

Marguerite Duras (Gia Đình, 1914 – Paris, 1996) is a rare example of a cult author who has also become a popular icon. Her fifty-six books, nineteen films and a dozen screenplays, together with her lesser-known work for television, occupy a highly influential place in European literature and film from the second half of the 20th century.

MARGUERITE DURAS

12.03 – 02.10.2022



[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



This exhibition is the first devoted to Marguerite Duras in Spain and the only museum retrospective anywhere in the world to date to cover the whole of her literary, film and television work.

Marguerite Duras (Gia Đình, 1914 – Paris, 1996) was one of the most influential European writers and filmmakers of the second half of the 20th century. The author of fifty-six books—including novels, journalistic writings and theatre plays—nineteen films and a dozen or so screenplays, Duras remains not only a cult figure but also, above all in France, a true popular icon.

An early voice railing against the “vampirisme colonial” in French Indochina in her book *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (The sea wall, 1950) and an active member of the “groupe de la rue Saint-Benoît”—welcoming the likes of Robert Antelme, Dionys Mascolo, Maurice Blanchot, Edgar Morin, Jean Genet, Jorge Semprún and François Mitterrand, among others, to meetings at her house—Marguerite Duras went on an ideological journey from the early 1940s to the late 1970s that mirrored the contradictions of an age indelibly shaped by the Second World War, orthodox Communism, May ’68 and the struggles of the feminist movement. Following her expulsion from the French Communist Party—accused of “arrogance, loose morals and sleeping around”—Duras was deeply involved in setting up the Comité d’action des intellectuels contre la poursuite de la guerre en Afrique du Nord (1957) and drawing up the *Déclaration sur le droit à l’insoumission dans la guerre d’Algérie* or “Manifeste des 121” (1960). She was also a regular contributor to the anti-Gaullist magazine *Le 14 juillet* (1958–1959) and in 1961 was closely involved with Maurice Blanchot’s failed project *Revue internationale*. Together with a group of intellectuals, she set up the Comité d’action étudiants-écrivains during the May ’68 student occupation of the Sorbonne. Then, in 1970, she

was arrested for protesting outside the CNPF employers' organisation following the death of a worker from Mali at the hands of the police in Aubervilliers. She later signed the famous *Manifeste des 343*—soon dubbed the “Manifeste des 343 salopes”—published in the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* on 5 April 1971, in which 343 women demanded that abortion be made freely available and free of charge after declaring that they themselves had had an abortion, thereby risking being taken to court and receiving a prison sentence. Finally, in 1977, she was one of the few public figures, together with Héléne Cixous, Monique Wittig and Antoinette Fouque, who refused to sign the open letter by writer Gabriel Matzneff in defense of three men accused of having sex with children under the age of fifteen, given that Matzneff himself faced several accusations of paedophilia and child abuse.

Over the course of more than three decades, Marguerite Duras wrote an impressive number of novels, including the early works *Les Impudents* (The impudent ones, 1943) and *La Vie tranquille* (The quiet life, 1944), followed later by the bestseller *Moderato cantabile* (1958), *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* (The afternoon of Monsieur Andesmas, 1962), *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (The rapture of Lol V. Stein, 1964), *Le Vice-Consul* (The vice-consul, 1966), *Détruire, dit-elle* (Destroy, she said, 1969) and *Abahn Sabana David* (1970). At the same time, she also began an acclaimed career as a playwright, whether adapting her own stories, such as *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (Whole days in the trees, 1954) and *Le Square* (The square, 1955), or by writing stage plays such as *La Musica* (Music, 1965), *L'Amante anglaise* (The English lover, 1968) and *L'Éden Cinéma* (The Éden cinema, 1977).

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Between 1965 and 1967, Marguerite Duras appeared regularly on *Dim Dam Dom*, a new magazine-style TV show

aimed at a female audience, produced by Daisy de Galard, editor of *Elle* magazine, and Manette Bertin, together with Michel Polac, Marc Gilbert, Jean-Pierre Bastid and Peter Knapp. It went out every month on a Sunday evening on the second channel of French television between 1965 and 1973 and combined short reports on a wide range of subjects—fashion, politics, cooking, interior design, music, etc.—introduced by famous singers and actresses, including Françoise Hardy, Jane Birkin and Romy Schneider, trying their hand as presenters. It also featured avant-garde filmmakers of the likes of Agnès Varda and Claude Lanzmann, who presented entertaining short films.

Marguerite Duras interviewed celebrities and ordinary people, creating brief essayistic documentaries that assumed the ethnographic grammar of *cinéma vérité*, in the words of researcher Lili Owen Rowlands.¹ Although there are signs of early experiments in disassociating words and pictures, which later became a trademark of her filmmaking, her TV reports are clearly in the vein of her journalistic writings, which she began in the late 1950s. Her articles, published mostly in the weekly left-wing news magazine *France Observateur*, focused on the members of the underclass and those living on the fringes of society.

This exhibition is the first to bring together eight episodes of *Dim Dam Dom* that offer a key insight into the many interests that Duras brought to the show. *Marguerite Duras interroge (Lolo Pigalle)* (Marguerite Duras interviews [Lolo Pigalle], 28 October 1965) is a report on a young stripper which analyses the productive nature of sex work; in *Marguerite Duras et le petit François* (Marguerite Duras and little François, 30 April 1965) and *Les enfants et Noël* (Children and Christmas, 25 November 1965) she gets a young boy to share his inner thoughts; *Mélina Mercouri - Marguerite Duras* (4 February 1967) portrait the writer's close affinity

¹ See <https://www.another-screen.com/marguerite-duras-on-television>.

with greek actress, politician and activist; in *Marguerite Duras chez les fauves* (Marguerite Duras in the lions' den, 25 February 1966) she forensically probes a Parisian zoo-keeper about the happiness of the animals in his charge; *Marguerite Duras à la Petite Roquette* (Marguerite Duras and the prison governess, 12 November 1967) is a taut conversation with Marie-Marguerite Vigorie, France's only prison governess, in charge of the Petite Roquette women's prison, where female prisoners were executed between 1939 and 1949 (in its earlier incarnation as a juvenile prison its inmates included Jean Genet); *L'arroseur arrosé* (The sprinkler sprinkled, 1965), in a nod to what is considered to be the first film comedy, made by Louis Lumière in 1895, sees Marguerite Duras interview Pierre Dumayet, one of the early driving forces behind French television; and, finally, in *Le parfait milliardaire* (The perfect multimillionaire, 1965) a successful businessman explains how he made his vast fortune and shares his fondness for tramps, the poor, Stalin and Fidel Castro.

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Duras's relationship with film began with writing the screenplay and dialogues for Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Henri Colpi's *Une aussi longue absence* (The long absence, 1961). By now, her novels had started to be adapted by various filmmakers, beginning with René Clément in *This Angry Age* (1957) and Peter Brook in *Moderato cantabile* (1960) and followed later by Jules Dassin in *10:30 P.M. Summer* (1966) and Tony Richardson in *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (1967).

Less than happy with several of these early adaptations—although the most wanting, Jean-Jacques Annaud's sensationalist and pretentious *L'Amant* (The lover, 1992), based on her 1984 novel, was yet to come—and following her much-publicised “professional falling-out” with Alain Resnais, captured in a searing letter on display here in which

Marguerite Duras lashes out at him after the filmmaker had turned down a screenplay she would later shoot herself,² Duras decided to direct her first feature, *La Musica* (1967), adapted from her play of the same name. However, it was only two years later, with the release of *Détruire, dit-elle*, that Marguerite Duras's truly original and increasingly experimental directing career really began to take off, resulting in a series of films that have had a decisive impact on the understanding of contemporary filmmaking: *Jaune le soleil* (Yellow the sun, 1972), *Nathalie Granger* (1972), *India Song* (1975), *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* (Her Venetian name in deserted Calcutta, 1976), *Le Camion* (The Lorry, 1977), *Le Navire Night* (The ship “Night”, 1978), *L'Homme Atlantique* (The Atlantic man, 1981) and her final film, *Les Enfants* (The children, 1985), among others.

Although Marguerite Duras's films might appear to belong in a separate chapter to her writing, they employ the same codes, shared by other writers of the time, eschewing the notion of a single, finished work. Instead, her characters appear and reappear in different films, plays and novels. One might say that her whole oeuvre is a series of comings, goings and re-entries into a crucible of microstories—voices and spaces indiscriminately revisited through different expressive means.

Made on a low budget without the benefit of a studio's production apparatus, and with an immediacy that belies the literary power of their dialogues and monologues, Marguerite Duras's films epitomise the eternal tug of war between image and text that lies at the heart of filmmaking. From this perspective, the dismantling between plot and audiovisual register, which reaches its zenith in *Les Mains négatives* (1979), *Césaire* (1979), *Aurélia Steiner* (*Vancouver*) and *Au-*

² In her letter of 29 January 1969, Marguerite Duras refers to a text, “Capital destruction”, which later became the film *Détruire, dit-elle* (1969).

relia Steiner (Melbourne) (1979) and *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (Agatha and the limitless readings, 1981), has led to her films being seen as an example of a characteristically female counter-cinema, offering parallel readings of discourses and strategies for shifting and reoccupying certain locations outside the narrative field, as astutely noted by artist and writer Virginia Villaplana. In another sense, Marguerite Duras's powerful use of voiceovers—often her own voice—is one of the hallmarks of a style of filmmaking that opens up a whole field of both experimental and simply descriptive possibilities that have been key for numerous later filmmakers.

In this brief look at Duras's films, it is worth noting the June 1980 special issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* magazine put together by Marguerite Duras, in collaboration with film critic Serge Daney. Entitled *Les yeux verts* (The green eyes), it was conceived as a blank sheet for Duras to write about film and even select the pictures to accompany the different texts. The result is a kind of cinematographic manifesto interrupted by political digressions, moral assertions and characteristic stories from the writer's universe, a patchwork of opinions, affinities and references that offer us not so much a greater understanding of her as a filmmaker as a unique opportunity to witness an intellectual cutting herself loose from a great many of her previous ideological ties.

Of particular interest is the conversation between Marguerite Duras and Jean-Luc Godard, produced by Colette Fellous and Pierre-André Boutang and directed by Jean-Daniel Verhaeghe, recorded in Duras's apartment at rue Saint-Benoît on 2 December 1987 for the TV programme *Océaniques*. In principle, the meeting was to promote the publication of Duras's novel *Emily L.* and the premiere of Godard's film *Soigne ta droite* (Keep your right up) that year, but in the event they readily engage in a lively discussion and mutual questioning, above all Duras. In addition to sharing opinions on filmmaking and politics, they ironically question their respective aesthetic and existential



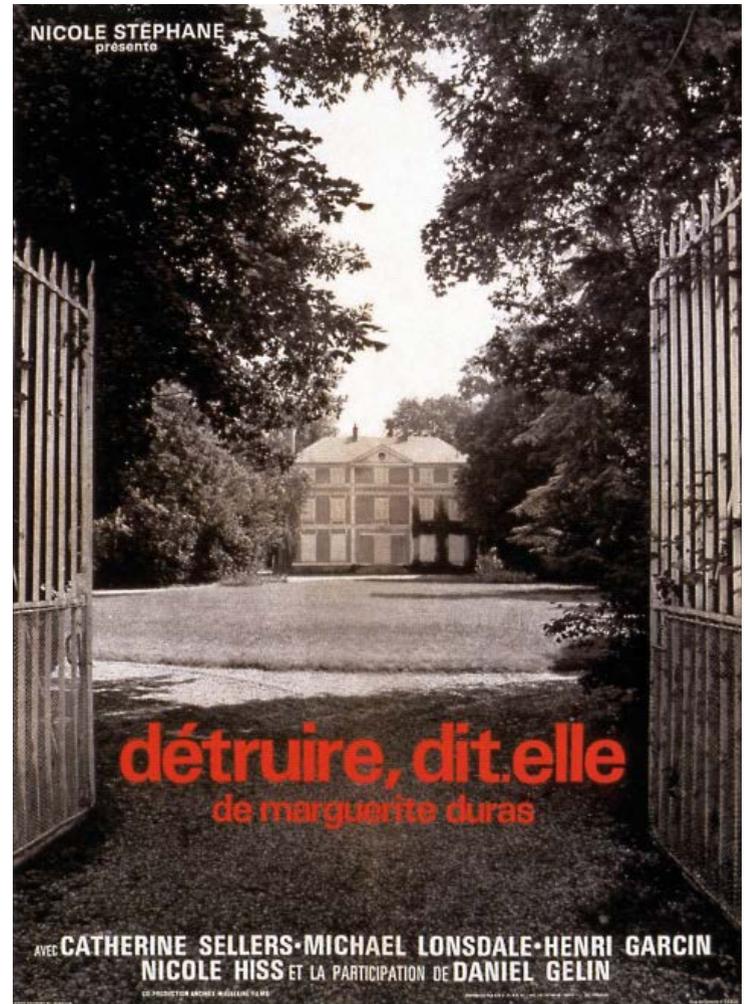
Dionys Mascolo, Marguerite Duras and Robert Antelme, ca. 1943
© Jean Mascolo



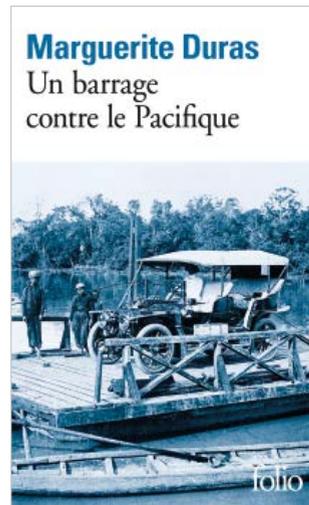
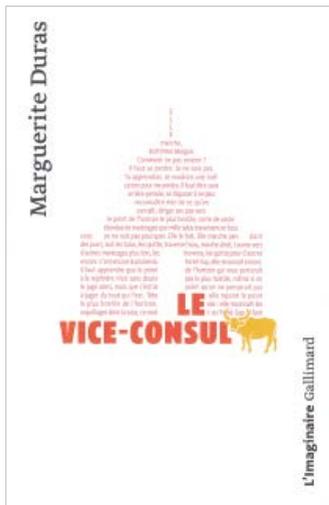
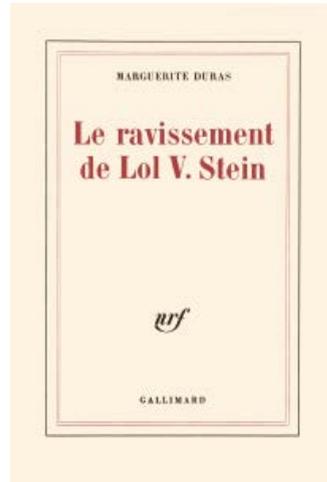
Marguerite Duras interviewing Lolo Pigalle for the television show *Dim Dam Dom*, 28 October 1965



Carme Sansa and Jordi Dauder performing in *L'amant anglès* (The English lover) at the Mercat de les Flors in 1996 © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre



Poster for *Détruire, dit-elle*, 1969



positions, hinting at a number of clashes and disagreements. This discussion follows on from two previous dialogues, the first from 1979, to mark the release of Godard's film *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (Every man for himself), and the second from 1980, after Duras turned down an invitation to take part in one of his films. All three conversations are now contained in the volume *Duras/Godard: Dialogues* (Film Desk Books, 2020) with introduction, afterword and footnotes by Cyril Béghin.

Finally, there are two period documents on Marguerite Duras's filmmaking: an interview by Eugeni Bonet and Juan Bufill from 29 January 1977, following the presentation of the film *India Song* at the Filmoteca in Barcelona, minutes before she boarded a train to Madrid; and a debate between Chantal Akerman, Delphine Seyrig, Liliane de Kermadec and Duras entitled *1975: C'est quoi, un cinéma au féminin?* (1975: What is women's filmmaking?), held at the Gaumont Rive Gauche women filmmakers' festival on 19 April 1975.

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Marguerite Duras's literature naturally has a major presence in this show. Two books published towards the end of her life, *La Vie matérielle* (Material life, 1987) and *Écrire* (Writing, 1993), act as a kind of compendium or statement of principles for a conception of writing and life shaped by subjects, characters and memories as irresistible epiphanies.

The texts in *La Vie matérielle* were dictated by Marguerite Duras to Jérôme Beaujour and later transcribed and reworked for publication. In her own words, "It's a book with no beginning or end—or even a middle for that matter. At most it represents what I think sometimes, some days, about some things." Its pages contain, among many other musings, references to earlier works and blunt insights into her own life, including her own alcoholism.

Écrire brings together three different texts: “La Mort du jeune aviateur anglais” (The death of the young English aviator), the basis for Benoît Jacquot’s 1993 short film of the same name; “Écrire”, the transcription of a talk recorded by Jacquot and produced by the Institut national de l’audio-visuel; and, finally, “Rome”, the main text for the film *Il dialogo di Roma* (1982), produced by Radiotelevisione italiana. This book, which has become a classic in Duras’s work, makes use of aphorisms or enigmatic digressions not only to encapsulate Duras’s positions on writing and what it means to her, but also to put together a kind of handbook on how to approach literary work, how to comprehend the inexorable and incomprehensible task of a writer.

Like her filmography, Marguerite Duras’s theatre work experiments freely with visual narrative. Her first stage success was *Des journées entières dans les arbres*, performed at the Odéon in 1965, directed by Jean-Louis Barrault, with the great Madeleine Renaud in the starring role. This was the first text written by a woman to be performed in a Paris theatre since 1900.

Madeleine Renaud and Claire Deluca were to Duras’s plays what Jeanne Moreau was to her films: the apotheosis of female characters at the heart of the action who have assumed all existential, narrative and ideological meaning.

In 1984 filmmaker Michelle Porte—who had previously directed *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (The places of Marguerite Duras, 1976)—made the documentary *Savannah Bay c’est toi* (You’re Savannah Bay, 1984), featuring an interview with Duras talking about her relationship with the theatre, intercut with clips of her directing the actresses in a production of her play.

Aurélia Steiner, Anne-Marie Stretter, the Mother, Agatha, Lol V. Stein, Emily L., Vera Baxter... all these women and many others are the true stars of Marguerite Duras’s writing. However, they could all be said to exemplify different forms of dissent against the archetypal female roles assigned to them by society. Openly rebellious,

they take charge of their own vulnerabilities and adopt an almost protean role: at times biblical, at others moulded by the circumstances of the age. We later find Duras’s own omnipresence as the main theme in her literature. Books such as *Vera Baxter ou les plages de l’Atlantique* (Vera Baxter or the beaches of the Atlantic, 1980), *L’Amant* (1984) and *Emily L.* (1987) are examples of a kind of writing that collides with and then parts company with the events these women find themselves caught up in, their ways of emancipating themselves or even rebelling against their very own convictions.

Right from the start of her literary career, Duras’s inimitable style won her both fans and detractors. Simone de Beauvoir famously remarked to the editor at Gallimard: “Please explain Duras to me: I can’t understand a thing”; and Jean-Paul Sartre rejected a set of short stories for *Les Temps Modernes* with the cutting comment: “I can’t publish that. You can’t write.” On the other hand, we have Jacques Lacan’s gushing praise of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* in 1965³ and Hélène Cixous’s enthralling conversation with Michel Foucault about Duras’s films and narrative structures.⁴ In any case, the combination of short, pithy sentences, oceanic silences and leaps from minor details straight to the unnoticed heart of an idea or emotion have made Marguerite Duras’s prose a powerful elixir for contemporary writers and filmmakers, who have found her writing to be a shining example of autofiction *avant la lettre*.

In her foreword to the Spanish edition of *Yann Andréa Steiner* (1992), Ana María Moix, one of the most accomplished translators of Duras into Spanish, recalls that Duras’s books from the 1950s and 1960s, when alcohol formed

³ Jacques Lacan, “Hommage fait a Marguerite Duras du *Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*”, *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 52 (1965): 7–15.

⁴ “À propos de Marguerite Duras”, *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 89 (1975): 8–22, in *Michel Foucault: Dits et écrits II (1970–1975)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 762–771.

an essential part of her life, were written following a very strict procedure, which disappeared after she successfully completed a detox programme: “Perhaps it was simply a need to free myself,” Duras said, “to free myself for once and for all from literature through literature: to cut straight through to writing itself.”⁵ Indeed, the widespread media coverage of her bestselling novel *L'Amant*—somewhat unexpected for a seventy-year-old writer with a faithful but modest following—marked a decisive turning point in Duras’s literary fortunes. What followed was a radical change in style, a period characterised by an increasingly confessional tone and a clear urge to describe the psychological furrows of desire.

In this same vein, *L'Homme assis dans le couloir* (The man sitting in the corridor, 1980) and *La Maladie de la mort* (The malady of death, 1982), masterfully adapted by Peter Handke in 1985, are two brief novels, often characterised as “erotic fiction”, that explore Duras’s pet theme of the impossibility of consummation and the sexualisation of human relationships.

Les Yeux bleus, cheveux noirs (Blue eyes, black hair, 1986), *La Pute de la côte normande* (The slut of the Normandy coast, 1986), *Yann Andréa Steiner* (1992) and *C'est tout* (No more, 1995) form a kind of circle around Marguerite Duras’s final companion, a young philosophy student thirty-eight years her junior who began a relationship with her in 1980 and went on to write two books: *M. D.* (1983), a gritty account of her detox programmes, and *Cet amour-là* (That love, 1999), in which he describes the dependency and toxicity in their relationship, as well as the love and veneration between Duras and himself, as her secretary, driver, nurse and lover.

The exhibition ends with a section on Marguerite Duras’s journalistic writings, gathered together in three books: *L'Été 80* (Summer 80, 1980), a set of ten summer columns for *Libération* newspaper; *Outside. Papiers d'un jour* (Outside: Selected writings, 1980), a Yann Andréa’s selection of articles and interviews that appeared in a range of French publications between 1957 and 1980; and its follow-up, *Le Monde extérieur. Outside 2* (The outside world: Outside 2, 1993).

If *Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* (Wartime notebooks and other texts, 2006), edited by Sophie Bogaert and Olivier Corpet, can be seen as offering a narrative of the period 1943–1949 containing the germs of ideas for many of her later texts, these journalistic opinion pieces on changing circumstances reveal a writer staunchly committed to calling out social injustice, bitingly critical of the far right and totalitarianism and utterly uninhibited when nailing her literary, ideological and personal colours and fears—above all her fears—to the mast.

⁵ Ana María Moix, “Marguerite Duras: una escritura *belle d'abandon*”, foreword to *Yann Andréa Steiner* (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 1994), 5–14.

Films and audiovisual documents in the exhibition

ROOM 1

Danièle Huillet
/ Jean-Marie Straub
En rachachant (1982) 7'

Nathalie Masduraud
/ Valérie Urrea
Marguerite Duras et l'illusion coloniale (2019) 53'

ROOM 2

Jean Mascolo
/ Jean-Marc Turine
Autour du groupe de la rue Saint-Benoît de 1942 à 1964 (1992) 300'

ROOM 3

William Klein
Grand soirs et petits matins (1968) 98'

Incidents CNPF et obsèques Maliens
10.01.1970 - 1'32"

Marguerite Duras
Césarée (1979) 10'24"

ROOM 4

Dim Dam Dom
Marguerite Duras interroge (Lolo Pigalle)
28.10.1965 - 16'12"

Marguerite Duras et le petit François
30.04.1965 - 8'20"

Les enfants et Noël
25.11.1965 - 6'

Marguerite Duras chez les lions
25.02.1966 - 15'46"

Mélina Mercouri - Marguerite Duras
04.02.1967 - 13'40"

Marguerite Duras à la petite Roquette
12.11.1967 - 12'01"

L'arroseur arrosé
(1965) 8'51"

Le parfait milliardaire
(1965) 10'48"

ROOM 5

Marguerite Duras
Détruire, dit-elle
(1969) 94'

La femme du Ganges
(1974) 85'

Le camion
(1977) 76'

Aurélia Steiner (Vancouver)
(1979) 48'

Agatha et les lectures illimitées
(1981) 82'

Les Enfants
(1984) 90'

ROOM 6

Océaniques
Duras - Godard
02.12.1987 - 62'24"

Chantal Akerman, Delphine Seyrig, Liliane de Kermadec and Marguerite Duras
1975: C'est quoi, un cinéma au féminin?
19.04.1975 - 15'45"

Eugeni Bonet and Juan Bufill
Marguerite Duras: el texto en la imagen
29.01.1977 - 30'08"

ROOM 7

Marguerite Duras
Les mains négatives
(1979) 18'

ROOM 8

Michelle Porte
Savannah Bay c'est toi
(1984) 65'54"

Benoît Jacquot
Marguerite Duras. Écrire
(1993) 44'

ROOM 9

Marguerite Duras
Aurélia Steiner (Melbourne)
(1979) 35'

Peter Handke
Das Mal des Todes
(1985) 10'



Curator: Valentín Roma

Between 8 March and 8 April, the Filmoteca de Catalunya will be holding a retrospective of the cinematographic work of Marguerite Duras. For full details of the programme, visit www.filmoteca.cat

Friday 25 March 7.30 pm

Screening of *Le Camion* and conversation with Marta Sanz at the Filmoteca de Catalunya

Wednesday 30 March 8 pm

Screening of *Césarée*, *Les Mains négatives* and *L'Homme atlantique* in conversation with Ana Aitana Fernández Moreno at the Filmoteca de Catalunya

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