

# Women Screaming

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by Eileen Myles

What a good thing to be asked to watch two films, Marguerite Duras's *Les Mains négatives* (1979) and Marie-Claude Treilhou's *Simone Barbès ou la vertu* (1980). When the films bleed right into each other which I will happily show. Duras has a man from 30,000 years ago howling for love. Easy enough, right. That sounds sarcastic but I do enjoy the film's elemental grandeur. He is no one in particular and he is calling to someone very particular, any inhabitant of a late seventies Paris (perhaps Duras) which is the manifest location of his call, and if I were as sentimental or just truthful about Paris as I am about New York, I'd say it's a city that is already gone, or dramatically different. Which is maybe even truer of the second film than the first. But so much else is absent in Duras's film, which is a small film with superlative scale. He is deeply alone, her man, and he is in a cave by the sea and surrounded by 'the European forests without end'. What forests, right? Woods gone so long and if truth be told he is calling from precisely the moment when he could easily have been not human but the last Neanderthal making his *cri* since his kind vanished from the earth pretty much exactly 30,000 thousand years ago. So throw that into the mix. He was clearly a being on the edge. Yet even more to the point, since the oughts we've known that the multiple handprints (all the same size, indicating that the person was alone, black hands and blue hands) were too small to be those of a man and so the first lonely artist calling to the present was a woman. Would Duras's film work if it were *she* calling out her love to the present? Think of it. Whatever a woman is, she is not as anonymous as a lonely Neanderthal guy howling to *our* present or specifically Marguerite Duras's present in 1978 from that by now familiar cave surrounded by the European forests without end and the crashing sea. The poem is off. It no longer works. The Neanderthal woman is feeling something different, she's anonymous anonymous, too anonymous for words, and she probably would have not called Marguerite Duras at all, nor would Duras have accepted the charges.

I do feel she is calling into the porn theatre of *Simone Barbès* so something truly works in this pairing. Two women are sitting in the lobby of a porn theatre of the late seventies. One ('Martine') is sentimental and the other ('Simone') is tough. And rather than the sea, we have the grunts and groans and fabricated ecstatic screams of recorded sex pouring intermittently, lavishly, deadeningly and comically into the lobby and the film. These sounds are as much a character as anyone else here. And there is 'a crazy woman' outside the theatre howling *Phillipe I love you!* and throwing herself down on the sidewalk around his legs. That's the missing link. You don't get any more particular than that. Within the lobby men of all sorts are lurking in the strange little hallways and alcoves of the theater, some floating in from the street, into the lobby of the film and the women, who are ushers, take turns escorting them into the theater and the sounds stop and start as the doors open and close. I thought of Chantal Akerman's *Toute une nuit* (1982), a subsequent creation which is only entrances and exits and it's as blue as the first film and as non-sentimental as this. *Simone Barbès* has none of the elegance of Chantal Akerman's work.

Maybe that's wrong. But Treilhou doesn't want or need it though the appreciation for CA clearly is there. *Simone Barbès* lands more accurately somewhere near Warhol and John Cassavetes, the main location being literally industrial, the lobby of a porn theatre decorated by a couple of froofy human eyes hanging over the heads of the two women as they chat with one another and facilitate the legions of men parading in in their tight white pants and bellbottoms, and their vanity and their needs. They bring candy and advice. They are all the kinds of men who like to watch porn. All the men in the world so collectively, this film is also elemental! One is even a film director complaining about the bad quality of the screening. The women nod as he blathers and keep talking. Their dialogue is as much a location as the lobby and when Martine asks Simone when her shift is over where she is going now she explains: 'I will go to the end of the street, it will depend on the moon.' The unevenness of the dialogue is a miracle. Among other things this moment ties us into the dyke bar scene that's coming right after, resembling every nightclub scene we ever saw in old movies except here we watch the shifting scene of lesbian romance, hustle and voyeurism. While *all* of *Simone Barbès* is a surprising feast for anyone who craves the loose wonderful and, yes, feminist work that came out of this vanguard moment in art film, *Simone Barbès* is also the breathtaking rough-edged minimalist classic that fulfills my own heart's desire of at last seeing a simulacrum of the lesbian bars I longed to visit in Paris in the 80s, so *Simone Barbès* gave me a private kind of thrill. The mish mash of the scene is modelled after 'Le Monocle,' the legendary Parisian dyke bar, of course long gone, and the scene holds whatever else the film needed – front and centre there's an old school lesbian trio where a white-haired woman in a white tuxedo plays an accordion, while singing a torch song proclaiming *his* caresses to the room. It seems the world Duras invoked was a time before pronouns and this is the moment after. Way before pronouns were a thing there simply was this demimonde irony and play with gender – here, in the back-and-forth dramas of an older man who comes in with his wife in a fur to command a front-ring seat, then grabs an intimate kiss from his older lesbian girlfriend who runs the place, then sitting down to watch a crazy leather-clad Amazonian floor show punctuated by a shooting and the place is gangster enough to be prepared to clean up the mess immediately and the night rolls on. Simone can't extricate her girlfriend from her own various hustles and johns. She has a matter-of-fact poetic conversation with the bartender who's spouting Racine. Simone steps outside once again, her movements govern the film and this time the 'end of the street' and 'the moon' bring a car to her once she takes a few steps outside. A man pulls up in a dark Volvo. He's wearing a tuxedo, like he's been to the opera and she shoves the bitch over and *she* drives. It's grim and important. Her grip on the wheel is practical and tense. The man's moustache is false. He tears it off. Masculinity is not reliable in this film, but a travesty of sorts just like everything else. It's the same Paris they're driving through in Duras's film. It's Paris dark and then light and just as spasmodically and you wouldn't want it any other way, she drives herself home, the movie stops.