

## The Practice of Strangeness: *L'Intrus* – Claire Denis (2004) and Jean-Luc Nancy (2000)<sup>1</sup>

**Martine Beugnet**

University of Edinburgh

A child of the era of decolonization, Claire Denis grew up in various regions of France's sub-Saharan colonial lands, and was brought back to the '*métropole*' as a teenager in the 1960s. She has thus had a double practice of foreignness, abroad, and in her 'own' country, which she did not know and where, in similar yet fundamentally different ways than in Africa, she felt like an outsider again. As the daughter of a colonial administrator – a childhood beautifully evoked in her first feature, *Chocolat* (1988) – she had stood as a highly visible embodiment of the Western presence on colonial soil. On her return to France, she would live through the more banal experience of becoming an invisible intruder, an exile at 'home' – a theme explored in her subsequent works (Beugnet 2004). From the start, Denis thus drew on her personal knowledge of feeling rootless to explore issues that have remained at the heart of her filmmaking: the deeply perplexing questions of identity and alienation, assimilation and rejection, desire and fear inseparable from the post-colonial malaise that affects France with particular acuteness.<sup>2</sup>

It does not come as a surprise then that Denis should find inspiration in the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy, a philosopher whose interests and research spread across the fields of politics and psychoanalysis, developing around notions of otherness and selfhood, and community and multiculturalism, as well as the questioning of the concept of historical

---

<sup>1</sup> This article relates to and extends from previous publications that discuss Denis's work. See in particular Beugnet 2005; 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Silverman 1999.

progression. Furthermore, the autobiographical basis of *L'Intrus*, unprecedented in the philosopher's writing, explains why Denis should be drawn to this text in particular. Nancy, on the other hand, found the echo of many aspects of his thought in Denis's films – not least in their refusal of closure – and has proved to be a particularly perceptive viewer and analyst of her work.

Hence, *L'Intrus*, Denis's cinematic 'adoption' of Nancy's eponymous book, is better envisaged as part of an on-going dialogue between the philosopher and the filmmaker's respective oeuvre. Nancy's keen interest in Denis's work led him to write an article on the director's celebrated portrait of Djibouti and the Foreign Legion, *Beau travail* (1999) (Nancy 2001). Similarly, Denis's direct cinematic practice of Nancy's ideas started before the making of *L'Intrus*, with her contribution to the collection of short films *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello* (various directors, 2002). In turn, one year after its initial theatrical release, on the occasion of the televised broadcast of *L'Intrus* on the Arte channel, Nancy wrote a detailed analysis of the film (Nancy 2005).

As the following paper goes back and forth between the films, the book and the article, what emerges is an impossibility to dissociate the abstract concepts from their embodied manifestation: in its cinematographic and in its literary expression, the theoretical preoccupation with foreignness is mapped out on the very body of the narrator/character, as well as in the wording of the written text and in the material surface of the film's images – imprinted, as it were, in the flesh of the text/film.

### Towards *L'Intrus*

In 2001, Denis was commissioned to create a short film as part of a collection entitled *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello*.<sup>3</sup> Aptly called *Vers Nancy*, Denis's black and white film is shot entirely in a train, presumably on its way to the border-town that bears the same name as the philosopher. Nancy himself is filmed in conversation with one of his students (the translator Ana Samardzija). The train journey is a familiar trope of the cinema, the changing landscape framed by the window a reminder of the unravelling images of a film strip. In

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ten Minute Older* is a two-part collection of short films commissioned from 15 well known art directors (Bertolucci, Jarmusch, Kaurismäki and Herzog, amongst others) who were given the very loose concept of time as a premise. The results were highly variable, as reflected in the critics' ambivalent reviews.

this case however, the trope takes on a historical significance as well, as the train travels east, towards a destination redolent of the history of France's involvement in World War I and II, and a border that remains a sensitive landmark in the geography of the nation's collective memory.

Sitting across from each other in front of the window, Nancy and Samardzija try to define what it is that renders our encounter with the foreign so fraught. Starting with Samardzija's own experience of being an invisible intruder (she is a white woman) hoping to integrate in France, they evoke that inherent but necessary contradiction that lies at the heart of the construction of individual as well as collective identities: the existence of an 'other' as the very fundament for self-identity, and the need to define oneself through difference, with and against the other, simultaneously denying one's own internal fragmentation. Their exchange is visually punctuated with images of actor Alex Descas, standing alone in the corridor. As the train nears its destination, Descas enters Nancy and Samardzija's carriage, and, seemingly aware that he is 'intruding' on their discussion, comments on the briefness of this (cinematic) journey. As the mostly silent black man arguably objectified by the lingering gaze of the camera and whose image serves as the visual counterpart to the dialogue between the two white travellers, Descas casts an ambiguous figure. Yet the *mise en scène* accurately reflects Denis's denial of the easy route offered by common political correctness, and her and Nancy's questioning of the belief in the possibility of complete 'assimilation' implicit in its discourse – a discourse where, as Nancy precisely puts it, one has to pretend 'that a black person is not black'.<sup>4</sup> Nancy's definition of the foreigner, offered as an opening to the text of *L'Intrus*, similarly eschews political correctness to engage with the more complex reality of an irreducible strangeness: for Nancy, as for Denis, the 'truth' of the foreigner lies precisely here, in the impossibility of reducing and erasing the difference without denying her/his existence at the same time. What needs to be practised, then, is not assimilation, but the difficult experience of being with the intruder, of being intruded upon.

There must be an element of the intruder in the stranger, otherwise his/her strangeness is lost (...) Yet most of the time, we refuse to admit it: as a subject matter, the intruder is an intrusion into our moral correctness (it is in fact a

---

<sup>4</sup> See also Denis's comments on political correctness at the time of the release of *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994), her portrait of a black serial killer (Beugnet 2004, 85).

remarkable example of *political correctness*). And yet intrusion is an inherent part of the truth of the stranger.<sup>5</sup> (Nancy 2000, 11-12; all translations are mine)

### Not Adaptation but 'Adoption'

Such reflections are at the core of many of the debates that stirred the cultural, social, political and artistic arena in France as the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century loomed. Tellingly, both the director's masterpiece, *Beau travail* (1999), and the philosopher's essay *L'Intrus* (2000) were the result of commissions on the theme of foreignness by a TV channel and a publisher respectively. Denis and Nancy's oeuvre is thus easily contextualised as part of a much wider reflection that includes the work of a significant number of French thinkers and filmmakers.<sup>6</sup> If Nancy's text stands out however, and if it wields such evocative power in cinematic as well as literary terms, it is thanks to its remarkable blending of the autobiographical account with the philosophical essay. Starting with the description of the heart transplant that he went through nine years before, the philosopher establishes a thought-provoking analogy between the physical and psychological implications of the transplant and the fear of being intruded upon. Through the description of his medical condition, Nancy explores how the experience of one's identity being threatened from within by that which comes from the outside is complicated by the need to lower one's defences, to weaken one's immune system in order to survive. The book thus weaves together the account of the personal experience that forms its starting point and running metaphor with a theoretical meditation on the nature of foreignness that is at the heart of the contemporary geo-political predicament of the West. That this relatively short book, part-essay, part-diary, part-stream of consciousness, should inspire such significant yet highly dissimilar film works as Nicolas Klotz's *La Blessure* (2004)<sup>7</sup> and Denis's *L'Intrus* is a tribute to the richness of the metaphorical journey it offers as well as to the openness of a reflection that eschews straightforward conclusions. As a result, as Nancy himself

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Il faut qu'il y ait de l'intrus dans l'étranger, sans quoi il perd son étrangeté (...) Le plus souvent, on ne veut pas l'admettre : le motif de l'intrus est lui-même une intrusion dans notre correction morale (c'est même un exemple remarquable du *politically correct*). Pourtant, il est indissociable de la vérité de l'étranger.'

<sup>6</sup> One thinks, in particular, of Kristeva's work on the same topic: *Étrangers à nous mêmes* (1988) and of Tzvetan Todorov's book, *Nous et les autres : la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (1989).

<sup>7</sup> Klotz's film depicts the arrival of African immigrants in Charles De Gaulle airport, where they are unlawfully detained by the French police, see Beugnet 2007.

recognises, even in the case of Denis, who chose to retain the title of the book, the link between source-text and film is necessarily much looser than one of adaptation or even transposition.

In his discussion of the relationship between his writing and Denis's filmmaking, Nancy compares it to a creative form of 'filiation', thus simultaneously referring to one of the core themes in Denis's film: kinship or lineage, real or imagined. Elaborating anew the metaphorical play on the theme of otherness, identity and embodiment by describing the process of translating the text to the screen as a form of 'adoption', Nancy thus emphasizes the rich connections and fertile departures that the corporeal allegory of the transplant (and, with it, of 'contamination') creates in terms of form as well as narrative inventiveness.

I must point this out for those who have not read it: the book does not contain a story as such that the film could adapt (...). As I once said, being struck by the assonance, Claire Denis did not adapt my book, she adopted it. (In effect, the film does speak of adoption.) The relationship between us differs from the relatively 'natural' process of adaptation (a simple change of register or tool); it is an unnatural and implicit relation established through a purely symbolic lineage. In the end, this might be the truth of all lineages – and maybe also the lesson to be drawn from the film, just as my book suggests that there is no such thing as one's 'true', proper body; and by saying 'just as' I am already engaging with the complex and subtle system of correspondences, of 'inspirations' or contaminations between us.<sup>8</sup> (Nancy 2005, 1)

Hence, Nancy adds, 'in spite of the undeniable, irreducible and welcome heterogeneity that separates the film from the book, the former brings us back to the latter and draws it, as in a backwash movement (*reflux*) beyond itself<sup>9</sup> (Nancy 2001, 2). The use of the word 'reflux', also the title of Paul Gégauff's 1965 film in which Michel Subor, *L'Intrus's* lead actor, also played the central character, points to an intricate process of exchange, a form of

---

<sup>8</sup> 'Précisons-le tout de suite pour qui ne le saurait pas: le livre ne contient aucune histoire que le film aurait pu adapter (sauf à se transformer en documentaire médical, qui n'aurait alors, en vérité, gardé du livre aucune 'inspiration'). Comme il m'est venu un jour de le dire, saisi par l'assonance, Claire Denis n'a pas adapté mon livre, elle l'a adopté. (Or c'est en particulier d'adoption que parle son film.) Le rapport entre nous n'est pas le rapport relativement 'naturel' que suppose une adaptation (un simple changement de registre ou d'instrument), mais le rapport sans naturel ni évidence d'une parenté qui doit tout à son élaboration symbolique. Que ce soit là, en dernière instance, la vérité de toute parenté – c'est peut-être aussi l'une des leçons du film, tout comme mon livre fait penser qu'il n'y a pas, pour finir 'de corps propre' véritable: et ce 'tout comme' a déjà engagé le système complexe et délicat des correspondances, des 'inspirations' ou des contagions entre nous.'

<sup>9</sup> '(...) en dépit de l'irréfusable, irréductible et bienvenue hétérogénéité qui sépare le film du livre, le premier fait retour vers le second et l'entraîne, dans ce reflux, au delà de lui-même.'

backwash movement at work within the film itself as well as in the passage from text to film. Indeed, if there is no direct narrative equivalent possible between the two, the following excerpts from Nancy's essay, redolent of Rimbaudian accents, can nonetheless serve to emphasize the premise of both the book and the film with equal aptness:

I have (who, 'I?', that is precisely the question, the old question: who is the subject of this utterance, always estranged from its own statement, always, inevitably, an intruder, and yet, inevitably, the driving force, the mainspring, the heart?) – I, then, have received someone else's heart, almost ten years ago. For reasons that have remained obscure, my own heart had become obsolete. To live, it had become necessary to host someone else's heart.

(...) My heart was becoming a stranger from me: a stranger, precisely, because it was inside. (...) A strangeness reveals itself 'at the heart' of that which is most familiar – but the term familiar is insufficient here: at the heart of that which never made itself known as 'heart'.

(...) identity equals immunity; one is identified with the other. To lower one is to lower the other one (...) We are snowed under with recommendations about the external world, but the most vigorous enemies are inside: the old viruses hiding in the shadows of our immune system, the intruders of old, who have always been there.<sup>10</sup> (Nancy 2000, 13, 17, 33)

In Denis's film, Nancy's monologue is refracted through the kind of constellation of elusive characters and elliptical storylines that typifies her cinematic worlds. The film, however, is dominated by the presence of Michel Subor in the role of Louis Trébor. Trébor is a mature man who undergoes a heart transplant before embarking on the search for a long-lost son – a journey that takes him from the Jura to Tahiti, via Switzerland and South Korea.

In the book, Nancy conveys the process of self-estrangement that occurs before and after the transplant through the recurring switch from first-person account to impersonal or passive voice (using passive impersonal forms, 'on', or passive infinitives) where the

---

<sup>10</sup> 'J'ai (qui, "je"?, c'est précisément la question, la vieille question: quel est ce sujet de l'énonciation, toujours étranger au sujet de son énoncé, dont il est forcément l'intrus et pourtant forcément le moteur, l'embrayeur, le cœur) – j'ai, donc, reçu le cœur d'un autre, il y a bientôt une dizaine d'années. On me l'a greffé. Mon propre cœur, donc, était hors d'usage, pour une raison qui ne fut jamais éclaircie. Il fallait donc, pour vivre, recevoir le cœur d'un autre.

(...) Mon cœur devenait mon étranger: justement étranger parce qu'il était dedans. (...) Une étrangeté se révèle « au cœur » du plus familier – mais familier est trop peu dire: au cœur de ce qui jamais ne se signalait comme « cœur ».

(...) identité vaut pour immunité, l'une s'identifie à l'autre. Abaisser l'une, c'est abaisser l'autre. (...) On nous barde de recommandations vis-à-vis du monde extérieur (...). Mais les ennemis les plus vifs sont à l'intérieur: les vieux virus tapis dans l'ombre de l'immunité, les intrus de toujours, puisqu'il y en a toujours eu.'

subject, the narrator, becomes the object of the enunciation. This process is unexpectedly brought to mind by the first question directed at Trébor in the local French language, when he calls at the house of his son's Polynesian mother: 'Tu veux quoi, Lui?' (literally: 'What do you want, Him?'). As in all of Denis's previous features however, in *L'Intrus*, dialogue is typically scant. In its cinematographic treatment, the experience of self-alienation is thus more suffused, although just as pervasive as in the writing. The leading character chooses to go back and settle in a far-away country, part of former French colonial land, where he spent time in his youth – although, as one of the locals gently points out, there is no place for him there. From the eastern French country-side where Trébor literally blended into his environment, the film thus takes us to radically different landscapes (and, by virtue of the images' synaesthetic power, different air, climate and smells). Here, Trébor stands out. He becomes the object of curious gazes and, silhouetted against the light, often forms a black hole on the surface of the image.<sup>11</sup> As he becomes progressively sicker, the recurring images of his hands caressing his scarred chest herald the growing intrusion of heterogeneous images within the body of the film itself.

Of Nancy's book, Denis thus retained the metaphorical play on the notion of the transplant, which simultaneously describes the effect on an individual's corporeal and psychological identity of the grafting of a foreign organ, and the mutation of the geopolitical body at large, as it is subjected to an influx of outsiders. The analogy is a topical one: as many other contemporary observers have pointed out, and as Nancy and Samardzija remind us in *Vers Nancy*, while the virtual and actual circulation of images and human bodies across national divides increases, an ageing, post-colonial western world appears to retreat, arguably more than ever before, behind the illusion of a unified and integral identity, and occasionally reacts like a besieged body, as if seized in paranoid fear of hidden takeovers.<sup>12</sup>

Such latent feelings of paranoia imbue the world inhabited by the main character. As Trébor's journey unravels, the film takes on a dark, thriller-like quality, weaving into its loose plotline the evocation of an international mafia and the traffic of organs. At the beginning of the film, he is depicted living a solitary life in the densely wooded frontier-

---

<sup>11</sup> For the human form as 'stain' see Beugnet (2007, 112-13).

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of 'Paranoid Spaces' see Burgin (1996).

land that stretches across the Franco-Swiss border. Neither his lover, the pharmacist from the local town (Bambou), nor his son (Grégoire Colin), with whom he has a distant relationship, seem to know much about him, and the film offers few clues to elucidate the mystery that surrounds this ambiguous character's dominating presence. Trébor has a Swiss and a Russian passport; he has lived in a multitude of countries and has been trained to kill. Walking, cycling or driving across the beautiful countryside that surrounds his hideaway, he observes from afar the desperate advance of groups of illegal immigrants hunted by customs officers. However, he too is hunted. Beset by ghosts of his past, he remains constantly on the alert, attuned to the way his dogs sense the presence of intruders. Yet the greatest threat comes from within: Trébor's heart is ill, and to survive he has to leave his retreat and get a transplant. But the new heart will not free Trébor from his own history. The past continues to haunt him, materializing throughout the film in the form of the young Russian woman (Katerina Golubeva) who follows him all the way to the Polynesian islands where he revisits the sites of his youth in search of his eldest estranged son. The content of the debt for which his persistent follower eventually exacts retribution remains imprecise and as impossible to erase as the colonial guilt carried by so many of the doomed figures that inhabit Denis's films. In order to gain a new lease of life – the transplant of a heart that, he specifies, must be of a young male – Trébor has unwittingly concluded a Faustian contract, unknowingly sacrificing the present to the chimeras of the past and of the future. Towards the end of the film, enigmatic images of the mutilated body of the young man played by Colin – the son who has been ostensibly disowned in favour of another, long-lost heir – suggest that it is his heart that now beats in Trébor's, his own father's chest.

In Denis's films, individual narratives almost always come entangled in the vicissitudes of a collective History, and blood ties rarely stand unquestioned: guilt is part of the inheritance and the sons and daughters try to free themselves from the sins of the fathers. Grégoire Colin's character in *L'Intrus* recalls the resentful son who reinvents himself as a loving father in *Nénette et Boni* (1996), and Sentain, the orphan who joins the foreign legion in *Beau travail* (1999). In the character of Trébor himself, one finds an heir to the father-figure of the commander who welcomes Sentain into the 'family' of the foreign legion. Trébor also stands as an echo of the pathetic and exploitative father figure of *S'en fout la mort* (1990), Ardennes (Jean-Claude Brialy), the shady business man, also the father



of two sons, who, like Trébor in *L'Intrus*, tries to buy the love of a young man (Alex Descas) whom he claims to have fathered during his – idealized – time in colonial land. *L'Intrus* evokes anew the ambiguous functions of lineage, 'real' or fantasized, in our contemporary world of closed frontiers and border controls (since in a time where technology and medicine rewrite the boundaries of corporeal identity, blood-ties and the name of the father continue to establish one's identity and legitimise claims of belonging to a particular country or social grouping). Lineage remains the ultimate key, that which opens gates and frontiers: the basis of a 'natural political economy' as Nancy puts it (*'une économie politique naturelle'*, Nancy 2005). Yet in Trébor's case, blood connections prove too fragile, or too difficult to trace, and the scene of the 'casting' improvised in Papeete by a group of elders intent on finding a surrogate son who bears some resemblance to the ailing white man forms a remarkable piece of cinematographic parable on the issue of genealogy in a post-colonial context. Ultimately, it is in renewed friendship, or thanks to the obstinate presence of the improvised son who appears ready to adopt him, that Trébor seemingly forges the tentative links that may allow him to confront death and even start to redeem himself.

Hence, argues Nancy, the significance of the Christ-like figure, in Nietzschean terms,<sup>13</sup> as it appears time after time in Denis's films: this is the perpetual intruder, the son who has no biological ancestry and no regard for the privileges associated with it. In the sacrificial son, Nancy again finds in *L'Intrus* the figure that he had already associated with the character Sentain in *Beau travail*, also played by Grégoire Colin (Nancy 2001). Before he is murdered, the young man is filmed in his father's deserted house, crying, a garland of leaves on his head. The garland was first worn by a vagabond girl – another Christ-like figure, female this time, and a not-so distant heir to Agnès Varda's Mona, the young woman who casts the charismatic, uncompromising figure of the intruder in *Sans toit ni loi* (1985).

### The living dead

Cinema, however, generates its own mythology. In its ability to conjure up life-like, moving images of a reality that might have vanished long ago (as *L'Intrus* does when it

---

<sup>13</sup> That is, the figure of the ultimate outsider, quintessentially irreducible to ideologies and established social systems, and as such, in opposition with the kind of recuperation and exploitation of Jesus and the figure of Christ in evidence in the Christian doctrine.

brings a young Subor/Trébor back to life), cinema plays its own tricks in denial of nature's curse of mortality. Unsurprisingly then, cinema opens a space where the battle between nature and *techne* can be played out, summoning archaic figures of retribution, bringing into life the strange mutant forms generated by the tampering with nature. Cinema is the 'natural' realm of Frankensteinian creatures and of the living dead – one of the terms used by Nancy when he evokes his own predicament: 'I become a science-fiction android, or, as my youngest son once described me, a living dead man'<sup>14</sup> (Nancy 2000, 43).

Just as the task of summarising Denis's deliberately mystifying narrative is to betray as well as emphasize the quintessential intangibility of her filmworlds, so to try and elucidate the destiny of *L'Intrus's* main character is to ignore the impossibility of disentangling the real from the fantasized (are the images of the son's dead body, with the heart carved out, actual, or the hallucination of a drugged man?). Indeed, in her portrayal of a man who feels himself gradually estranged from his own body as much as from his own environment, Denis is faithful to Nancy's account of his own feeling of alienation. From active body in control of the space and dominating the frame, Trébor increasingly withdraws into a reclining figure, an object of medical care, handled and examined by others. Between mind screen and sensory screen, in fragmented sequences accompanied by syncopated drum beats and the outlandish, lingering sound of electronic sound waves and single guitar chords, images then offer themselves as the evocation of a physical and mental process of self-estrangement which Nancy's words had already conjured up with cinematic force: 'I end up being nothing else than a flimsy thread; from pain to pain and from strangeness to strangeness'<sup>15</sup> (2000, 40).

Trébor (as indeed the characters of *Trouble Every Day* (2001) before him) embodies the predicament of the modern man as Nancy describes it in his essay. Using science to play God with nature, to push the frontier of death further away, man turns into 'the most terrifying and troubling of technicians, the one described by Sophocles twenty-five centuries ago, the one who denatures and constructs nature anew, who recreates the

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Je deviens comme un androïde de science-fiction, ou bien un mort vivant, comme le dit un jour mon dernier fils'.

<sup>15</sup> 'Je finit/s par n'être plus qu'un fil ténu, de douleur en douleur et d'étrangeté en étrangeté.'

creation, builds it out of nothing and, maybe, takes it back to nothing. Capable of the origins and the end'<sup>16</sup> (2000, 44).

Aptly, it is in Geneva, the world capital of watch-making, that Trébor undergoes the transplant that might rejuvenate his ailing body. In one of the city's exclusive shops, he is seduced by the movement of the branded mechanism and buys an expensive model. In this case however, just as genius engineering cannot domesticate time, surgery fails to fend off death. Repudiated by one son, in exile everywhere, a man whose body rejects a new (his own son's?) heart, Trébor becomes a hostage to medical knowledge and a foreigner to himself, caught in a timeless void.

There is something of the monstrous about this film character, as if he were some distant heir of Frankenstein and Nosferatu. At the beginning of the film, *mise en scène*, light and camera work stress the character's closeness to the natural environment he inhabits: Trébor appears to exist in sensual harmony with the elements, his body almost merging with its surroundings. He lives in the sole company of his husky dogs, only sharing the dark kingdom of forests that spreads out around his house with the leader of a larger pack of dogs, a kind of wolf-woman (Béatrice Dalle, made to look more predatory than ever)<sup>17</sup>. His sensuality extends to killing as it does to sex: the same hands that silently cut the throat of an intruder and clean the blood off the knife are seen tenderly caressing the body of a lover a few instants later. When in need of the fresh blood that will extend his life time however, Trébor moves seamlessly from life in the depths of the Jura forest to the exclusive world of high-flying international trade and banking. And as with the classic vampire figure (and the lowering of the coffin into the boat towards the end of the film brings to mind cinema's first vampire), it then emerges that in the wider world, this apparently isolated, reclusive figure had his factotums, taking care of his wealth – a capital that appears to know no borders.

---

<sup>16</sup> 'le plus terrifiant et le plus troublant des techniciens, comme Sophocle l'a désigné depuis vingt-cinq siècles, celui qui dénature et refait la nature, qui recrée la création, qui la ressort de rien et qui, peut-être, la reconduit à rien. Capable de l'origine et de la fin.'

<sup>17</sup> Although Nancy insists on the uncertain, changing relation between body and identity (in the book, he points out that the heart he received might be the heart of a woman and/or of a person of a different race), his analysis of gender in *L'Intrus* re-establishes traditional boundaries: female characters are, he says, the ones who nurture, nurse, and their closeness to dogs in particular marks them out as those who sense the presence of intruders. This analysis disregards the emphasis that the film puts on Trébor's closeness to his own (female) dogs, and the nurturing role of the young father played by Colin.

### From the filmed body to the body of the film

The deep, rectilinear scars that, as a result of the transplant, run across Trébor's torso create a gruesome sight – straight, linear folds of reddened flesh that cut through his chest to form a dreadful geometrical pattern. As incongruous as some of the artificial borders that divide the surface of the earth, they find their visual equivalent in the duplication of man-made boundaries that punctuate the frames, like scars on the skin of the film itself.<sup>18</sup>

A recurrent motif of the film, the wide-angle shots lingering in slow panoramic movements or aerial travelling shots on the limitless expanse of natural landscapes convey a sense of wonder. Yet the open-ended feel of these unfolding spaces and distant horizons is constantly challenged by the limitations imposed by the human hand. Frontiers and customs, walls, blinds, doors, windows; the camera tracking certain gestures – a hand on a door knob, the massive door of a bank safe sliding back smoothly in its frame; the intervals between frames even vividly evoked by the motif of the double window (as when Grégoire Colin, at the beginning of the film, disappears briefly behind the dividing wall of adjacent rooms while the camera, looking in from the outside, pans blindly from one to the other window). Only the tiny child that the young father lovingly nurtures and carries against his chest, even when laid in its cage-like cot, appears to remain in osmosis with its surroundings. Unaware yet of its individuality, of its coming alienation from the whole, he embodies the fleeting memory of a being-in-the-world before adult man's perverted instincts are put in the service of violent and paranoid ownership, fixated on the delimitation and defence of a territory where the foreign body is always the intruder, always reducible to a threat, to be hunted, driven away or destroyed.

The film speaks of enclosures and partitions, yet shows them to be porous, vulnerable to the intrusion of the gaze, the movement of bodies, the blow of a weapon, and the effect of time. Here, the play on the scale of shots emphasizes the metaphorical significance of the ailing body. Switching from close-up shots of Trébor's body to long shots of the countryside where groups of trespassers appear as tiny silhouettes, the film works to

---

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the scene between Trébor and the blind woman, and the description of exiles as 'seers', see Beugnet (2007, 85-7).

collapse optical into haptic vision, to create the dizzying feeling that what we are seeing is the inside of Trébor's body.

In her review of Nancy's book, Marie Gauthier remarks that in writing *L'Intrus*, Nancy adopted a style that is unlike that of his other philosophical essays, using words to dissect his subject with unyielding precision: 'We find none of the circumlocutions and rhetorical approach that are characteristic of his writing, but instead concise, forceful sentences. The words are as cutting as they are precise, adding to the sense of bottomless void and vertigo'<sup>19</sup> (Gauthier, 2000: 3). As the text unravels however, its rhythm also recalls that of irregular breathing or a heart beat: hurried passages where series of short interrogative sentences collide, are followed by clauses using elaborate phrasing and long sentences between parentheses that create suspended moments of reprieve. In turn, in his comments about the film, Nancy proves particularly sensitive to the pace of Denis's work, the sense of 'perpetuum mobile' that calls to mind the regular beat of a heart offset by the film's discontinuities and overlapping of temporalities:

The gliding movement of the swimming and the cycling; car journeys; dogs racing; the course of planes and boats; wanderings; surfing: the movement of the film, its *kinesthesia*, is a movement of movements and sensations of movement, its conclusion suspended in the flight of the dog sleigh and the movement of the whip of the woman who drives it (...) time is mechanical, in sync, counted – similar to the regular beat of a heart, to that machine where only the beat matters – and at the same time, it is continuous and fluid, variable, extensible and unpredictable (...) Duration at once rises and becomes suspended, and is ceaselessly punctured and thwarted by ellipses, imprecise flash backs and uncertain overlaps.<sup>20</sup> (Nancy 2005, 3)

Drawn into the film's circular flow (the journey takes us around the world and back), the characters operate less like psychological constructs than like chemical bodies reacting to a series of contrasted environments, or like cells traveling through the body of the film, set

---

<sup>19</sup> 'Nulle circonlocution ou rhétorique de l'approche dont il est familier, mais des phrases concises, percutantes. Les mots ont le tranchant de la précision, ce qui rend le vertige encore plus abyssal.'

<sup>20</sup> 'Glissements de la nage ou du vélo, déplacements des voitures, courses des chiens, trajets des avions et des bateaux, déambulations, glisse du surfeur: le mouvement du film, sa *kinesthésie* est un mouvement de mouvements et de sensations de mouvements dont la conclusion se suspend en plein élan du traîneau à chiens et du fouet de leur conductrice (...) le temps est mécanique, ajusté, compté – pareil à la pulsation régulière d'un cœur, à cette machinerie dont seul le battement importe – et en même temps, il est continu et fluide, variable, élastique et imprévisible. (...) La durée tout à la fois s'élève et se suspend, elle ne cesse pas d'être trouée ou déjouée par des ellipses, par des flash back mal décidables ou par des simultanités incertaines.'

on their course by its internal kinesthesia (Nancy describes the sequence of the red and white balloon that explodes at the launching ceremony in South Korea as 'the heart of the film').

Denis thus channels back the inspiration that she draws from Nancy's book into her own creative project, elaborated in close collaboration with her director of photography and camerawoman Agnès Godard, and her editor, Nelly Quettier. Even more that her previous works, *L'Intrus* gives precedence to film's kinaesthetic and material qualities, above and beyond the requirements of narrative continuity. The result is, as Denis herself recognises, a somewhat outlandish construct, which the spectator, leaving expectations and preconceptions aside, needs to engage with sensually as well as intellectually. In an interview following the ambivalent reception of *L'Intrus* at the Toronto Film Festival, she admitted: 'My films, sadly enough, are sometimes unbalanced. They have a limp, or one arm shorter, or a big nose, but even in the editing room when we try to change that, normally it doesn't work' (Denis 2004). The image of the editing room as a Frankensteinian laboratory seems particularly apt in the case of a film that not only sets out to evoke the vulnerability of modern man's identity through that of his body, but is itself constructed primarily like a sensory universe – a body of sensations.

Rather than relying on a chain of events, *L'Intrus's* structure is based on the superimposition of block-like ensembles, that are edited together to create series of contrasts and resonances. Movements within the frame and between frames, colours and light, frame scale and composition, bind together particular groups of sequences which, in turn, become part of the sum of sensations, temporalities and rhythms that form the body of the film as a whole. From the texture of skin and the erratic geography of the wrinkles on a face to the metallic slickness of a heavy steel door; from the organic mass of the forest to the strict lines of a modern office's designer environment, Godard's camera tracks bodies, objects and gestures, capturing a multiplicity of textures, tones and movements to be combined through *mise en scène* and montage. The dark, earthy tones of the Jura countryside, are followed by the bright, colorful patchwork of the Polynesian towns and seascapes. In turn, images of the sun-drenched beaches and heat of a Southern island alternate with those of an almost monochrome expanse of snowy fields and icy lakes caught in cold winter light. The tumult of hand-held travelling shots and the claustrophobic intimacy of extended close-ups on bodies are opposed to the stillness of

the camera focused on an inanimate object or on the familiar gestures that make up routine chores; the turbulent movement of horses galloping in the snow is contrasted to the languishing calm of a hot afternoon, curtains flapping limply in the warm tropical wind. Alternatively however, images may form patterns that echo across the film: the brief vision of the shining top of a coffin recalled by the cold, reflecting surface of an office table; the flower headdress of the young vagabond of the French forest a replica of the headdresses worn by the Tahitians; the unfolding of land meeting sea in a Polynesian archipelago echoing the line where forest meets plain in the east of France. Fleeting, at the end of the film, opposed worlds seem to merge as the bluish tree-tops of the Jura wintry forest caught in aerial shots resemble, for a moment, the changing surface of the southern seas.

Denis constructs her film as series of liminal zones, an in-between territory where heterogeneous spaces and temporalities cohabit, and ubiquitous characters from various horizons cross paths. Within this hybrid fictional universe, the presence of the sequences drawn from Gégauff's 1965 film may be understood as the visualisation of Trébor's reminiscences; as filmic matter however – as extracts of related but older material inserted in the body of the more recent film – they are like pieces of tissue transplanted onto a strange body and, in spite of their similarities, only imperfectly integrated (Subor is clearly identifiable, as is the location of the shot; Gégauff's images might have aged, but they have preserved the youthful ghost of *L'Intrus's* ailing man). The image of Trébor/Subor as a young man in Polynesia thus creates an uncanny sense of recognisance, and a forceful evocation of the porosity of (cinematic) time.<sup>21</sup>

This is precisely what Nancy identifies as the quintessence of Denis's work: 'The joint intrusion of times and places with that of people forms the film's fundamental reflection'<sup>22</sup> (Nancy 2005, 3). Most crucially, as evidenced in *L'Intrus's* blurring of the frontiers of past and present, film opens a space where the practice of foreignness operates at the most fundamental level – as the practice of death, or, to paraphrase Nancy, as a means of

---

<sup>21</sup> Although he is not mentioned, Gilles Deleuze's thought on cinema haunts the dialogue that Nancy and Denis have established through their respective means of expression. Deleuze's Bergson-inspired understanding of film is that film is, by 'nature', the medium of false continuity; that its mechanical unfolding of frames (and then again, technological advancement is fast ruling out the 24 frames a second paradigm) is always open to overlaps and intrusions, to temporal and material heterogeneity, corporeal metamorphosing and the transplantation of strange images and sounds.

<sup>22</sup> 'l'intrusion mutuelle des temps et des lieux, avec celle des personnes, fait la pensée la plus propre du film'.

keeping death and life together, 'life and death intimately woven together, each intruding in the heart of the other'<sup>23</sup> (2000, 23).

Transplanting *L'Intrus* to the screen, Denis effectively co-opts Nancy's writing to feed it into her filmmaking agenda: cinema envisaged as a practice of foreignness. Underpinning such a project is the willingness to explore forms of embodiment that move beyond the mapping of abstract concepts onto actors' bodies, to the materialization of the same concepts within the form and material texture (the 'flesh' as it were) of the film itself.<sup>24</sup> The film thus offers itself as a body of sensations through which, as spectators, we might sense and practise our ability to let our defences down – to be drawn into and infused by the unfamiliar.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> 'l'une intimement tressée dans l'autre, chacune faisant intrusion au coeur de l'autre.'

<sup>24</sup> Hence Barbara Kennedy's description of the filmic experience as a practice of the affective seems particularly apt in the context of Denis's latest feature. Taking her cue from Deleuze's notions of classical versus modern cinema (Deleuze 1989, 214) and from Guattari's suggestion that we gain knowledge not through representation, but through 'affective contamination' (Guattari 1995, 92) Kennedy summarizes the notion of a film that 'performs as a body': 'The filmic experience has evolved through a whole new idea of the processuality, the rhythm of the film as a set of bodies, in motion, producing a new cartography of the visual. The film does not record images, or convey representation. It acts, it performs, as a "body" with other bodies, in a constituted body, a molecular body, through the affective' (Kennedy 2000, 103).

<sup>25</sup> Much thanks to Elizabeth Ezra for reading through this article.



## Bibliography

- Beugnet, Martine (2000) *Marginalité, sexualité, contrôle: cinéma français contemporain*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Beugnet, Martine (2004) *Claire Denis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Beugnet, Martine (2005) 'Die Sinnliche Leinwand: *L'Intrus*' in *Claire Denis*. Eds. M. Omasta and I. Reicher. Vienna: FilmmuseumSynemaPublikation.
- Beugnet, Martine (2007) *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Burgin, Victor (1996) *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1989) *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. H. Tomlinson & R. Galeta. London: Athlone Press.
- Denis, Claire (2004) Interview. *pastemagazine*, <[http://pastemagazine.com/action/article?article\\_id=1325](http://pastemagazine.com/action/article?article_id=1325)>.
- Guattari, Felix (1995) *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*. Trans. P. Bains and J. Pefanis. Sydney: Power Publications.
- Gauthier, Marie (2000) 'Un Blanc à la place du coeur'. *L'Inventaire*, March, <[http://www.inventaire-invention.com/lectures/gauthier\\_nancy.htm#3](http://www.inventaire-invention.com/lectures/gauthier_nancy.htm#3)>.
- Kennedy, Barbara (2000) *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia (1988) *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Fayard.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (2001) 'L'Areligion'. *Vacarme*, Winter, <<http://www.vacarme.eu.org/article81.html>>
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (2005) '*L'Intrus selon Claire Denis*'. *Remue.net*, <<http://remue.net/spip.php?article679>>.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (2000) *L'Intrus*. Paris: Galilée.
- Silverman, Max (1999) *Facing Postmodernity: Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (1989) *Nous et les autres: La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine*. Paris: Seuil.

## Filmography

Denis, Claire (1988), *Chocolat*. France/West Germany/Cameroon.

Denis, Claire (1990), *S'en fout la mort*. France/West Germany.

Denis, Claire (1994), *J'ai pas sommeil*. France/Switzerland.

Denis, Claire (1996), *Nénette et Boni*. France.

Denis, Claire (1999), *Beau travail*. France.

Denis, Claire (2001), *Trouble Every Day*. France/Germany/Japan.

Denis, Claire (2004) *L'Intrus*. France.

Gégauff, Paul (1965) *Le Reflux*. France.

Klotz, Nicolas (2004) *La Blessure*. Belgium/France.

Varda, Agnès (1985) *Sans toit ni loi*. France/UK.

Various directors (2002), *Ten Minutes Older : The Cello*. UK/Germany/France.