

Memor of War

(La Douleur)

A film by
Emmanuel Finkiel



127 mins / France / 2017 /French with English subtitles/Certificate tbc
San Sebastián International Film premiere 2017
French entry for Best Foreign Language Film 91st Academy Awards

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SYNOPSIS:

In 1944 Nazi-occupied France, young Marguerite Duras is a talented writer and an active Resistance member with her husband Robert Antelme. When he is deported by the Gestapo, she dives into a desperate struggle to get him back. She develops a chilling relationship with the police inspector and Vichy collaborator Rabier and takes terrible risks to save Robert, playing a cat-and-mouse of unpredictable meetings all over Paris. Does he really want to help her? Or is he trying to dig up information about the anti-Nazi underground? Then comes the end of the war and the return of the camp victims, an excruciating period for her, a long and silent agony after the chaos of the Liberation of Paris. But she continues to wait, bound to the torment of absence even beyond hope and love.

Adapted from *La Douleur* by Marguerite Duras. Published in English as *The War: a Memoir*

Further information and downloads [here](#)

Photo set can be downloaded [here](#)



CAST

Marguerite
Rabier
Dionys
Mme Katz
Morland
Robert Antelme
Mme Bordes
Beauchamp

Mélanie Thierry
Benoît Magimel
Benjamin Biolay
Shulamit Adar
Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet
Emmanuel Bourdieu
Anne-Lise Heimburger
Patrick Lizana

CREW

Director
Screenplay

Emmanuel Finkiel
Emmanuel Finkiel
adapted from **La Douleur (The War: a Memoir)**
by **Marguerite Duras**

Director of Photography
Sound

Alexis Kavyrchine
Antoine-Basile Mercier, Jean Goudier
Benoît Gargonne

Production Designer
Costumes
Editor
Casting Directors
Producers
Co-producers

Pascal Le Guellec
Anaïs Romand, Sergio Ballo
Sylvie Lager
Antoinette Boulat and Richard Rousseau
Les Films du Poisson, Cinéfrance and KNM
Versus production, Need productions

With the participation of
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France 3 cinéma, Same Player
Canal +, OCS, France TV, Proximus
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Région Île de France, Eurimages, Fondation Carac

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Tax shelter du Gouvernement Belge, Inver Invest

127 minutes

EMMANUEL FINKIEL

Emmanuel FINKIEL (born in 1961) was for years an assistant director, for instance on Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue, White and Red*. He has been writing and directing films himself since 1995. His feature debut *Voyages* (1999) was awarded at several film festivals in France, including in Cannes.



FILMOGRAPHY

2017 MEMOIR OF WAR (La Douleur) – San Sebastián International Film Festival

2015 A DECENT MAN (Je ne suis pas un salaud) – Festival du Film Francophone d'Angoulême

2012 I AM (Je Suis)

2008 NOWHERE, PROMISED LAND (Nulle part terre promise) – Locarno Film Festival, Best Cinematography

2001 CASTING – Honourable Mention, FIPRESCI Prize, Leipzig DOK Festival

1999 VOYAGES – Award of the Youth, Cannes Film Festival, Best First Feature, César Awards



DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The first time I read *La Douleur*, I must have been about 20. Returning to the story 30 years later to make this adaptation, I found myself as unutterably moved as the first time round. The purpose of this movie is to recapture that emotion through the events as they unfold.

A personal twist

My starting-point, inevitably, has been my own history or that of my father rather, whose parents and younger brother were arrested and deported in 1942, not to return. For many years and to an irrational degree we waited for them. There was no hope in our waiting. It was waiting for waiting's sake: waiting and absence as lynchpins of aftermath. And as a child, I did not understand why, every July, a night-light was lit in one corner of the apartment. For many years, no one would answer my questions as to why, leaving the imagination and fantasy free to roam.

Marguerite Duras' story offers a unique account of the business of waiting. The first time I read it, I found myself recognizing familiar processes, at last pinned down into words. I should never, back then, have dared attempt an adaptation of what immediately became one of my sacred texts. All the same, I know that my reading of *La Douleur* underpinned the writing of my first film, *Voyages*, another film about absence and endlessly awaiting a return; about the fantasy that there might be a return; about the impossibility of living in a haunted present, where every place, every city, every road is crowded with ghosts.

Here I am today, though, confronting that sacred text. The emotions experienced now are no different to those that haunted me all those years ago. A heart-rending realization comes at the end of the book: that a woman, who has lived only for her husband's return, finds she no longer wants him when he comes home. All the time he has been absent, she has kept him alive with unfailing devotion; but her love has lasted only as long as his absence.

Inevitably, memories of everything I have seen and heard in my own family over the years erupt.

This, I now know, was what moved me to tears all those years ago: the cruel understanding that Robert dies twice, in a concentration camp and again on coming home to the woman who no longer loves him.



Adapting *La Douleur*

I have chosen to tell a tale set in 1944 and 1945. My heroine is not Marguerite Duras aged 50, re-reading forgotten notebooks, but a young woman aged 32 who walks the streets of Paris, then plunges into the depths of her own apartment to await a husband who may or may not return.

I have focused on two stories in the collection entitled *La Douleur*: the title story, which takes place after the Liberation of Paris in August 1944; and a story entitled *Rabier*, set during the final weeks of German occupation immediately before. The protagonist shifts from street-warrior in a Nazi-occupied city to embodying despair during the celebratory weeks that come with Liberation. Until, finally, she shuts herself up in an apartment to visit the outer fringes of her own madness. The narrative is structured in two parts, two timeframes, whose boundaries steadily overlap, till they get caught in other, shifting and imaginary timeframes that haunt Marguerite's final moments of waiting in that apartment.



The part played by Paris

Paris is a central character in Duras' *La Douleur*, representing collaboration with the Nazis, street-fighting and fear. With its boisterous crowds and mendacious appearance of springtime Victory, Paris then comes to provide a paradoxical backdrop for grief.

It is a city that stabs those waiting for their ghosts to return in the heart. Its victims are those for whom the war cannot end and may never end. Spring sunshine holds no warmth for people like Marguerite. They cling to the shadows, whilst others dance in the streets busily not remembering, and cry out against forgetting.

Paris is a world of its own. Paris stands for wartime and freedom on the march. Paris is other people and their loudness; other people and their weeping, their laughter, their cowardice, their fear and their gladness.

Is “Marguerite”, Duras?

La Douleur is the closest Marguerite Duras ever got to writing autobiography. That, to me, is what she means by saying “in the light of which, I have to say, the very idea of literature must appear unseemly.”

Therefore, and we must also take into account the fact that cinema is about showing, I would say that we cannot dodge the fact that our protagonist is Marguerite Duras.

Yet, at the same time, and I would say, above all, our Marguerite is a woman like any other, a human being, typical of those women who found themselves waiting for someone to come home and all those women, more generally – in all wars everywhere and throughout history – of whom, Duras says that they alone “know” the abomination. Marguerite is a spokeswoman for all those other women.



The “Douleur” in *La Douleur* is what, exactly? A being not one, but two.

“Douleur” means what, exactly? Pain, Grief, Distress. Maybe sorrow. The “Douleur” in *La Douleur* relates then, to what exactly? The waiting and fear that Robert might be dead, massacred? That he might have been treated as the Jews were treated during the genocide? Is Grief a desire to undergo what another is undergoing? Or guilt, perhaps, at being alive oneself? Or a feeling still more complex and less easily confessed? Yes, a mixture of many contradictory and uneasy sentiments: “a terrible disorder of the mental faculties”.

Of course, even before Robert’s arrest, Marguerite and Dionys are having an affair. When Robert returns, Marguerite is no longer in love. Indeed, she may not have loved her husband for several months. So then she gives herself up to loving someone who is not there; and to the fantasy of a man who must come home. What matters is his absence and suffering as a substitute for true love. Perhaps that is the guilty sense of the word “Douleur”: a game played for public and private consumption, Marguerite’s lie to herself: a form of bad faith, identified only many years later, on re-reading, when the subterfuge, at last, is understood. Maybe.

I have used a Doppelgänger in certain scenes, allowing Marguerite both to engage in action and to watch herself engaging in action. The “other Marguerite” is a spectator of the first’s performance. She is not the person who, many years later, will rediscover the events in a rediscovered notebook. She is not the writer. She is a second Marguerite from the time of the action, unimpressed by her own hysterical overkill.

And perhaps after all *La Douleur* is actually absence of “douleur”, grief at absence of grief and suffering at not suffering enough. Or is this a step too far? A twisted reading? Are we all not, all the time, traversed by paradoxical feelings? That speak of the dense and unknowable nature of humankind?

The one thing that matters, I would say, is that term “Douleur” is a complex, difficult concept. Complexity must lie at the absolute heart of our project. More than ever, the idea is to tell the truth. Primo Levi and Robert Antelme spoke the truth. They spoke of complexity and guilt in relation to the death camps. Well there was complexity among those waiting for people to come home too. Amongst those who have to live with the waiting.



La Douleur and Jews

As a member of the French Resistance, Robert should have been sent to a concentration camp and he should have returned with the first or second wave of transports home. But he comes home another way, which most people, at the time, did not know existed. What happened to Robert is what happened to Jews. Waiting for Robert to come home, in this sense, represents the discovery of the Final Solution. Duras ends her narrative with the words: “Robert did not die in a concentration camp”. At the time, the expression “Death Camp” did not exist. Nor the expression “Extermination Camp.” People did not speak of gassing. A veil was drawn over the fate of the Jews by De Gaulle’s policy of refusing to publicize what had happened. Casting a veil was the order of the day: forgetting. Forgetting Robert, hiding the very evidence of his disappearance. This policy of not recognizing what had happened (fuelling Negationist fantasies to come) is what causes oblivion, grief, sorrow, distress: “Douleur”.

Time is “Douleur” too and another of the Story’s protagonists

Time is experienced only as duration or, more precisely, a sense of its own passing. Marguerite wanders around her apartment and through the streets of Paris feeling the weight of every second.

Time of the imagination combines present and past, memory and fantasy and sometimes it shifts an immediate future into the conditional tense: he might come home; if he were to come home.

Time is a killer. That form of Time which belongs to the outside world and is experienced as an imposition on the inner world. Months go by. Camps are liberated. Spring comes to Paris. And still Robert is not home. The more time passes, the more the certainty of his death seems unavoidable.

And this is not all. A time will come which has no time for people who have been in the camps, no time for the fact of genocide nor remembering.



Why cut Robert's homecoming and the last quarter of the original story?

For two reasons. The first is very simple and unavoidable. There is no way of representing someone returning from the camps without "lying". The second reason is about endings. Marguerite knows that she is no longer in love with her husband. That is why our story must end as Robert is about to enter the apartment, at that precise moment when he has come home but not yet appeared. This is where the question posed at the very beginning of our tale is at last answered: we come to love those who are gone; those who return are forever accursed.

It is a love story.

Emmanuel Finkiel