

From implicit memory to a revised colonial past: Marguerite Duras rewriting cultural memory

My paper illuminates the creative route from autobiographic memory into artistic works which have enough potency to rewrite the traditional cultural memory of the time. An artist with such impact is Marguerite Duras, who consciously dedicated herself to depicting human tragedy. Mediated by her literary trauma narratives, Duras's critical working through individual catastrophes in colonialism shows how micro-historical, experiential material can be incorporated into the collective social memory. Using shock and suffering as a powerful embodied figure of suffocated people, Duras gives a new function to lived trauma, which is acknowledged by the audience as a reorganisation of its ethical consciousness. In particular Duras explicitly uses forgetting as an inversion of Proustian remembering, thus tackling European bourgeois values by criticising not only the hegemonic narrative propagating success for the French colonial empire but also the subordination of women as a whole.

Duras's main mnemonic device for creating suffering figures was the voluntary retrieval of episodic long-term memories from the Annam and Cambodia of the 1920s and inter- and post-war France. My main theoretical problem is how an implicit, embodied and shocking memory image can be translated into an explicit narrative. Duras's micro-historical modulations feeding into social memory are enabled by two methods. First, she transcribes her "literal", crystal-clear flashbacks and their metonymic details into polysemiotic phantasms for new metaphorical purposes; cognitively taken, she couples her haunting memories with associative and imaginative memory systems. Second, she distances herself from mimetic descriptions of trauma by various self-reflexive techniques. As a result, the metanarratives of the fictional protagonists non-verbally enacting their traumas can point directly to topical socio-political problems.