I don’t know how to approach, why not say it, the truth – no more than woman. 
I have said that the one and the other are the same thing, at least to man. 
They constitute the same hindrance [embarras].
As it turns out, I relish the one and the other, despite what people say.


N’importe quelle femme est plus mystérieuse qu’un homme.

Marguerite Duras, Le Parleuses, 1974

It is the speaking of her name, ‘Baxter, Véra Baxter’ which initially attracts the attention of the stranger, l’Inconnue, because it appears to be an enigmatic name, a word-object of sorts. She repeats it to savour its sound, as if the name itself might reveal something. Its flowing sound harbours implicit dignity when spoken out loud, perhaps even inviting knowledge of a life. When Michel, Véra’s ex-lover, asks l’Inconnue, “The name Baxter, means nothing to you?” “No, nothing...”, she replies wistfully. The intended reference here is to Véra’s husband, Jean Baxter, but this is not captured because it is primarily the name, ‘Véra,’ which intrigues l’Inconnue. Like much of what is said and seen in Marguerite Duras’ film, Baxter, Véra Baxter, nothing can be taken at face value because this film is about ambiguity and ambivalence; it does not seek to answer urgent life questions, but instead stays with the anxiety of their deferral. Moreover, this is a film which reveals the very presence of a woman, Véra, by creating a space for her voice and silent jouissance beyond the banality of her love affairs and subsequent subjective destitution. This space facilitates a transferential relationship between Véra and the mysterious l’Inconnue, a relation which is essentially that of an analytic couple through which, over time and a disjunctive split between what is seen and what is
heard, the enigma of woman is revealed via three interweaving modalities: name, truth and time.

Although one can never know everything about even one’s own life, one can catch a glimpse of another’s life through shared words, even just a name, which in the case of Véra Baxter ultimately saves her psychic life. Why is the name Véra Baxter enigmatic and intriguing? In the final scene l’Inconnue imagines a group of women, “...L’une d’entre elles s’appelait Véra Baxter...” who, living in the forest one thousand years ago and abandoned by their men who have left for the Crusades, are rescued by talking to the natural world, with the sea, the forest and its animals, but are in the end destroyed by a forest fire. Thus it is through language they are saved, and it is from the simple enunciation, “Baxter, Véra Baxter” that Duras’ film about a woman on the verge of suicide and who shares her libidinal anguish with a curious but sympathetic stranger, begins.

When we first meet Véra, she is a woman who is clearly experiencing melancholic anguish; she is in such excruciating distress she can barely speak, choosing instead to isolate herself in a partially furnished, uninhabited villa. Living is something she is ambivalent about; how to live is another question which it seems has haunted her for some time. Véra speaks about her past life in terms of day to day existence, raising children, watching television and going out with her husband Jean Baxter, all in such a disaffected way, it is difficult to imagine she once carried out these tasks. Interestingly, Jean Baxter is nearly always referred to by his full name, a formality implying the distance which separates them, and whose signification lies in the conjoining of both words. Véra, whose name is spoken only in the singular un-
til the appearance of *l’Inconnue*, is in existential crisis, but for the most part copes because she is a woman who is trying to confront her fear, despair and alienation. Nevertheless, she cannot help but long for the destitution melancholy promises, and is self-destructive regarding two men: her husband whom she obviously still loves and her ex-lover Michel, with whom she has shared passion and the glimpse of a different life.

As a way of doing something, anything, to ease Véra’s anguish while he is busy making money and pursuing other lovers, Jean Baxter instigates a liaison between his wife and Michel through a bizarre business arrangement with him. But in simply replacing himself with Michel and thinking that this would be enough to satisfy Véra, Jean Baxter wrongly assumes complete, if any, knowledge of her jouissance. This becomes increasingly apparent as Jean Baxter realises that he is not enough for Véra, neither in the end, is Michel. The deal between Jean Baxter and Michel is compromised when Michel, realising that he has fallen in love with Véra and knowing that this transgresses the agreed deal, feels ashamed and sad in having to walk away from her. For Michel, Véra has become a woman who cannot be fully known because she is now the forbidden, erotic presence in his life.  

Image 2: Véra, played by Claudine Gabay, in her sparsely furnished villa
However, Duras’ film is more than simply about a woman whose husband, in an attempt to ease her anguish, ‘offers’ her to another man for a million francs. It is about capturing the essence of an enigma which cannot altogether be enclosed by the voice which makes the feminine the centre. Lacan’s commentary on *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* echoes this: “it turns out that Marguerite Duras knows, without me, what I teach” (1965, 124). In fact, blindly trusting narrative alone is a method both Duras and Lacan warn against. Here the question arises, why should we trust anything Véra has to say about herself? While much of Duras’ work in literature and experimental film has sought to question the relation between narrative and representation, there is perhaps something a little different to be gleaned from Véra’s character. Although we should be wary of representation, at the same time it provides something for us to work with, a pretence of the politics of language. Véra’s fragmented narrative deliberately withholds representation; the conversations between Véra and her interlocutors are somewhat like stilted prose, shaped by contingency, which is superimposed on how we might grasp her reality. Language itself becomes a crisis of method. We get the sense that Véra is insightful, perhaps even wise, but nevertheless imperceptible to herself.

In this film Duras does something remarkable; within the subtext of a failed love story she conveys the very presence of a woman. This makes an interesting contrast to Duras’ *A Tranquil Life* (1944), a novel about becoming a woman, about the rite of passage into womanhood. Véra depicts similar solitary discoveries regarding dimly perceived identities and failures of love. However, being more aware from the outset that her life is a fiction, she struggles with determining her status as a feminine object. Moreover, Duras depicts Véra as a figure who embodies the presence of a woman beyond man’s actions, actions which in the narrative are striving to
either confirm or eliminate the truth of what it means for Véra to be a woman. Duras captures such being as a distinctly cinematic truth, about which Badiou claims, cinematic culture must begin with a question about existence. Whether it encompasses a culture or not is tantamount to the question, “to be or not to be” when it comes to this still-disputed art. But such a question cannot in fact be resolved, because an art can no more be proved than something’s existence...

(2013, 21)

The villa setting provides a place to contemplate and reflect on the details of Véra’s life amidst the chaos and disappointment which envelope it. Here two women new to one another, l’Inconnue and Véra, share their voices and silences but little else; the voice rather than the word is the destiny for the subject. In addition, the presence of Jean Baxter is sensed through the voices of his ex-lover, Monique Combès, and his current lover, a young model whom he meets regularly in Chantilly.

It is not until we reach the most important transference between Véra and l’Inconnue that we have a real sense of Véra’s existence hitherto concealed by her anguish: her fear is not that she has lost Jean Baxter, nor her ex-lover Michel, but that she has lost herself in so far as these men have ‘stolen’ her away from herself. Until she speaks at length with l’Inconnue, Véra is a woman who is struggling to speak, answering affectlessly, often with a single word. L’Inconnue offers to stand in for something important to Véra, namely, as the object in which Véra’s voice can circulate. Although she holds Véra accountable for her own words she nevertheless, in the kindest and most sympathetic of gestures, allows Véra to simply speak, patiently bearing witness to her testimony of anguish.

Je ne fais que passer, traverser votre vie... alors si une... vérité était dite ici ce soir, elle n’aurait aucun devenir... elle resterait sans conséquences.
L’Inconnue acts as both the capturer and the shadow of Véra’s voice, supporting Véra in the refusal to think that her voice is stolen or that it is a prescriptive voice of reason. That is, there is no pressure to speak with any particular sense or sensibility. Véra’s voice is hers and hers alone to formulate her jouissance on her own terms. Here l’Inconnue is an inscription of the transference between bodies and of transmission afforded by voices, ensuring that the voice takes on an ethical dimension in support of speech. She further alerts Véra to the most important revelation: that her truth cannot be fully spoken, everything said about it is a mi-dire, even that deliberate lying in order to preserve the ego is when the voice really vanishes.5

In the published film script, during a conversation between Michel and Monique, Duras offers an enigmatic comment: “Le facteur essentiel de l’histoire vient d’être évoqué: le mensonge” (1980, 15). Yet Jean Baxter insists to Véra that she is only one who speaks the truth, just as she remarks the same about him. It seems that in trying to stage truth, untruths not only become apparent but are essential: thus Véra is understood as an habitual liar; Michel lies to himself about falling in love with Véra; Jean Baxter lies to Véra about money; and Monique admits to lying to Véra about Jean Baxter. At the same time, it seems that this film is not about whether the voice speaks truth or lies but, rather, how in their rhetorical impotence, the intention of lies is to uphold the false truth conveyed by words. This usually occurs when one wants to believe what is said simply because it is said. A lie, on the other hand, has a paradoxical investment in truth, albeit truth that is conversely spoken. Thus there is a fantasy of truth operating within the lie, a lie which prepares the fantasy for reality. We could say then that truth is both true and untrue and perhaps can even be a lie. However, it would be unfair to claim that Véra is an habitual liar (as
implied by Monique), or deliberately utters falsehoods; she simply struggles with speaking her truth let alone any clearly heard voice such as an anxious ‘voice of reason’ which arguably subordinates the body to an affective command. Behind Véra’s malady, her atteinte de fidélité, resides a will to rearrange language in order to communicate a sort of reasonable truth regarding her and Jean Baxter. To this extent we could say that Véra is suffering from fidelity, whereas Jean Baxter suffers from infidelity. Although he thinks he speaks the truth, he is nevertheless unfaithful to Véra. We can say that Véra lives up to the character of her assigned proper name according to Latin etymology: truthful and faithful.

Given that we can’t necessarily perceive truth in Véra’s words, especially since it seems she cannot trust herself, where is Véra in her malady of words? A t first, we come to think that she is situated between reality and fiction, until we discover that her most poignant actuality is the suffering and anguish which haunts her. Her first conversation at the villa with Monique Combès, although peppered by rhetorical impotence, arguably lays the ground for further truth as well as lies, which in turn pave the way for her release from the pretence of language in which she is trapped. Although Monique calls Véra out on lying, she does not realize that truth, at this moment, is elusive to Véra.

Monique: Véra, c’est faux ce que tu racontes là, n’est-ce pas?
Véra: Oui.

The conversation continues

Monique: On ment beaucoup toi et moi.

Véra maintains a nonchalant, even disengaged manner towards Monique, simply either confirming or denying Monique’s account of aspects of the love triangle between them. She has no interest in convincing Monique of anything. Their shared lies and rapport are a pretence, they are not even bound by their former mutual love and admiration for Jean Baxter. The entire encounter feels two-dimensional and empty.

This conversation is set in a partly furnished villa against the background of the upbeat music of a neighbour’s party which, through its repetition, appropriates almost the entire film. This sonic idiosyncrasy also frames Véra’s silence and helps locate her. The music ceases momentarily when Jean Baxter’s current lover finds that he has been in conversation with Véra on the phone; upon her replacing the phone, the music stops and la maîtresse speaks:

Tu as téléphoné à Thionville, je vois… Tu devrais venir près du feu. Je suis allée à Villiers par les étangs. Ils ont detruit la forêt par là … plusieurs hectares… c’est terrible… on ne reconnaît plus rien…’
When Véra speaks it is in conjunction with the music; this is absent only in the initial scene of Véra lying naked and ceases when la maîtresse, from her room in Chantilly discusses Véra with Jean Baxter. Thus music plays a uniquely contrary role to Véra’s voice; it provides more than mere background and when it does momentarily cease its absence is striking. The music renders a material trace which counterpoints Véra’s despair. It also helps set the scene of feminine jouissance in a context of anonymity, loneliness, despair and anguish, as l’Inconnue moves around Véra as if in a symbiotic dance.

L’Inconnue tells Véra that because she is merely a passer-by, a stranger in Véra’s life, any secrets are safe with her. This moment of tenderness between the two women transcends what might otherwise seem an unfulfilled relationship. Véra’s prior hurtful experiences of being dismissed (her husband selling her for one million francs, her lover being ambivalent about continuing the affair, and the distinctly cool relationship with Monique suggestive that Jean Baxter has played them against each other in a bid to win their affections) contrast with l’Inconnue’s insight into what it means to inhabit the empty space left by lost love. l’Inconnue’s understanding is an expression of analytic love towards Véra, as Jacque-Alain Miller says:

Love in psychoanalysis is transference. The very concept of love, its question of expressions in psychoanalysis is directed by the concept and problematics of transference so that love seems to be only displacement – a case of
mistaken identity... That’s why, in analysis, love is slapped with a certain inauthenticity (1992, unpaginated).

Just as it is for Michel, it is hard not to fall in love with Véra. She is transcendent in ultimately giving ground to her feminine jouissance upon the realisation that she has never in fact lost it. Although love has structured her past (marriage, children, status and so on) and eventually frees her through the understanding of l’Inconnue, it is at times stifled by money-talk in which even she indulges – the million-francs tag on herself being the amount to lease the villa, how Jean Baxter values money over love, and so on. The importance of these moments cannot be under-estimated; Duras beautifully demonstrates the painful obfuscation that money and status sometimes bring to love, even that these are an unfortunate symbolic part of love. That love and money can coexist might well be an enigma for Véra: she is sold because her husband loves her and wants her to be happy. Thus price and cost are more than merely metaphors for what Jean Baxter does to Véra.

We may consider Duras’ film as being about a marriage in crisis, but also about Véra the woman as a contemporary parallel to Freud’s Dora, one who is asking through a veil of melancholy and frustration, what does it mean to be woman when there is no clear Other to be a woman for? At the villa we meet a woman who, almost devoid of subjectivity, is struggling with the need to speak. In the end it is hard not to love and appreciate the woman she becomes, someone at ease with her vulnerable sensibility and who is willing to continue the struggle to speak. In retrospect we realize that her lack consists in the need to forge for herself a symptom she can live with rather than in an identity which has been imposed by her husband. More than anything else this is the nature of her despair. In this way we can understand her love as intrinsic to her perception of femininity rather than to the sexual geography she has mapped for herself through various conversations. The indeterminacy of the question, what kind of lover can I be for the one I love? is vividly portrayed in Duras’ film. Colette Soler (2003) maintains that women want a love that does not encompass ‘loftiness,’ implying that love needs to be a proper name anchored in time. Of the proper name, Lacan says

It is indeed here that I want to pause again today on the point of departure of what we have to say about identification. The function of the signifier in so far as it is the mooring point of something from which the subject constitutes himself, here is something which is going to make me dwell for a moment today on something which, it seems to me, should come quite naturally to mind, not just for reasons of general logic, but also because of something that you should touch on in your experience: I mean the function of the name (nom), not the noun (nom), the noun defined grammatically, what we call the substantive in our schools, but the name in the way that in English – and what is more, in German – the two functions are distinguished. I would like to say a little more about it here, but you well understand the difference: the name, is the proper name (1961-62, 48) [Italics in original].
He continues,

I would like to say a little more about it here, but you well understand the difference: the name, is the proper name. You know as analysts, the importance that the proper name of the subject has in every analysis. You should always pay attention to what your patient is called. It is never indifferent. And if you ask for names in analysis, it is indeed something much more important than the excuse that you may give for it to the patient, namely that all sorts of things may hide themselves behind this sort of dissimulation or effacing of a name, concerning the relations that it may bring into play with some other subject (48).

It is Véra who bears the proper name, for it is her name which captures attention. It is the woman bearing this name who piques the curiosity of others. Duras uses the name Véra as a springboard to ask the important question Lacan poses in Seminar XX: *what does a woman want?* Yet at the same time Duras refuses this question in that she situates Véra’s desire as a transitioning mediatory between subjectivity and time.

In this film, time isn’t to be trusted as necessarily linear and thereby expressive of narrative. Rather time for Duras appears more Kantian in its sensibility, more an “inner sense” (1781 [2007], 69), a subjective condition uniquely necessary to make “the actuality of appearances possible” (67). Kant’s insight here brings to mind the inner sense shared by the analyst and analysand, one not bound by the function of the ideal ego, but rather by sensibility of how the unconscious presents itself in transference. Located thus, time is a moment of the unconscious, a mixture of the symbolic and the extimate and is where Véra, the woman who inhabits a proper name, is situated. Although immersed within the empirical reality of time, she is arguably not wholly subject to that time through refusing it by attending to melancholia, thereby evading any claim to reality. Time for Véra is a contradiction: it rests upon her name and the ambiguous sense she brings to it as both a universal reality and a private, individual moment. In imagining the Véra Baxter at a moment one thousand years ago, *L’Inconnue* intuitively understands how time for Véra momentarily stands still, a compelling insight which arguably psychoanalysis shares.

In an interview Duras troubles the notion of bearing a fixed name in time when claiming that she still identifies as a communist but without her former party identity:

**Interviewer:** Are you still a Communist?

**Duras:** I’m a Communist. There’s something in me that’s incurable.
Interviewer: But you left the Party.

Duras: The Party is not Communism.

Interviewer: Has there been any true Communist government over the years?

Duras: Not one. There was one Communist year: 1917.

Interviewer: Do you hope to see that sort of Communism return to the world?

Duras: I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I am a Communist within myself. I no longer have hope in the world.

Interviewer: And the other? Do you have hope for the next world?


(Garis 1991, unpaginated)

Just as communism is closely linked with particular names and times so Duras, although no longer a party member, associates her name with a specific year in the communist calendar, 1917. Yet her rejection of the party as communism perhaps highlights not merely the naming of herself as an individual communist but rather that communism expressed in terms of a party is a fantasy of the truth of communism.

In the film, time is revealed through the reformulation of two subjects as one: the two Baxters, Véra and Jean are a double for the scene of the two women, Véra and l’Inconnue. Véra and Duras share something: that, in the face of categorisation, its consequent figuring of the subject is an inevitable destitution to be contended with. Such a dis-figuring leaves the subject with simply a body and a voice, which needs to confess an unwillingness to enter into a masquerade for the sake of a secure and anguish-free separation from the appeal of any particular social group. This dis-figuration is an anguish linked to a truth: it underpins the realisation that the not-all does not make a whole, that the feminine position has the potential to be revealing, because in the other it presents as a sexed being fully included in the non-rapport.

The sexed being of the not-whole woman does not involve the body but what results from a logical exigency in speech. Indeed, logic, the coherence inscribed in the fact that language exists and that is it outside the bodies that are moved by it – in short, the Other who is incarnated, so to speak as sexed being – requires this one by one (une par une) (Lacan, 1972-1973, 10).

Here the ‘I’ of the subject is an unequivocal occupation of that position as an identity emanating from speech, thereby giving the other no imaginary locus. Yet it is also an identity foregrounded not on collective identity but as an expression of what the subject stands in the name of regardless of social bond. For Duras, to be communist does not require membership of a collective to speak for her; for Véra,
to be a woman does not require that a man’s voice responds to hers. Both Marguerite Duras and Véra stand by their own names, not in the name of feminine acceptance of what Lacan calls the “masculine myth” of Don Juan in which the masculine image depends on the woman-object of man’s desire being always available in order to (falsely) postulate his absolute being. In this way, Duras furthers Lacan’s theory of the libidinal subject by, with him, refusing to say “man is this, woman is that” but instead claiming that men and women are sexed beings of jouissance, or as Lacan puts it, “les appareils de la jouissance” (Ibid 55). It is this identification of the sexed-being with jouissance which links to a notion of truth. For Duras too, woman is the subject of all desires, known and unknown, that is to say, woman is both subject and object of desire.

Jean Baxter and Véra share a surname, for better or worse, but this leaves Véra with a conundrum: who is she if she is without Jean Baxter’s name? Is she still a woman if she is no longer Véra Baxter? If she is without a name, is she destitute? She gives us a hint when suggesting to Jean Baxter that perhaps they separate and then find their way back together by re-identifying with each other, her as a woman who is named Véra, he as a man who is named Jean, both of whom desire each other. She is postulating Badiou’s maxim: to remain loyal to love by recreating it as an event in which both can glimpse the truth about themselves, that in facing their individual anguish together, they are intrinsically bound. Here Véra’s loss is poignant in being the loss of her name and therefore of her truth which then becomes an unspeakable, unreachable truth. We might even say this truth has an irrational character to it. In the quest to discover a potential truth to her subjectivity, Véra is willing to submit to subjective destitution, an estrangement with which she is already familiar. The truth inherent in her name takes on a different dimension, that of the melancholic and painful process which cannot be spoken but is instead a bodily experience of anguish. Might the shared anguish of Véra and Jean Baxter provide a reassurance against destitution?

Of subjective destitution, Anne Dunand says that it is

a necessity to be able, at a certain point in analysis, to recognise one’s particular relation to castration, it is just as necessary to let go of a particular jouissance castration produces. It is probably the most difficult aim to achieve, since jouissance from castration is a protection against all possible forms of castration. In analysis, the subject first has to be instituted, just as the symptom has to emerge and the fantasy has to be constructed. At the end, the subject has to bring about his or her own destitution, and his or her castration really derives from the fact the Other is barred (what Freud described as the mother’s castration). This amounts to the destruction of the subject-supposed-to-know, and it also goes against the satisfaction stemming from transference; it deprives the subject of finding him or herself lovable as an ideal ego contemplated by the ego-ideal (1995).
She then makes an important distinction between this and narcissism when she says that destitution is not the same as narcissistic deflation; it goes much further, entailing a loss of fundamental references. At this stage, ethical principles have to be reconsidered, since they were, up until then, just another way of finding approval or love as compensation for whatever renunciation the subject had imposed upon him or herself. When a subject reaches this boundary s/he can no longer ask him or herself what his or her analyst’s desire is, but what range is left to his or her own desire... (1995)

Such an unreachable truth is portrayed through the notable absence of Jean Baxter: we never actually see Jean Baxter but we do encounter an image of him as Véra’s desire via his voice, a voice which appears to be signified not by him but rather by the image of either Véra or la maîtresse. His voice, it appears, anchors not his desire, but instead Véra and his mistress. Véra becomes animated, even desperate when she speaks to him on the phone. The fascination of Jean Baxter’s voice gives character to this faceless man and resonates with what Régis Durand says of Duras’ work:

There is no such thing as a neutral voice... If there was, it would be an experience of absolute terror. But even as it is, and even though it may charm, the voice frightens and disturbs. Is it because the voice gives us nothing to see, because it has no mirror image? Speaks to us of loss, of absence? (1977, 203) [Italics in original]

The disjunctive split between visual and aural, between subject and language is a classic Duras cinematic manoeuvre. It is not hard to get a sense of pure presence in the Jean Baxter of Véra’s phone conversation, for we know that they are both wanting to resist the inevitable distance between them. His voice alone literalises Jean Baxter; although he is disembodied and somewhat mysterious his voice provides an exterior to him, whereas Véra remains an enigma to us even though we see her. What is even stranger is the curious ventriloquism that takes place because we never get to see Jean Baxter but only the two significant women in his life: we hear him speak but only as a response to them. When Véra demands something that perhaps she is not sure of herself, she and Jean Baxter share a sublime transmission in which sexual difference is revealed, even unburdened, in that they are both in different ways dislocated from themselves: he has no body without her and she, until the encounter with l’Inconnue, has without him, lost her voice. Equally poignant is that at the same time, the sensorial and bodily split between the couple exacerbate their inextricable sense of ‘one-ness’ with each other.
This is a specific identification which constructs not only the relation but also fully inscribes its absence, its erasure as Jacques-Alain Miller puts it:

This “panic point” of the subject is the point, so says Lacan, at which the subject is “effaced […] behind a signifier.” This effacement should not be understood as an identification but as an erasure: it is the point at which he can no longer say anything about himself, at which he is reduced to silence. This is when he clasps onto the object of desire. It is the same logic of the fantasy that is operative at the level of the unconscious where the subject has no possibility of designating himself, or where he is faced with his namelessness as a subject. This is when he turns to the fundamental fantasy, and it is in his relation to the object of desire that the truth of his Being resides (2013).

Miller importantly distinguishes identification from erasure without privileging or abandoning one for the other. During their phone conversation Jean Baxter leaves Véra with nothing more to say because he ends up saying nothing more. Because they do in fact identify with each other through shared history and an inevitably precarious future, the objects they clutch are the images of one another. However, as Teresa de Lauretis says, the function of identification is to “be actively involved in a process that, it must be stressed, is materially supported by specific practices – textual, discursive, behavioural – in which relation is inscribed” (1984, 141). But what if erasure can be inscribed only once identification is established? Is this not precisely what Véra does? Perhaps we can say that what happens between Jean Baxter and Véra is identification and erasure in synchronicity: in order for there to be an identification there must be evident a textual and/or material erasure which
leaves a trace. Conversely in order for the erasure to take place, identification must be established.

Following this phone conversation with Jean Baxter, Véra sits on the couch devastated and broken. When l’Inconnue enters the villa and meets Véra, she reacts by asking simply, "Vous êtes Vera Baxter?" This is not really a question, but a statement requiring confirmation from the name bearer. Once Vera replies, "Oui," l’Inconnue puts Véra’s voice to work, immediately addressing what Durand refers to as the problematic area between language and the voice which “cancels, displaces the subject as referent” (1977, 110). L’Inconnue frees Véra’s voice from the conventions which have constrained her: to tell the ‘truth’ even through lying, to maintain candour and panache in the midst of rage, anguish and the intensity of pure desire. Because l’Inconnue is a transitory figure with no investment in Véra’s truth, she can offer Véra freedom from the symbolic confines of language. In willing her to use her voice she frees her from the bonds of her subjectivity and we witness how in the final idle conversation about the weather, that at last something in Véra has been released. In retrospect we can see that what has taken place between Véra and l’Inconnue is an analytic transference.

Jacques-Alain Miller says of analysis that it

isn’t an intellectual journey – its praxis is a certain suffering, a kind of complaint: the statement of a being wanting to change – and when these elements are absent, analysis becomes a hard task. Someone who feels fine, at the peak of his possibilities, desiring an analysis in order to become an analyst, for example, would not foster a praxis of the experience. When

Image 8: An image of Véra when we first see her
someone says "everything is great for me," always wait until the second, or third meeting. For, basically the praxis of analysis is a suffering, not an intellectual journey. Certainly, nothing could empower the analyst to take on the complaint unless he presumes to have the means to relieve its suffering. This puts the analyst in the position of the therapist, the person who thinks he might cure. Thus for Lacan's disciples as for Lacan himself, even surely for Freud, psychoanalysis cures; psychoanalysis is a therapy. But, not for that reason, may we deny, exclude ethics and the very notion of cure – in the sense of what results – not in the sense of the process but in the sense of the outcome, it being the cure itself. If psychoanalysis is a cure, we have a problem with the notion of cure, which in psychoanalysis is problematic, and this is easy to understand: it's that the notion of cure is bound to the notion of symptom.

The analytic symptom, unlike the psychiatric symptom, lacks objectivity. It's founded on the subject's self-evaluation, so that sometimes, usually, it is imperceptible to others. (2017, unpaginated).

In light of this, what has been overcome for Véra? Her symptom remains but her anguish is noticeably diminished, this is obvious even from the ambiguous ending and certainly perceptible to both herself and l’Inconnue. This is not only the start of analysis but the realisation that, for better or worse, one is bound to the symptom. Véra's symptom emanates from the recognition of Lacan's poignant maxim: woman is symptom of man. The function of the symptom is that it compensates for the lack
of sexual relationship, in the absence of which lies not only the symptom but also the subject’s relation to it. Colette Soler puts this succinctly:

The variations of the symptom appear at the level of phenomena, for it is obvious that such phenomena can be either more or less uncomfortable. Some are intolerable because of the deleterious jouissance that they include; others are only too well tolerated – whether we think, for example, of drugs, or even as woman as a symptom: they are not always so disagreeable, and occasionally not disagreeable enough! (2003, 257)

While it seems that when we meet Véra she is in unrelieved melancholic anguish, we do get glimpses of Véra naked, posing, satisfied beyond words within feminine jouissance. But it is her engagement with l’Inconnue, not with Jean Baxter or Michel, which propels Véra towards her destined feminine jouissance not as a way out of her symptom, but into a relation with it on her terms. Perhaps the initial scene of Véra lying contentedly naked against the background not of party music, but the sound of the ocean, is in fact Duras’ fantasy of Véra’s destiny.

In Véra we see that what is overcome in speech is not the wrestling with the symptom, but a confrontation with it. For both Véra and l’Inconnue this enables a new satisfaction, what Lacan calls the “satisfaction of speech” (1972-1973, 61). This can occur only in the mutual commitment of two subjects to share their voices as well as silences. The analysand speaks (and stays silent) in order to glimpse the desire of the Other and the analyst co-opts the analysand into speaking into the analyst’s silence. Lacan calls this “the pact, the agreement” between voices:

The desiring human subject is constructed around a center which is the other insofar as he gives the subject his unity, and the first encounter with the object is with the object as object of the other’s desire… This defines, within the speech relationship, something that originates somewhere else – this is exactly the distinction between the imaginary and the real. A primitive otherness is included in the object, insofar as primitively it’s the object of rivalry and competition. It’s of interest only as the object of the other’s desire. (1955-1956, 39)

What is remarkable about the character of Véra is that she thoroughly appreciates the futility of chasing subjective wholeness. In this lies Lacan’s point: subjective wholeness is structurally impossible once one accepts one has an unconscious. Neither can consciousness make up for this lack because in it full meaning inevitably eludes us. Véra comes to a position where she accepts this and no longer desires such a desire but, rather, through language is enabled to navigate a jouissance which is livable. Although the ending is ambiguous, we sense that she is refusing man’s small ideal of her as woman, a being of Jean Baxter’s desire. For Lacan, we are holed rather than whole, by the signifying relations which simultaneously function as civil bonds, also by our need for separation. Véra leaves the villa with insight into how the abyss of the abject has invaded her. She realises how she needed to lose herself in order to be; and this is the melancholic position which bars any purifica-
tion of meaning. In Baxter, Véra Baxter, Lacan’s maxim: *there is no such thing as a sexual relation* is established by Duras from the very beginning. However, Duras doesn’t leave it there, instead offering that the possibility of an analytic love relation lies in the exchange of voices and silences. It is here that love emerges from nothing, only to change everything.

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Notes

1. In the 1980 film script this is a man (*l’Inconnu*) but played in the film by Delphine Seyrig and therefore referred to here as *l’Inconnue*. In her *note de l’auteur*, Duras critically reflects on this point: “J’ai déjà dit le tort que j’avais eu de le remplacer dans le film par une femme. Il s’agit là d’une erreur si grande, si grossière qua même une actrice comme Delphine Seyrig n’a pas pu la corrigé. Je ne veux pas revenir là-dessus sauf pour dire que si jamais l’histoire était reprise, soit au cinema soit au théâtre, ce serait cette version-ci qui devrait être retenue et non pas celle du film ou de cette première pièce intitulée Suzanna Andler” (1980, 6).

2. There is a resonance here with Duras’ (semi)autobiographical *L’Amant* (1984) in which the impossibility of an affair becomes for a time an obsessive fiction for the protagonist. Here Duras poses an interesting question for the man-in-love: *how does or rather should, one represent oneself to his lover?*

3. Because of her emphasis on feminine desire, Duras’ literary and film work lends itself to be appropriated by psychoanalysis and feminism together with other critical discourse. Arguably, Duras’ *oeuvre* is a genre in its own right in that it is not fixed and in its experimentation with concepts, resists the convention of classification.

4. Susan Cohen (1993) emphasises how the intertextual nature of Duras’ work in its endeavour to transpose between genres and narrative configurations which deliberately disrupt simplistic representations of woman, opts for plots in which the protagonist’s position is complex and changing, thus always varying the content of what is, or is not said. Deborah Glassman (1991) considers that Duras actively displaces and destabilises representation and the identities it affords, by signalling both the pleasure and trauma of the feminine body.

5. In her reading of Duras’ films and writings, Cathy Caruth (1996) attests to this manoeuvre linking vocal transmission to both truth and fiction, maintaining that the language of truth and fiction co-opts trauma as a specific subjective experience of deferral demanding a witness.

7. This forest fire anticipates the important final scene in which l’Inconnue points out that the position of woman today is the same as that of women a thousand years ago; the forest had enabled women to speak and its destruction takes their shared language away, leaving them with their anguish: “... leurs maris étaient loin, presque toujours, à la guerre du seigneur, à la Croisade, et elles restaient parfois pendant des mois dans leur cabane, seules au milieu de la forêt, à les attendre. Et c’est comme ça qu’elles ont commencé à parler aux arbres, à la mer, aux animaux de la forêt…” (Duras 1980, 106).

8. As Mladen Dolar (2006) suggests, we can think of this as the Kantian voice of reason situated in the clinic.

9. This is how we might understand Jean Baxter’s position, that he is the desired passion for woman.

10. This has been much discussed by Duras scholars, notably Renate Günther (2002) and Fernanda Negrete (2015). These authors consider the split between language and the subject insisted upon by love, is crucial to Duras’ work. Lacan (1965) points to his appreciation of Duras’ technique of ‘splitting’ between the object and the subject who comes into existence because of this very split. For Lol Stein as with Véra, it is the inability to find the right words because of the pain caused by separation, which features as the kernel of such splitting. Lol Stein and Véra linguistically dance around the inability to name the pain of separation (which is unsayable) and thus enact it at the level of affect: they are separated both from the immediacy of the Other and from parts of themselves caught in the transition of a separation which is seeking a way to ‘be’ for the Other.

11. Several of Duras’ films, especially where the female protagonist is played by Delphine Seyrig, feature the reclining woman. Whereas Duras’ reclining Véra portrays her naked and vulnerable, her reclining housewife, Anne-Marie Stretter in India Song, is beautifully dressed and surrounded by admiring male companions, thereby revealing a very different enigma of feminine jouissance.

Works Cited


