
Silence.

“Someone beating a gong?”

“Sounded rather like ....”

Silence.

“Or was she dreaming? She can’t choose her own dreams?”

“No.”

Silence. They smile at each other.

*[the film adds: “Nor her own power (*puissance*)?”]*

“It is very great.”

“Yes.”]

In the film, the ‘gong’ is a piano. Duras slammed the lid of a grand piano while the sustaining pedal was held down creating a deep, Dionysian noise that resonates across the overtone series, setting the whole sonic spectrum alight. Soon, the sound of the gong is accompanied by the distant sound of violins playing a theme from the final fugue of Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*. With “immeasurable strength, sublime
gentleness, it enters the hotel.” It is almost as if, Blanchot remarks, the clarity of its sound emerges from the depths of noise in a way that doesn’t cancel noise, but allows it to trail behind.2

Thor wonders whether the music is coming from a child playing with a radio. Stein insists it is coming from the forest. The music grows in strength as darkness approaches. “Only when the darkness is almost complete can it be heard clearly,” Duras writes, and as the figures on the film set become almost indistinguishable from one another, the music begins to sound “majestically loud (dans une amplitude souveraine)” (85/136). The final lines, which somehow have to be read in the shadow of the music, are as follows:

“It’s going to do it, it’s going to get through the forest,” Stein says. “Here it comes.”

They speak in the intervals of the music (entre la musique et la musique), softly, so as not to wake Alissa.

“It has to fell trees, knock down walls,” Stein Murmurs. “But here it is.”

“Nothing (rien) to worry about any more,” says Max Thor. “Yes, here it is.”

Yes, here it is, felling trees, knocking down walls.

They are bending over Alissa.

In her sleep, Alissa’s childlike mouth widens in pure laughter (un rire absolu).

They laugh (rient) to see her laugh (rire).

“Music to the name of Stein,” she says (dit-elle). (85/136f)

How is one to interpret this ending? Alissa’s dream; her power; her desire; the forest; the name of Stein; the end of worry; the silence-noise-music-speech sequence; the mouth of the child; a laughter that is absolute; the arrival of a destruction at once physical, logical, and psychological: how are these lines tied together? The aim of this essay is, at a certain level, to unravel this knot. But any reader of Duras will recognise that this is an infinite task. These lines condense the driving concerns of her work during the late sixties and early seventies. To unpick the knot would be to articulate a constellation at the heart of Duras’ work, one that I’m not sure is entirely susceptible to articulation. My aim here then is to take up only one of these threads – the question of the music – and follow the way it implicates some of the others.

Music lies at the heart of this knot in complex ways. In Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras, two televised interviews with Michelle Porte that aired in 1976, Duras tied some of its major terms together by raising the question of how two of them, the forest and music, were linked:

They’re connected, somehow, the forest and music. When I was afraid of the forest, I was of course afraid of myself, you see, and I was afraid of myself
after puberty. Before puberty, I was not afraid in the forest. Music distresses me as well. I think that in music there is a fulfilment (accomplissement), a time that we cannot actually receive. There is a sort of annunciation in music of a time to come, one you can hear.  

As the passage unfolds, its emphasis slowly shifts. By the end, the connection in question is no longer that between music and the forest: music itself has become a link, and what it links together are the separated worlds of the child and the adult. Its specific power lies in the way it recalls a time before the education of desire, before the I was alienated from itself. It is a kind of radio transmission from our past, one that temporarily recalls us to another movement of desire. While it points backward to a state of integrity and wholeness, however, it also points forward, announcing a future where that separation may no longer reign. Music, in this view, is an angel that carries the promise of future redemption. The music of Bach above all has this effect, Duras goes on to say. However absurd it may sound, Bach is a kind of proletariat composer because of the way he works with the concrete of affective life—an idea to which I'll return to below. Music, then, temporarily rearticulates the history and structures of desire, repositions the I in relation to its sexual history, and from this point of view, many of the major themes in the final lines of Destroy begin to align.

The thematics of destruction, however, are curiously missing here. The conclusion of Destroy is unequivocal, though: it is ultimately the music that destroys “everything,” as Thor says. It is not the noise of the ‘gong,’ not the speech of the characters, not the silence that subtends them all, but the music which knocks down trees and walls, but also ways of living and loving. In the same movement, music itself is destroyed. “Destroy,” Duras remarked in a 1969 interview with Jacques Chancel, “is a film without music” until the very end, when “a piece of music is destroyed, it is Bach.” Blanchot would echo this dialectic in the final paragraph of his essay on the work. It “is not only music (beauty) that reveals itself as destroyed and yet reborn,” he writes, “it is, more mysteriously, destruction as music to which we are present and in which we take part.” And so I want to look here at the specific relation between destruction and music.

Many of Duras’ readers have argued that her ongoing preoccupation with music is not only a central thematic concern, but one that animates her most extreme formal experiments. Wendy Everett has gone so far as to argue Duras’ cinematic art as a whole might be understood, at a general level, as an art of the fugue on the basis of its proliferation of polyphonic textures. I want to try to show here the way Destroy, She Said pushes this tendency to its limit. Duras draws on the forms of Bach’s Art of the Fugue in surprisingly direct and unexpected ways to radically redistribute the conventions of film and novel form, and to introduce an index of freedom into the creative act.

The sovereignty of musical destruction would lie, then, in the way musical forms silently transform narrative patterns, from the earliest pages of the work. The si-
lent, musical reordering of narrative form will indeed explain part of the “mystery” Blanchot finds in the idea of destruction as music, and it will ultimately explain how beauty, the idea of beauty, might be an agent not only of order but of destruction. But the mystery begins in the very concept of destruction Duras seems to be working with. To think about the kind of destruction at work in the final pages of *Destroy* requires a very different concept of destruction than the everyday notion of simple ruin. It is with this other concept of destruction that I will begin, then, before turning to the ways in which the music of Bach operates its destruction.

**Registers of Destruction, Concepts of Destruction**

Llewellyn Brown has shown that the theme of destruction lies at the heart of Duras’ writing. Tracing a line from the paradoxical metaphor of the *barrage* in 1950 to *Loi V. Stein* (1964) to *India Song* (1973), and a cluster of post-1968 texts, he shows the way it consistently animated her reflections on the act of creation and the functions and dysfunctions of language and image. At the heart of this trajectory, of course, is *Destroy, She Said* (1969), whose title indicates that it is, in some sense, a sustained reflection on the act of destruction. I want to begin, then, by reconstructing elements of Duras’ reflection, drawing on interviews around the time of the work in which she proliferated the different objects and instances of destruction and briefly indicating the way they echo in the text of *Destroy*. In these texts, destruction is at once historical, political, aesthetic, and ontological.

Duras emphasises, first of all, the historical experience of destruction. The bomb’s devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the hippie movement’s radical indifference to the forms of bourgeois life; the events of May ’68; the capital destruction enacted in the camps: these were only the most powerful forms of contemporary destruction. For Duras and her circle these last two events in particular were inextricably bound, and, long before the events of the 60s, many in her circle already held that any revolutionary thought would have to be grounded in the memory of the Holocaust. The connection between the two events shapes the penultimate episode of *Destroy*, too, when Elisa’s husband, Bernard Alione, asks Stein, Thor and Alissa who they are. Alissa replies: “German Jews.” Her response recalls one of the slogans of ’68 that erupted, Blanchot recalls, in a “spontaneous demonstration,” when, following news that Daniel Cohn-Bendit had been denied entry into France, “thousands of young revolutionaries let forth the cry ‘We are all German Jews’.” “This was to signify,” Blanchot explains, “the relation of solidarity and fraternity with the victims of totalitarian omnipotence, of the political and racist inhumanity represented by Nazism.” Blanchot connects without comment a certain desire for the destruction of the state among the young revolutionaries with a desire for those who were destroyed by the Nazi state, and that connection illuminates the play of desire in *Destroy*. Those two desires echo in very different ratios in characters of *Destroy*. They echo in Alissa’s desire for Thor and Stein, for instance, but also in Elisa’s hesitations between a desire for Stein and another for her husband Bernard Alione, between a revolutionary desire and the inertia of the bourgeois state.
But in both cases the intimacy of personal desire is immediately recoded in terms of a political desire, one that drives against historical catastrophe.

Destruction, then, also names the social and political ambitions of the work. One of Destroy’s aims is, very clearly, to destroy bourgeois social relations and to generate the experience of another kind of relation, one built around new, and therefore unrecognisable, forms of life. Laura MacMahon and Leslie Hill among others have shown the extent to which, form this point of view, Destroy participates in the ideals of The Student-Writers Action Committee, a group of students and writers, including Blanchot, Duras, Mascolo, and Nathalie Sarraute, who began meeting on 20 May 1968. In a series of anonymous essays published in their magazine, Comité, they developed a politics of refusal and depersonalisation. Refusal, pushed to its extreme, was not only the refusal of the existing order of exploitation and appropriation, they argued; it was also the refusal of the theoretical demand for a positive politics organised around a collective articulation of a common and determinate end. If literature was the highest form of work for a much younger Blanchot, it was because the act of writing alone revealed a negation free of ends in any form; in the pages of Comité, the highest form of theory, too, entails the rejection of projects and platforms. Theory, they held, should remain critical and to establish itself in “worklessness.” One of the primary objects of this critique, particularly in Duras’ texts for the committee, was the form of bourgeois subjectivity, which they tried to rethink under the rubric of “depersonalisation.” The “enhancement of depersonalisation,” the committee wrote, “seems to us to be the only revolutionary stance.” The characters of Destroy, as many readers have noticed, express this ideal: they become increasingly interchangeable, indistinguishable from one another, subjectivities antithetical to – and illegible in – the forms of “bourgeois life.” What is destroyed at this level – and I’ll return to this at length below – is a certain social relation at the ground of identity.

Destruction, then, also names the aesthetic ambitions of the work. Duras frequently underlined the ways the work was conceived as a destruction of film form and novel form: it subjects the conventions of each to a progressive and radical dismantling. As critics have emphasised, the film rigorously subverts the conventions of continuity, the clear distinction between the objective and subjective camera, and, more generally, any stable position or the function of camera. Duras herself tended to emphasise the break with the conventions of the novel. She opens the interview with the Cahiers du cinéma, included in the English translation, by describing Destroy as “a fragmented book from the novelistic point of view,” (91) and over the course of the interview she indicates the ways it overturns nearly every dimension of novel form. It destroys sentences (“I don’t think there are any sentences left in it” (91)); it destroys the position of narration and the the conventions of focalisation which regulate the narrator-character relation (95; more on this below); and more fundamentally, and in Blanchotian register, writing itself is an act of destruction. There is a certain annihilation that appears at each of its moments – in the act of writing itself, in publication and reading of the text, the act of throwing it away.
If destruction appears at the heart of the work, it is because a work always expresses, however indirectly, a certain cri, a "screaming without sound" as she puts in Écrire. In the "Note for Performance" at the end of Destroy, she explains: "No one actually "cries out," even when the words are used: the words indicate an inner reaction only" (88/140). That "inner reaction," though, is the cry that has to be heard behind the relative tranquillity of any given utterance, one which opens every utterance to the movement of a destruction.

If the concept of destruction can encompass all of these registers and objects, it is because, in an important sense, it has no object. The 'détruire' of Détruire dit-elle is not, as the English title might imply, an imperative. It is an infinitive: To Destroy. Destroying is an act that is not yet determined by time or tense, one that is not yet attributable to a subject, and one that is not yet set in relation to an object. When it is first announced, then, destroying is an undetermined action, one that belongs to another time and another place. And when Alissa says "destroy" later in the work, she, too, says, “détruire.” It is not a command we should hear, but, if anything, a kind of distant, indirect articulation of a desire. The word "détruire" is, Blanchot says, "like a light in one’s heart: a sudden secret." It names, in a certain sense, the desire of desire itself: to be expressed, but not fully. A drive to create, but one whose creations and forms only ever attest to their status as a fragile comprise, like Lol’s living room: its cold, ready-made orderliness is only "the empty stage upon which was performed the soliloquy of some absolute passion whose meaning remained unrevealed," a stage or a scene awaiting a thaw.

But at this level, the question of just what the act of destruction looks like or might mean begins to assert itself. Jean Narboni raised this question toward the end of "Destruction and Language." Do the thematics of the void not entail a kind of absolute, contentless destruction, he asked, an almost theological repudiation of the world? Does the film not “fall back into a sort of abstract idea of a rejection of every thing that is almost Christian,” he asked. Duras apparently interrupts him to say:

No, it’s not a rejection; it’s a waiting period. Like someone taking his time. Before committing himself to act. That’s the way I see it … It is very hard to pass from one state to another. Abruptly. It is even abnormal, unhealthy. If you like, the changeover by the popular democracies from 1940 to 1945 was a brutal one, one not freely consented to and … It is necessary to wait … You don’t do something unless you undo what’s gone before.

Destruction here has a curious form and place. It does not designate a rejection, removal or elimination of an object of form. It names a space of transition or transformation. This space of transformation, at once anticipatory (waiting) and retrospective (undoing what had gone before), is the proper location of the void, Duras suggests. In the lines that follow she calls it a "zero point" or a "neutral point" where "sensitivity regroups, if you will and rediscovers itself." It’s not the void, then, that comes after a form, but one that sits beneath every form.
There are two quite different concepts of destruction at play in this brief exchange. Narboni’s questions follow from an everyday concept of destruction. This concept is, you could say, caught up in a dialectic of the all and the nothing. When you destroy something – say Heidegger’s pitcher – you deprive it of its form and its function, liberate its matter, and erase its relation to its efficient cause, the art or techne that created it. To destroy something is not simply to deform it, but to shatter it, render it unrecognisable, and ultimately to abandon it. A dialectic of the all or nothing, then, in the sense that when a pitcher is shattered, you have an apparently formless mass that you sweep up and throw away. You move from pitcher to no pitcher, from formed thing to mess. This is an informal concept of destruction in the sense that it attends only to the un-forming of a previously created thing. It's a sense that is grounded in the etymology of the word, which entered English from the French détruire but which ultimately derives from the Latin destruere: to un-build that which has been instituted, constituted, or structured.

Duras' concept here seems very different. Destroying does not move from the form to the formless, but from form to form. It doesn’t move from something to nothing but from something to something, state to state. There is still a moment of absence at play, but that absence has been relocated. It no longer appears at the end of an act of destruction, but at the origin of any form, a condition of creation. It is a nothing that is no longer indicates the disappearance of a structure, but the condition of any structure and its transformation. Destruction, then, is conceived on this second model as a species of change in which a form begins to take on a new relation to its parts and to transform those parts in turn, where it begins to express a relation another art or techne, and, indeed, to organise itself in relation to another end.

The Art of the Fugue

Duras appended a brief “Note for Performances” to the end of the text of Destroy. She writes there that “the music of the finale is from Johann Sebastian Bach. It is, precisely, fugue 15 from the Art of the Fugue (numbered 18 or 19 – after Graeser’s classification – in different recordings).” (87/139; translation modified) The film further specifies her sources: it credits Milan Munclinger’s 1966 recording with Ars Rediviva. Duras’ precision has unexpectedly broad implications for the interpretation of Destroy. The designation of the Art of the Fugue, the designation of the fugue 15, and the designation of the Munclinger recording all bear on the sense and form of Destroy.

The Art of the Fugue is Bach’s final work. With the B minor mass and the Musical Offering it is widely considered to be one of the fullest expressions of his art. It is the work in which the already acknowledged master of the fugue pushed that mastery to a level that has been unsurpassable ever since. It “stands before us,” writes the great Bach scholar Christoph Wolff, “as the most comprehensive summary of the aged Bach’s instrumental language.”23 It is a work of such staggering complexity that one of the questions that has structured its critical reception over the past two
hundred years has been whether it is possible to hear it as music at all or whether it can be approached only as an ideal of technical transcendence. 22

In its final form, the piece will, as Duras indicates, have as many as 19 or 20 pieces, a mixture of canons and fugues. Both are complex forms, and I'll sketch some specific aspects of the fugue form below. But much of the work's reputation for technical transcendence comes from the fact that each of the 19 contrapuncti are developed from a single simple theme, the Haupthema, with which the work opens:

The liner notes to the Munclinger recording Duras used, detail the different ways this main theme is taken up across the work as a whole:

The basic theme appears in the different fugues in various guises. Counter voices spring from it; it welcomes elements of voices from the counterpoint; it transforms itself through this vast process, like the human personality ... it lives ... Each fugue brings a different solution [...] from the simple fugues (the first four) to the three fugues in opposite movement [...] to the fugues with several themes, where new themes come to join the main one. In the double fugue, called 'en miroir,' the second fugue is the reverse image of the first: the basses become the sopranos, the tenor becomes the alto, the ascending melodic line becomes a descending movement with the same size of intervals. In the triple fugues, each theme is first developed independently (in all the voices), most often in reverse, and only after that do the themes combine. The last fugue was probably meant to be a four-theme fugue, since the existing three themes can easily combine with the basic theme of the Art of the Fugue, a synthesis that would have been the culmination of the fugue. It remained unfinished. 23

The final fugue, the one which Duras wanted Destroy to end on, was probably intended, Munclinger says, as a four-subject fugue. In its current form, it only has three. The third and final theme is built around the name of Bach (B natural was called 'H'; B flat, B):

Music to the name of Bach, you could say. But shortly after the introduction of this third subject on his name, the manuscript stops. While working on the final fugue,

the story goes, Bach had fallen ill from an eye infection which led, ultimately, to his death a few months later. In one of the manuscripts, below the final staves of the interrupted fugue, we read in the handwriting of his son, C. P. E. Bach that "while
working on this fugue, in which the name Bach appears in the countersubject, the composer died” (see Image 1). A description of one of the first performances of Graeser’s orchestrated edition puts it this way: after “Bach signs his name in minim,” the “composition soon stops short with two unfinished notes on the wind. The best witness to the perfection of the whole was the strength of the shock that one felt.” At the very limit of Bach’s own art, then, at the moment he signed his name, death, the highest form of destruction, adds its countersignature.

What, exactly, is the relation of the *Art of the Fugue* to *Destroy*? Over the next few sections of this essay, I want to try to show that *Destroy* is built around the *Art of the Fugue* in complex and subtle ways. But I will begin with a not very subtle observation: *Destroy* does not have chapters. It is built around 19 precisely distinguished blocks of text. While the exact number of *contrapuncti* that make up the *Art of the Fugue* is subject to some debate, Munclinger’s recordings admit 19. This simple numerical equivalence suggests that Duras’ episodes might be *contrapuncti* themselves, and her episodes share further structural similarities with the Bach. The episodes of *Destroy*, like Bach’s *contrapuncti*, grow in complexity as they move along. The early episodes are built on a simple theme with only one or two characters speaking; the later episodes give way to more experimental forms, like the tenth, episode X, whose patterns of indentation distinguish two sets of voices, creating a kind of counterpoint effect. Central to my argument are two very specific structural parallels between the two works. Episode XVII of *Destroy*, like *contrapunctus* XVII in Munclinger and Graeser’s numbering, is *en miroir*. And, of course, Duras directly links the final episode of *Destroy*, number XIX, with the final fugue of the *Art*, *contrapunctus* XIX. These two episodes reveal the complex ways Duras transformed her writing by transforming Bach’s, and in what follows I want to look closely at the ways they redistribute literary forms.

*Depersonalisation: From Character to Voice*

One of the most spectacular acts of destruction in *Destroy* is the destruction of character, or, more precisely, the entire system of character. One of Duras’ only additions to the extremely spare set of the film appears in the penultimate episode, with arrival of Elisa’s husband, Bernard Alione, an almost parodic embodiment of bourgeois subjectivity (the owner of a canned food factory, he spends his vacations dreaming of investment opportunities). Just behind Alissa’s head is a curious image of four rifles, one on top of the other. At different moments of the scene they appear to be aimed at the heads of different characters (Image 2). With the appearance of the first recognisably ‘normal’ character, then, there appears an image that stands in for what the film as whole does to character: it silently reconstructs the characters in the image of an extreme limit, the moment of their death.

The field of character and its destruction has different textures depending on whether we’re talking about film, theatre, radio or the novel. But across these media and their genres, the destruction of character is operated on at least three dif-
different formal levels: (1) that of the individual character and their apparent subjectivity or depth; (2) the structuring of “character space” around a main character who stands out against a background of minor characters; and (3) the relation of the main character to the narrator or to the camera, a relation governed by the conventions of focalisation in which the narrator or camera focuses the story through the eyes of a dominant character.

Duras is more or less explicit in her interviews about the ways she targeted these formal aspects of character – think only of her comments on the camera-narrator relation or on the conventions of Jamesian focalisation in the Mauriac-Sartre debate.26 What I would like to add to this problematic is that musical forms are central to this reconfiguration. The rifles are also musical staves. The four characters are voices, in the musical sense of the term: Alissa, a soprano, Elisa, an alto, Thor, the baritone and Stein, the bass. If the relations between the camera-narrator and the characters are destabilised, and if the subordination of minor and major characters no longer structures character space, it is not because Duras destroyed them in the abstract, but because the system of character is here governed by a new logic.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the fugue form in general is that a fugue is written in counterpoint. The kind of music we’re used to now is organised around a dominant melody that stands out against an indistinct harmonic ground, maybe the chords of a guitar or an Alberti bass or rolling arpeggios. Counterpoint, however, has no harmonic background whose primary function is to support a melodic line. Counterpoint is built around independent voices – usually three or four – each following its own melodic line. Those lines certainly combine according to the
conventions of harmonic progression, but their modes of combination and interaction are also governed by specific conventions of counterpoint which, for instance, demand that independent voices avoid unseemly intervals (the tritone) or, when they move in parallel, avoid intervals that sound flat (parallel fifths or parallel octaves). Because fugues are built out of the weaving of independent voices, they tend to be designated by the number of voices in each: a fugue in three voices or a fugue in four voices. At this general level, then, to think of the system of character in fugal terms already requires losing the dominance of a main character and, with it, an anchor for the narrator (or, to keep up the optical metaphor of focalisation, a lens through which the story might be focused). But the really interesting effects of Destroy’s character system follow from the specific form of relation that counterpoint lends narrative.

In a fugue, the different voices take on a specific relation to one another. Despite wide variation in the form, a fugue usually begins with a clearly announced “subject” in one voice—a theme that runs for maybe five or six measures. When the subject ends, it is immediately taken up by a second voice, and then by a third, and then, if it’s a four-voice fugue, a fourth. Hence its name: fugue from fuga or flight. The subject flies from one voice to another, and in certain fugues it sounds almost as if the voice itself is fleeing the subject. Once all of the voices have taken up the subject, there’s usually a transition to an “episode,” where the different voices play variations on the subject, fragmenting it, inverting it, reproducing rhythmic patterns, and so on. After the episode, a re-entry of the subject, which again moves across the different voices. Then another episode, then a final entry.27
This flight of the theme from one voice to another is one of the distinctive aspects of the characters’ speech in *Destroy*. Sometimes there is a simple, direct repetition of the words of one character by another:

> “We knew each other as children,” [Elisabeth] says. “Our families were friends.”

Alissa repeats softly:

> “We knew each other as children. Our families were friends.”

Silence. *(64/103)*

Other times, there is a more diffuse repetition of motifs, little fragments of a theme that skip from one voice to another:

> “Your hair,” [Stein] says.

He touches it. It has been cut.

> “It was so beautiful,” says Stein.

> “Too beautiful.”

He thinks.

> “Has he noticed,” he says, pointing to Max Thor.

> “He hasn’t said anything yet. […]”

> “I did exclaim (*J’ai crié*),” Max Thor says.

> “I heard him exclaim (*criait*). But he didn’t say anything (*il n’a rien dit*). I thought you cried out (*criais*) for some other reason.”

Stein takes her in his arms.

> “For what reason?” Max Thor asks.

> “Impatience,” Alissa says.

Silence.

> “Come over here, Alissa,” Stein says.

> “Yes. What will become of us?”

> “I’ve no idea (*Je ne sais rien*).”

> “We’ve no idea (*Nous ne savons rien*),” Max Thor says.

>[…]

> “She’s getting used to us. She said, ‘M. Stein’s a man who inspires confidence’.”

They laugh (*rient*).
“What did she say about him?” Stein says, pointing to Max Thor.

“Nothing (rien). She talked about leaving.”

(46/73f)

Here, the motifs that travel across voices also belong to the thematic axis of the work. The conceptual sequence runs from beauty back to the destructive-constructive cry from which it emerged is echoed in a sonic constellation which links the cry (cri) to a plural smile (rient) to a nothing, in the form of the negation, rien (itself an anagram of nier). This particular constellation appears in the final lines of the book – as I indicated above and will return to below – but what I want to emphasize here is just that there is a kind of homophonic flight across the different voices of the piece that is fugal in form.

The flight of a figure, whether sonic or conceptual, participates in the broader transformation of character that many readers have seen in the work. Blanchot, for instance, describes the transformation of character as a general fungibility: characters constantly exchange themselves for one another and thus operate a destruction or depersonalisation of the category of identity. Kristeva situates it at the level of sexual desire. Max Thor and Stein, as she puts it, “love Alissa and are fascinating by Elisa. Alissa Thor discovers that her husband is happy to meet Elisa, who seduces Stein. Thus she, too, lets herself be loved by the same Stein (the reader is free to compose dyads in this suggestive plot). She is dumbfounded that Max Thor enjoys this kaleidoscopic universe of doubles.” Desire, then, is no longer contained in the form of the couple but circulates, if not freely, then with a wider extension than it has previously. In all three cases – the discourse of characters, the form of their personality, the patterns of their sexuality – it is the fugue form plays a determining role in their destruction.

Reflecting on the interchangeability of Elisa and Alissa, Duras remarked that, for “a few seconds, they are one and the same. This can be called love. Or the demand that communism makes.” In her script for the trailer she again describes the film as an affirmation that the “communist world of tomorrow will be.” The trailer ties the appearance of that world directly to the destruction of character. To the question, what do you mean by “capital destruction” she answers: “the destruction of someone as a person.” Capital destruction, then, is capital. It is a kind of decapitation: the destruction of memory, judgement, the cognitive faculties, the trailer explains. The sense of this statement turns on what one understands by “person,” but also on the sense of the word “destruction.” Destruction in the sense of the Terror, in which heads are little more than cabbages? Or destruction as real becoming, the creation of a qualitative difference articulated in a new form: less a decapitation than a kind of re-capitation in which it is a question of creating a new field of ideas or a new mode of thinking. I think it’s clearly the latter that she is pointing to, and if Bach is, in some sense a musical proletarian, it is partly because he provides, in this work, a different way of thinking about the relations between characters.
The flight of a statement from one voice to another might be formulated in terms of a lack. The speech of Duras’ characters seems mechanical, empty, almost inhuman, and the realist character of the nineteenth century novel, whose speech is the window into their soul and whose singularity cultivates the reader’s sympathetic imagination, is clearly gone, replaced by characters who seem to lack an inner world. Or, if it is not an inner world that they lack, then you could, perhaps, pathologise them: each character in Destroy thinks the others are mad, and Duras clearly expects her readers to think so, too: she often emphasises that the hotel really is a hotel, not code for a hospital. It’s certainly not clear how to read these characters – not even for the characters themselves. But this illegibility, I am arguing, is not the sign of an absence, but of another order. It is not a sign of a lack, but of another logic. Is communist love, then, fugal? No. I don’t think it is. Nor could it be effectuated, I would argue, through the imposition of an abstract and Baroque form onto an indifferent matter. But it also cannot be constituted on the foundations of bourgeois subjectivity, and that, I think is the object of Duras’ destruction here. At this level, Destroy is simultaneously an undoing and an anticipation of another mode of subjectivity, one that would be completely illegible from the point of view of the present. The transformation of character into voice opens up a kind of transitional phase, then, in which the traditional forms of subjectivity that animated the system of character in the novel are destroyed and reconfigured – by the most unlikely proletarian, J. S. Bach.

Intimate Forms, en miroir

The transformation of character into voice is a far bigger story than the one I sketched above. Part of its story is continued in a second way Duras takes up and replays the Art of the Fugue, this time at the level of a specific encounter.

One of the more astonishing feats of the Art of the Fugue is the set of two so-called “mirror fugues,” Contrapunctus XII, in four voices, and Contrapunctus XIII, in three. In these two fugues, the entire fugue is played through once, “rectus,” and then a second time in inversion, “inversus,” with the intervals between notes exactly inverted. The rectus and its mirror are meant to be played sequentially, almost as though they were two entirely separate fugues – and in the first edition they were printed sequentially, one after the other. But Bach wrote them out on top of each other in his manuscripts, no doubt to aid in the process of composition, and that presentation makes their mirror-like form immediately clear. Consider, for instance, for instance, Contrapunctus XII (Image 3). The top four staves belong to the first run through of the piece; the bottom four to the repetition in inversion. It’s as if the two were split by the mirror of Bach’s equals signs running through the middle.

(You can see, too, how the subject of Contrapunctus XII is a variation on the Haupt-thema: the intervals are identical – up a fifth, down a third, etc. – and there is only a minor variation on the rhythmic patterns.)
In Munclinger’s recording, the two mirror fugues follow the four canons, which means that although they’re numbered 12 and 13 in the first edition of the *Art*, they are numbered 16 and 17 for Munclinger, as they are for most critical editions. *Section 17 of Destroy* takes place, as Duras writes in the opening lines of the section, “in the mirrors” (60/95). In the film, the scene begins in front of the mirror: Elisa is in the foreground of the image, Alissa is reflected in the background, although she must be standing directly behind Elisa, out of frame in order to appear in the frame at all (see Image 4). Their heads are gently inclined toward the edge of the frame, so that for a second you might mistake Alissa for Elisa’s reflection. In the text, this process of identification is delayed: the section begins outside, with the two sitting in the shade before they move inside and “find themselves,” as Duras suggestively writes, “reflected in the mirror:” "*Elles se trouvent toutes les deux prises dans un miroir*” (62/99). They are reflected, but also gripped, taken, held, captured by the mirror. It is at this moment that the two reflect on their nearly identical appearance: “‘We look very much alike,’ Alissa says. ‘How strange.’” (63/101)

This series of convergences linking *Destroy* to the *Art of the Fugue* – at once thematic, formal and quantitative – suggests that the mirror scene of *Destroy* might be constructed in the form of a mirror fugue, but how? Is the episode, perhaps, a symmetrical composition, as Bach’s mirror fugues are, in the sense that, halfway though, it might take up the opening themes and play them in reverse? As far as I can tell, it is neither symmetrical nor does suddenly invert the themes in the middle. Is there, then, a fugal subject whose repetition, flight and fragmentation structures this scene? Elisa and Alissa do indeed take up and repeat one another’s sentences here, but not in the way you would expect in a fugue, with its clear opening statement of theme and then its flight another voice. If there is a theme, it’s at
the level of the signified rather than the signifier: the episode, like all of the others, turns around the Hauptthema of a death that drives desire. While the relocation of the theme to side of the concept raises interesting questions about the successive transformations of the concept across the speech of characters, this is hardly a revolutionary position with respect to literary composition, as estranging as this particular presentation might be.

What is reflected here is obviously one character in another. Elisa is the inversion of Alissa, and vice versa. Commenting on the similarity of their names, Kristeva notes that “homonynmy notwithstanding, it is nevertheless not an identification that takes place between them.” But one might also say that it is precisely because they are homonyms that they cannot be identified in sense. Their homonymy is grounded in the structure of non-identification that is demanded by Duras’ replaying of Bach’s mirror fugues. The curious specular effect that structures this episode is that these two figures, indistinguishable at the level of sound and image, relate to one another according to a law of antagonism: each takes up what the others says and inverts it, negates it, flips it, opposes it, or inverts its values.

Consider the opening dialogue of the episode in the printed text:

“We may meet again some day. Who knows?” Alissa says. […]

“We live in an out-of-the-way place. You have to make a special trip.”

“We could make a special trip,” Alissa says. (60/95)
Hughes: Formal Destruction

Alissa opens the scene on the theme of loss and the hope or desire it inspires – specifically the loss of Elisa. But her expression of loss, banal and everyday as it is, is not met with the expected banality, "yes, perhaps we will, it's a small world." It is met with another banality, but an inversion of the expected: "we live an out-of-the-way place." And Alissa's response again inverts the expected: not, "oh then perhaps not," but, "we could make a special trip."

This sequence of inversions governs the dialogue that follows, and it becomes more pronounced as the episode progresses. In "Destruction and language" – the interview with Rivette and Narboni referred to above – Duras describes the scene as one in which Alissa and then, for a moment, Elisa, takes the place of the analyst, and it is structured along the patterns of question and response (126). At the heart of the scene is Elisabeth's description, guided by Alissa's questions, of the death of her baby, of her possible affair with her doctor, and of a certain letter the doctor wrote which she showed to her husband.

'It was after the confinement that I showed my husband the letter. And it was when [the doctor] found out I'd done that that he realized ... nothing would come of it, and he tried to kill himself.'

'How did he find out you showed him the letter?'

'My husband went to see him. Or wrote. I'll never know which.

Alissa says nothing. Elisabeth Alione is uneasy.

'You do believe me?'

'Yes.'

Elisabeth Alione sits up and looks at Alissa questioningly.

'You see, I'm the sort of person who's afraid of everything. My husband's quite different. I'm lost without him ...'

She comes closer.

'What have you got against me?'

'Nothing.' Alissa says softly. 'I'm just thinking about what you told me. It was because you showed your husband the letter that you were ill. You're ill because of what you did.'

She gets up.

'What's the matter?' Elisabeth Alione asks.

'Disgust,' says Alissa. 'Disgust.'

Elisabeth Alione gives a cry.

'Do you want to make me desperate?'
Alissa smiles at her.

‘Yes. Don’t say anymore.’

‘It’s too late,’ says Alissa.

‘For what?’

‘To kill you.’ She smiles. ‘It’s too late.’

Silence. (61f/97f)

This sequence operates a series of progressively extreme inversions: secrecy turns into revelation; suspicion into belief; understanding into accusation; sympathy into disgust; speech into violence. The abstraction of these nouns hides, however, what the experience of reading reveals, namely that these inversions are also and primarily inversions of the intimate forms of what Duras calls “bourgeois life.”

The categories which legislate that sympathy should never convert into disgust or speech to violence are also the patterns of what one feels or doesn’t feel, what one says or doesn’t say in a given situation. If this passage is, in a certain sense, illegible, if the responses are curious or unexpected, it’s because those categories are still the reader’s. But this passage submits the patterns of speech to another rule – a quasi-fugal inversion – in which those rules lose their hold, and a new set of categories begin to operate.

This particular structure of mirroring, I think, leads to two different conclusions. First, these “fugal” inversions echo Duras’ statements about the socio-political aims of the work around the withering away of the bourgeois subject. Negatively, you could say that the structure of inversion introduces contortions in the field of sense, rendering the speaking subject unfamiliar and strange, thus calling attention to the social forms that structure even the most intimate encounters. Positively, the implication seems to be that one cannot imagine an alternative to bourgeois life by proliferating a series of abstract predicates (bourgeois life is X, Y or Z) that would then be negated, cancelled or dismissed, but by refashioning the field of social relations as such, by rearticulating the forms of intimacy that ground those abstractions without being grounded by them. Put differently: it is not possible to build the image of another world out of the concepts of this one. One needs, rather, another form, a form from elsewhere (an elsewhere that we are not yet ready to receive), but would allow you to construct the image of a transitory subject. That form, here, comes from Bach.

But, second, in no way is there a straightforward appropriation and application of a musical form in this episode. Many of the defining elements of the fugue form are absent here. Only two features remain: the reduction of character to voice and an extremely general structure of specular inversion – and even “inversion” is taken in a quite different sense and given a quite different function than it has in Bach. There is clearly not a monochromatic abstraction at play in the movement from Bach to Destroy, and the *Art of the Fugue* could not function as a kind of master
text which would allow you to reconstruct the form of Destroy. What this episode makes clear is that Bach is present as an element of what Duras calls in “Destruction and Language” the writer’s “freedom” (133). The writer’s freedom is not unrelated to what she had called earlier in the interview the “problem of freedom” (121) in a passing reflection on the determination of the will, the faculty of desire, and the social strictures which do or do not govern it. The articulation of the writer’s problem has a different form, though. In a late work, she puts the problem this way:

I think that what I blame books for, in general, is that they are not free. One can see it in the writing: they are fabricated, organised, regulated; one could say they conform. A function of the revision that the writer often wants to impose on himself. At that moment, the writer becomes his own cop. By being concerned with good form, in other words the most banal form, the clearest and most inoffensive.35

Un-freedom is a question of the already given form: organisation, regulation, policing according to the protocols of politeness, banality, and familiarity. A book that Duras could not blame, then, would not be one without form but one which took a form from elsewhere. And that other form could not merely be imported abstractly from Bach: that would only be another form of conformity. It would have to participate in what Deleuze and Guattari described as the “revolutionary” aspect of the faculty of desire in Kant’s thought: its productivity.36 If, as Duras says, in writing Destroy she felt, for the first time “completely free” (133), I suspect it is not because she had no form, but because she had the form that demanded the creation of a new form.

The Singularity of Duras

By way of conclusion, I’d like to briefly turn to a third aspect of the Art of the Fugue that is central to the interpretation of Destroy. This third aspect is no longer a question of the subject or of the event, but of the empty centre of destruction. It would be tempting to read the abrupt finale to the Art of the Fugue as a kind of literalisation of Kojève’s arguments in two of his most influential lectures, printed in full under the title “The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel.” In the first lecture he constructs an ontological image of death. Christ is the figure who intuitively represents this notion, though Kojève will strenuously insist Hegelianism is the exact antithesis to Christianity. Christ is not only the becoming-finite of God, but, as an agent of a redemption that would qualitatively transform the real, he stands for that point at which time is introduced into being, death into God. In the second lecture, Kojève develops a phenomenological image on this basis. He reads the early works of Hegel to demonstrate the manner in which this death is lived, indeed, becomes, a maladie of Man and Nature, and, as such, becomes the condition of freedom, history and individuality.37 A condition of freedom, because, to be free, one must be able to transcend the given and the field of its determinations; a condition of history, because the negation of the given “is only real insofar
as it is a creation, an accomplished work:” history is, fundamentally, the progress of free creation (654-55; original emphases); a condition of individuality, because it is only in risking one’s life for purely political/universal/historical ends that one is individuated (661). In order to say ‘I’, Kojève concludes, one must inhabit and be inhabited by death. At a first glance the Art of the Fugue seems, if only at the level of fact, to unite these dimensions: it stands in for the extreme limit of creative freedom; it is a constitutive and unsurpassable event in the history of music; and it ends with the inscription of a proper name, a name moreover which appears at the moment of the work’s constitutive incompleteness and which is marked precisely by the appearance of death as such.

But it is worth listening again to the final moments of Duras’ film. The film does, as you would expect, accord with Duras’ notes for performance. After the ‘gong’ begins to sound, we hear the first faint whispers of the final fugue, Contrapunctus XIX in contemporary editions. But Duras starts the recording in the middle of the second subject, not the third on the name of Bach and interrupted by death. As the credits roll, and as we watch a sequence of proper names slowly ascend out of frame until the final sound of the gong, we only ever hear the second subject of the fugue. We never hear the third. Why at the very moment that you would expect music to the name of Bach, do you get music to the name of Stein? Or, because the politics of depersonalisation presents an obvious answer: what it at stake in this final act of depersonalisation, the suppression of the name of Bach and the annulment of the moment of individuality?

One could pose this question in an analytic register as well. In 1975, apparently without any reference to Duras, Serge Leclaire turned briefly to the Art of the Fugue in the final case of A Child is Being Killed. Spurred on by the characterisation of the Art of the Fugue as a living thing in the liner notes to Munclinger’s recording quoted above, Leclaire suggests Bach’s work might stand in as a kind of allegory for the structure of the subject. Music is perhaps able to designate, more precisely and more “adequately,” the nature of the subject and its relation to the letter:

The work of psychoanalysis, as we know, consists entirely in letting the unconscious speak, in somehow having the other story be heard. But it is a singular story composed of erratic fragments: a back, a solitaire, a smell, the space of a breath, a cry; it is arranged like a constellation, impervious to time and events, in the shape of a strange body that could never say ‘me,’ but articulated ‘I’ in the interval of each element. To draw that body, write that other story, and have the scansion of the ‘I’ be heard, notes (named with letters) would be more adequate than words.\footnote{38}

If music in general can do this work, the Art of the Fugue, in a way, shows why: in building the entire work out of the Hauppthema, Bach repeats the transformational logic of the unconscious. This theme, Leclaire writes, “determines the unity of the work up to its incompleteness. The same notes, the same letters, make up the web and give birth to the fabulous display of fugues and canons.” The Hauppthema is like an
"unconscious primal phantasy," at work "in the whole of psychic life." 39 The movement of the *Art of the Fugue*, then, becomes an allegory of the letter, dramatizing in music the way an individual's sexual history might be heard insisting in the scansion of the I. But Duras, I think, interprets the ending of the *Art of the Fugue* in a quite different way: it is precisely this trajectory that ends in the I that she dismantles in *Destroy*.

Duras' bracketing of the proper name opens up a field of questions in which her specific difference from the two thinkers with whom her work is traditionally identified – Blanchot and Lacan – is at stake. This is too large a question to answer here – arguably to even open here – but the contours of a schematic response clarify the the stakes of this interpretation of *Destroy*. Schematically one could say that in contrast to Blanchot’s emphasis on the neutrality of death, its sublime indifference, in his own response to Kojève’s lectures, for Duras the cry that un-works every work issues from a body, from a material configuration of needs and desires: differences, held in tension. A body that is often animal in nature, cat-like in *Aurelia Steiner*, or dog-like in *La Musica*. It is a cry of the non-neutral. Psychoanalysis would appear to be the discourse that would grasp this most precisely – and no doubt it is, but the analytic situation has demands and concerns that are different from Duras.’ It’s not the scansion of an ‘I’ that is articulated in *Destroy*, even if, for Duras, too, the “cry” of a “strange body” is always audible beneath the relative tranquillity on an utterance, as Leclaire put it. 40 But in *Destroy*, it is ultimately the scansion of a “you” that finds itself articulated in the intervals of the body. The love that recognises these desires is not the love that appears in the transference. It is the love of equals in the recognition of their desire.

The movement of desire in the final scene of *Destroy* gives texture to this interpretation. The music is first presented as though it were the movement of Alissa’s desire. At different points leading up to the final scene, the work implied that capital destruction would come from Alissa. The theme of this final scene, too, is desire: the characters discuss the erosion of desire, death by desire, and, ultimately, the question of whether Elisa might have yielded to Alissa’s desire had she stayed for a few more days. Finally, at the moment the sound begins to be heard, Stein and Thor are watching Alissa dream. In the final lines it is as if they are watching her desire arrive, become actual; and the closer it gets, the more attentively they watch Alissa, bending over her as the trees in the forest bend. For all of these reasons, then, the music appears to stand in for Alissa’s desire. But when the music arrives and when it is named, it is named as “music to the name of Stein.”

Why music to the name of Stein? Is it that a desire is properly named by its object rather than its subject? Perhaps. But that object, here, is another subject, and that brings other dynamics into play. The music that is kept offstage is music to the name of Bach, in the form of that third “subject.” For Bach, both the highest point of the creative act and the work’s completion (which inscribes it in the movement of history) are linked in an act of aesthetic individuation. For Duras, it is not the name of the subject which is articulated, but the name of the other. For Duras, the
music is certainly associated with Alissa’s own desire – and, to recall the schema from Les Lieux, its sound, and her childlike smile, somehow indicate a return to her own sexual history and the annunciation of a non-alienating time to come. But at the end of Destroy that movement of desire is no longer locatable in a personal trajectory. Not only does Alissa name the desire by its object, but, conversely, it is precisely her desire that is desired by Stein and Thor. There is an obvious Kojévian thematic here: Stein, Thor, Alissa, all desire the desire of the other, and, in fact, the desire of each seems to be desired in turn (as Kristeva put it, one can freely construct dyads). And yet the proper name does not stick. The moment of individuality is displaced, and each only speaks the name of the other.

It is the collective dimension of this desire, I would like to suggest, that grounds the absolute extension Duras gives pain and pleasure it in these final lines. The rhetoric of infinity is located at the two poles of a dialectic here, which itself takes two forms, one sonic, one affective. The sonic space oscillates between the noise of the gong and the clarity of the Bach, its “sovereign amplitude,” “immeasurable strength” and a “sublime gentleness.” At the same time, the music carries with it an affective charge – as it did in Les Lieux: the characters oscillate between “infinite pain” (“with infinite pain the music stops, begins again, stops, repeats, starts again. Stops”; “What pain. What immense pain”) and an “absolute laugh” (“In her sleep Alissa’s childlike mouth widens in pure laughter [un rire absolu]. They laugh to see her laugh.” (85/137) This dialectic is a familiar one to readers of Duras: from body to speech, pain to beauty, suffering to joy. It is the movement of the cry as it drives toward expression. Cixous puts it this way in a luminous gloss on Duras’ work:

what fascinates her, as we gradually discover – and, I think she herself discovers, has us discover – is a mixture of eroticism bound up with female flesh (it really functions through what can be so overwhelming and beautiful in something indefinable in woman) and death. And it all blends into one. And so it gets lost once again. As if death enveloped life, beauty, with the terrible tenderness of love. As if death loved life.41

This assemblage (death, desire :: beauty, life) appears throughout destroy, I tried to show above. It circulated in the homophonie gliding of cri-rien-rient noted above – a gliding which you can hear, again, in the final lines of the work, just when the music itself traces this arc from a lived pain to its joyful expression in a beautiful form. In the final lines of the work, however, the joy is collective, grounded in an act of recognition, even love: it is by affirming the desire of the other, the text suggests, that pain, lack or need is converted into joy.

What, though, makes the absolute laugh absolute? One interpretation would follow from the nature of the affirmation and its object: to affirm the desire of the other is also to affirm what animates that desire, the lack the pain or the absence which pulses in it. Immediately before Thor and Stein “laugh” with Alissa’s absolute laugh, they are witness to an infinite pain. That pain is located in a body or a personal trajectory no more than the desire it gives rise to or its recognition is:
not only is it not clearly Alissa’s, at times Duras implies it is the music itself that is pained. What we share is what we lack, as Mascolo put it in Le Communisme, and for that reason the first and guiding definition of communism itself was “the movement of the material satisfaction of needs.” I suspect this is one sense of Duras’ persistent identification of communism and love: a care for the needs of the other that is universal. From this point of view, then, it is the collective dimension of pain, our status as homo necessitudinis, that renders Alissa’s laugh absolute – but also Bach-like, in its annunciation of a time to come in which freedom has been wrested from necessity.

This is, at least, one element in the interpretation of the remarkable, curious lines in Écrire and which seem to return to the animating ideas of Destroy. Even if she had become a concert pianist, Duras says, she would have continued to write. “Unreadable books, but whole nonetheless. As distant from words as the unknown object of an objectless love. Like the love of Christ or of J. S. Bach – the two of them breathtakingly equivalent.”

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Notes

1. Marguerite Duras, Destroy, She Said, trans. B. Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 83. Further references are indicated by page numbers included in the text, followed by the corresponding page number(s) from Marguerite Duras, Détruire dit-elle (Paris: Minuit, 1969); here 133.


4. Ibid., 30.


6. Blanchot, Friendship, 116; original emphasis.


19. *Destroy*, 120.

20. *Destroy*, 120-21; original emphasis.


22. For a historical survey of this debate, see Michael Markham’s “The Usefulness of Such Artworks: Expression, Analysis, and Nationalism in The Art of Fugue” in *Repercussions* 9.1 (2001): 33-75.


25. For a brief overview of the issues here, see Wolff, *Bach* (341ff).


27. For a brilliant performative explanation of fugue form, see Glenn Gould’s 1963 “So you Want to Write a Fugue.” There are a shocking number of versions available on youtube.


34. *Destroy*, 130.


37. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 651. On death as a malady, see 649-651. For an overview of the importance of this particular lecture to Blanchot and an account of the way it inflects some of his most fundamental positions, see Leslie Hill, Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary (London: Routledge, 1977), 104.


40. There is a robust literature on this question, mostly around the question of Duras’ complex relation to écriture féminine, and it appears in every major critical account of her work. See Anne Tomiche, "Writing the Body: The Rhetoric of Mutilation in Marguerite Duras’ ‘L’amante anglaise’" in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 120-130. Tomiche foregrounds the problem of figure and disfiguration in this field that resonates strongly with the argument I am developing here.


43. In addition to the lined quoted above from the interview (127), see, in particular her interview with Michelle Porte following *Le camion* in *Le camion, suivi de entretien avec Michelle Porte* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 119-20. See Leslie Hill, Duras, pp. 48f for an account of the relation between Duras and Mascolo on this point.