux sees what Yann tells her, a number of scenes which she needs to portray. She listens and then stages Yann's tale.

These are the scenes where she sees Yann or even the drawings, that she grows closer to him, that she starts to love him in her own way. Her journalist's imagination allows her to see, for example, that in Caen there is a marina in the centre of town, when Yann says that he discovers Duras by reading *The Little Horses of Tarquina*. She sees Yann's tale incarnated, she "makes her own film", just like we all do when listening to someone's story... She unwinds the discreet threads from Yann's words. Michèle Manceaux is very important because she simultaneously provides the perspective of an outsider, of another woman who might also fall in love with Yann, of a friend... In fact, this interview came to be because Yann had called Michèle Manceaux from Trouville several weeks beforehand, and told her he was going to commit suicide. She responded by saying: "No, no, you'll never pull it off; you don't have the right pills..." and that was how the idea for the interview emerged.

Was the interview a kind of therapy?

He wanted to talk to Michèle Manceaux about herself, so that he could start writing a work of his own. Because Duras, he said, didn't listen to him. He had literary ambitions.

How did you portray this conversation, in cinematographic terms?

I filmed the interviews in a single shot sequence every time to give the impression that they were happening in real time, in the present moment. Everything happened just as you see it: when Emmanuelle Devos listens to Swann Arlaud, she's really listening to him, at the moment when he's talking. At first, the actors thought I was going to shoot with two cameras; but I didn't want to. So I practiced filming them with one camera – the shots I designed were very complicated, lasting between 35 and 40 minutes. When I film, I know exactly what I'm going to do, even if I improvise a bit because I'm the one behind the camera. It wasn't at all, for example, how the series *En Thérapie* was filmed with key shots and reverse angles. I needed everything to be real, to take place in real time – I needed this to allow the actors' genius to unfold, but to satisfy my own standards as camerawoman and director. I'm like a child, or certain jazz players – I prefer doing things in real life, making "live" choices, without any possibility of going back.

Interview by Victoire Tuillon

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