

Deconstructing Community and Christianity: 'A-religion' in Nancy's reading of *Beau travail*

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This article will argue that 'A-religion' (2004), Jean-Luc Nancy's reading of Claire Denis's *Beau travail* (1999), can be understood in the context of concerns he explores elsewhere in his philosophical work.¹ I will be focusing here on the ways in which his thinking of questions of community and Christianity (as they are elaborated in *The Inoperative Community* (1991) and *Dis-Enclosure* (2007) respectively) can be seen to influence and direct his reading of Denis's film. *Beau travail*, this article will argue, comes to represent for Nancy a point of intersection between two main issues: the demand of community on the one hand and the deconstruction of Christianity on the other, that is, broadly speaking, the political on the one hand and the theological on the other.

Nancy reads the French Foreign Legion in *Beau travail* in terms of an 'a-religion', an order which, whilst seeking to embody an ideal of secularised community, remains reliant upon a quasi-religious system of ritual, symbol and observance. Tracing the film's debt to Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Nancy highlights a tension between the secular ideals of the Legion and the Christic allegory at work in *Beau travail*, suggesting that Denis's film might be read as an inquiry into the possibility of an atheist art. He likens the self-sufficiency of the Legion to the film's own mode of self-presentation or 'literalness', a cinematic aesthetic described as 'a non-representational, non-figurative affirmation of the

¹ I am indebted to Emma Wilson and the anonymous reader for *Film-Philosophy* for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

image (...)’ (Nancy 2004, 17). Nancy argues that, as the film focuses on the harmony and beauty of the Legion’s rituals, it simultaneously enacts its own sacralisation, a valorisation of the autonomy of the image which raises questions about the links between art, atheism and the political. He goes on to conclude that *Beau travail* enacts a form of philosophical questioning, as ‘art finds itself in charge of nothing less than the escheating of the theologico-political order (...)’ (ibid. 17; translation modified).²

The aim of this article is to examine what is at stake in the claims that Nancy makes for *Beau travail*, by contextualising this reading against the background of his thinking of the political and the theological elsewhere. The article also aims to open up an alternative reading of *Beau travail*, one which moves away from themes of memory, desire and sexuality which have tended to dominate commentary on the film so far. In what follows I shall first attend to the model of community developed by Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* in order to suggest how this might be usefully mapped both onto *Beau travail* and onto Nancy’s analysis of the film. The article will then examine the ways in which this model of community can be traced back to Nancy’s interest in the deconstruction of Christianity, which, I argue, shapes and determines his reading of the film. In the final section I turn to question Nancy’s attempt to transpose the model of an ‘a-religion’ onto what he sees as the film’s aesthetic of ‘auto-sacrality’. Drawing on Nancy’s own concept of *exposition* (‘exposure’), the article argues for a reading of the aesthetic of the film in terms of *ouverture* (‘opening’), in contrast with the closed self-presentation of the Legion.

***Beau travail*: The Work of the Operative Community**

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy argues that the problem of being has been thought predominantly in isolation from the question of community. For Nancy, the demand of community is the blindspot of Western metaphysics (Nancy 1991b, 4). Nancy criticises Heidegger’s *Being and Time* for positing *Dasein* before *Mitsein*, as it appears to assert atomised existence before the ‘with’ of community. *Contra* Heidegger, Nancy argues that being cannot pre-exist in itself: the *Mit-* does not come to qualify the *sein*, rather the *Mit-*

² The phrase used by Nancy is ‘la déshérence de l’ordre théologico-politique’ (Nancy 2001a); in the 2004 translation, ‘déshérence’ is given as ‘escheating’, meaning ‘forfeiture’ or ‘reversion’.

or 'with' of being is that which constitutes being itself (ibid. 14).³ For Nancy, being must be thought first and foremost in terms of what he calls 'being-with' (*'l'être-avec'*) or 'being-in-common' (*'l'être-en-commun'*). Nancy thus reverses the order of the Heideggerian existential structure, proposing the originary 'with' of community as the background against which being demands to be thought, the 'with' continually interrupting any ontological claim to self-presence or atomised identity.

The Inoperative Community is Nancy's attempt, therefore, to rethink the relation between being and community. In it he seeks to oppose a communitarian model grounded in collective industry, cultural symbolism and social ties: such a model would remain hostage to the very metaphysics of identity, presence and substance which he is so careful to deconstruct. In place of this communitarian model, Nancy proposes a model of 'inoperative' community (*'la communauté désœuvrée'*⁴), an open space of groundless contact between singularities, which would disrupt ideals of communal industry, political fusion and common essence.⁵ The identitarian underpinnings of the communitarian subject are thus destabilised and replaced with a model of 'being-with' between singularities, within a structure of what Nancy refers to as 'exposition' (or 'exposure').

This structure of 'exposition' is understood by Nancy primarily as a shared but non-appropriable exposure to finitude. The work of Bataille is central to Nancy's argument here.⁶ For Bataille, the death of the other exposes the subject to the outside of the self, thus opening onto community:

If it sees its fellow-being die, a living being can subsist only outside itself [*hors de soi*]... Each one of us is then driven out of the confines of his person and loses himself as much as possible in the community of his fellow creatures. (Bataille, quoted in Nancy 1991b, 15)

What Nancy takes from Bataille is this inextricable link between community and death: the death of the other ruptures the closed self-sufficiency of the witness, forcing the subject 'outside itself'; the *being-with* of inoperative community takes place via a shared but

³ For a more detailed treatment of this point, see 'De l'être-en-commun' in *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Nancy 1986, 199–234). This chapter does not appear in the 1991 translation.

⁴ Nancy borrows the term '*désœuvrée*' ('unworked' or 'inoperative') from Maurice Blanchot. For Blanchot, '*désœuvrement*' is that which ruins or negates the literary *oeuvre* in a movement which always precedes it, thereby remaining the very condition of its (im)possibility (Blanchot 1955: 48).

⁵ See Hutchens on Nancy's deconstruction of communitarianism (Hutchens 2005, 103–124).

⁶ See James on the importance of Bataille in Nancy's thinking of community (James 2006, 178–185).

unworkable relation to finitude. This, as Nancy makes clear, is the opposite of totalitarian community, which seeks to put death to work in order to assert a common essence or identity. The key example here for Nancy is Nazi Germany, which strove to preserve Aryan essence by eliminating all those who did not satisfy the criteria of that essence: such a quest for 'pure immanence' installs a 'logic of sacrifice' which engulfs the entire nation, a logic of putting death to work which has as its extreme conclusion the suicide of the community itself (Nancy 1991b, 12). The demand of inoperative community is to be thought as a negation of the workable relation to death implied by any such political ideal of pure immanence and communal fusion.

The model of operative community critiqued by Nancy can be usefully mapped onto a reading of the Foreign Legion as it is presented in *Beau travail*. The ideal upon which the Legion is based is one of communal fusion within a structure of collective identity. Bolstered by the French Republican values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the Legion seeks through ritual and symbol to establish tight, harmonious social bonds which would override any racial and religious difference between its members. What binds this community is a collective identity: that of the Legionnaire. As Martine Beugnet and Jane Sillars note in their reading of *Beau travail*, the mythical self-image of the Legion

offers fusion within a collective ideal that subsumes individuality and sublimates desire within its enduring rules of tradition and discipline. This apparent integration of races and religions is then played back as part of the visual iconography of the Legion, promoting its ideology of belonging through assimilation. (Beugnet and Sillars 2001, 168)

It is this 'playing back' of the communal image within a closed circuit of self-presence which Nancy identifies as characteristic of the operative community; similarly, it is this ideology of belonging and communal fusion which Denis seeks in the film to deconstruct. Just as Nancy examines the importance of myth in the grounding of operative community,⁷ here Denis dissects the conjoined myths of the nation and the military underpinning the ideals of the Legion. Key to the unravelling of the Legion's myth of communal fusion is the film's progression from scenes focusing on the idealised unity of the *corps militaire* (scenes which were choreographed, according to Denis, to give the impression of 'a single body'

⁷ See in particular the chapter 'Myth Interrupted' in Nancy 1991b, 43–70. On the role of myth specifically in relation to Nazi Germany see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1991.

and 'a military ideal' (Monnier and Nancy 2005, 126)) towards scenes showing the fracture of that collective body, in which 'images of clasping, contact, rescue and conflict [are] foregrounded' (Beugnet and Sillars 2001, 170). In one scene, bare-chested Legionnaires repeatedly clasp one another violently and move apart again, the sound and sight of skin-to-skin contact marking out the spacing between singularities.⁸ As bodies collide and repel within a shared structure of *expeausition*,⁹ the scene gestures to the limits of any ideal of collective fusion, signalling a form of *being-with* shot through with the impossibility of hypostatized communion.

Central to the deconstruction of the Legion's myth of collective fusion is the tale of jealousy and revenge which unravels the communitarian bonds of the Legion. Galoup's hatred for Sentain builds throughout the film and reaches a climatic point as he banishes him to the desert; this violent quest to destroy another member of the community lays bare the fallacy of the infrangible bonds of brotherhood through which the ideals of the Legion are supposedly embodied. By attempting to expel the difference posed by Sentain ('I noticed one of them who stood out (...) He had no reason to be with us [*parmi nous*] in the Legion'), Galoup's act represents the will to destroy the *being-with* of community in order to preserve the essence of a unified collective. If, for Nancy, the operative (totalitarian) community is that which seeks to put death to work in order to assert a common essence or identity, then Galoup's punishment of Sentain is not only an act of revenge stemming from his jealousy of Forestier's affection for his rival, but also an attempt to exclude that which threatens to spoil the purity of the Legion's collective essence; his act lays bare the totalitarian contours of this community.

Nancy writes that the operative community seeks to achieve 'a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence *as community*' (1991b, 2). In *Beau travail* it is the work of the collective to produce its own 'essence *as community*' which finds itself under scrutiny; indeed, this is signalled by

⁸ Significantly, in *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy privileges touch as a figure for the limit between beings, a limit which interrupts the myth of fusional communion. See for example: 'Interruption occurs at the edge, or rather it constitutes the edge where beings touch each other, expose themselves to each other and separate from one another, thus communicating and propagating their community' (Nancy 1991b, 61).

⁹ The term '*expeausition*' is a homophonic neologism by Nancy which in its emphasis on '*peau*' (skin) highlights the corporeal contours of his concept of 'exposition'. On '*expeausition*', see Nancy 1991a, 31–34.

the emphasis upon work in the film's title itself. Significantly, Nancy draws out the irony of the film's title in his own reading, tracing it back to the sarcasm of the phrase 'Handsomely done' in Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (Nancy 2004, 14). In *Beau travail*, symbolic ties are shown to be bolstered through communal industry and activity: in scenes ranging from military exercise to everyday duties such as ironing their uniform, the Legionnaires replay the essence of the collective back to themselves. Yet by teasing out the irrelevance of these tasks, Denis subtly dissects the Legion's communitarian goal of 'producing in essence their own essence as work', allowing the 'folly of its labour, the meaninglessness of its industry' (Hayward 2001, 162) to signal the obsolescence of the communal ideal (as the disillusioned Forestier puts it bluntly: 'What ideal?'). Integral to Denis's dissection of the myth of the Legion's closed community is the emphasis upon its encounters with the more open Djiboutian community. Denis allows the gaze of the Djiboutians, as they observe the Legionnaires at work, to implicitly question the function of the Legion (and to problematise, by extension, the history and legacy of the presence of France in Djibouti). Similarly, in the nightclub scenes, the uniform(ed) body of the Legion is shown to be dispersed amongst the array of colours and difference presented by the Djiboutian women, in a display of contact and *being-with*. By interrogating 'the neo-colonial implications of the Legion's position' (Cooper 2001, 180), whilst also focusing on instances of intercultural contact throughout (Hayward 2001), *Beau travail* makes the tensions, differences and dislocations of the post-colonial moment central to this nascent model of *being-with*.¹⁰

Thus in *Beau travail* we gradually witness the unravelling of the operative community. In the scene in which a Legionnaire dies in a helicopter crash at sea, the vulnerability of the *corps militaire* is suddenly laid bare, and the film begins to gesture to an opening onto *inoperative* community. As Nancy puts it: 'Death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself – and reciprocally' (1991b, 14). In death, the singularity of the soldier – his name and nationality – resurfaces as Galoup refers to him as 'Pierre, the Corsican'; the singularity of death here ruptures the

¹⁰ Denis's film can thus be read as opening Nancy's model of *being-with* to the thought of the post-colonial. Indeed it is worth noting that the role of the Djiboutians receives little mention in Nancy's reading of the film. This points to one of the ways in which Nancy's reading may attempt to map the model of a closed, self-sufficient body too strictly onto the film, overlooking interactions between the Legionnaires and the Djiboutians, such as the relationship between Galoup and Rahel.

uniform, collective identity of the Legion; as blood spills through the sea water, filling up the filmic image, visually the shot appears to figure the shared but ungraspable '*expeausition*' to finitude through which inoperative community might be seen to take place.¹¹ This is compounded by the funeral scene which follows. Over images of the coffin being carried by the Legionnaires, Galoup's voiceover states: 'That day something overpowering crushed and choked my heart. I thought of the end. My end. The end of Forestier.' To recall Bataille, the subject exposed to the death of the other is pushed 'outside itself'; here Galoup's words gesture to a fragile relation to finitude which may signal an opening onto the *being-with* of community. However, when Sentain is honoured for his role in rescuing another Legionnaire from the helicopter accident, the death to which the community has been exposed is immediately put back to work, recuperated in a dialectical move back into the collective narrative of the Legion's heroism, allowing the community to re-ground itself as operative.

The unworking of community is figured more forcefully however in the final scenes of the film, as the possible suicide of Galoup and the hallucinatory death dance which follows sign the final disintegration of the operative community. As Galoup appears to contemplate suicide, the camera focuses on a tattoo on his chest, which bears the motto of the Legion: '*Sers la bonne cause et meurs*' ('Serve the good cause and die'). Whether this denotes a dying *in order to serve* the cause or dying *after having served* the cause, the divergent temporalities of the 'and' of the motto inscribe death as both the *means* and *end* of the collective, linking it to the very logic of sacrifice – and suicide – which Nancy underlines in his model of operative community. Pulling against this suicidal logic is the live throbbing pulse in Galoup's arm shown in extreme close-up; as the shot moves from tattoo to pulse, it marks a shift from the bodily inscription of the Legion's workable relation to death towards an '*expeausition*' to finitude, a shift figured upon the very surface of the skin. In Galoup's dance of death at the end, the operative community has reached a limit point: death cannot be reabsorbed and turned back into work; it becomes excessive, indeterminate and ungraspable. Denis explains that the dance scene was positioned *after* rather than before the contemplation of suicide in order to 'give the sense that Galoup

¹¹ This recalls Nancy's reading of the bloodied image in Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001) as '*pellicule expeausée*'. See Nancy, 'Icon of Fury: Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day*' in this issue of *Film-Philosophy*.

could escape himself' (Darke 2000, 17); in this moment we witness the unravelling of the identity of Galoup and, by extension, the collective identity of the Legion. As Galoup's excessive movement threatens to overflow the frame, his dance acts as a figure of unmasterable finitude undoing the operative structure of community.

A-religion and the deconstruction of Christianity

What I have been referring to here as the 'operative community' of the Legion is described in Nancy's reading of the film as an 'a-religion that defines itself in closely similar terms to the Christian one' (2004, 16). Though Nancy does not use the word 'community' in his commentary on *Beau travail*, I want to suggest here that the wider context of his writing on community, and its relation to his thought on Christianity, becomes relevant to an understanding of his reading of the film. Before pursuing what Nancy understands to be the 'a-religion' of Denis's film, I want to pause then to consider the links between community and Christianity in Nancy's work in general.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy identifies a lineage of thought, beginning with Rousseau and passing via Schlegel, Hegel, Marx and others, in which history has been viewed in nostalgic terms as a loss of community, 'a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality' (1991b, 10). According to Nancy, this nostalgia for lost community in Western thought is at root a longing for the original Christian community; the desire for communal fusion is, Nancy argues, none other than a desire for spiritual communion 'at the heart of the mystical body of Christ' (ibid. 10). An investment in the notion of 'community', then, acts in substitution for a belief in 'the divine'; nostalgia for a lost, archaic community reveals itself to be yet another manifestation of a longing for communion with divine essence. Thus the 'death of God' finds itself reinscribed and reworked in Western thought as the 'death of community'. Yet as Nancy points out, the announcement of the 'death of God' remains locked within an eschatological structure of meaning determined by Christianity in the first place: 'this expression remains pregnant with the possibility if not the necessity of a resurrection that restores both man and God to a common immanence' (ibid. 10). At the very moment at which the death of God appears to announce the end of Christianity, it holds open the possibility of its resurrection and return. Thus the figure of

the divine withdrawn from immanence (*deus absconditus*) persists and plays itself out through nostalgia for communal fusion.

This link between Christian eschatology and nostalgia for community is developed in *Dis-Enclosure* (2007), Nancy's work on the deconstruction of Christianity, where he argues that the logic of Christianity continues to dominate modern secular political and philosophical thought. Given that the histories, forms and structures of Western thought and Christianity are inextricably bound up with one another, Nancy argues that any analysis of Western secular society as a turning away from Christianity fails to recognise the fact that modern society is precisely '*le devenir du christianisme*', the future, the becoming, the logical extension of Christianity (Nancy 2005, 209). Christianity is in a state of what Nancy calls 'self-overcoming' ('*auto-dépassement*'), a process of self-superseding embedded in its own internal logic of development (2005, 206). This very same process of '*auto-dépassement*', Nancy argues, continues to shape the de-Christianisation of modern society. As Ian James notes, the shift towards secularisation since the Enlightenment and 'the increasing suspicion toward, or critique of, abstract and metaphysical categories, can be seen as part of this self-overcoming of the Western tradition' (2006, 135). Any deconstruction of these metaphysical categories is therefore indebted to the Christological structures of meaning always already informing Western thought. As Nancy suggests, to posit an 'end' to such categories is to remain locked within a logic of providence inherited from Christian eschatology. The key example here is atheism: according to Nancy, atheism must be understood as another stage in Christianity's process of self-overcoming; it is Christianity which renders possible the thought of atheism in the first place. And thus: 'The only current atheism is one that contemplates the reality of its Christian provenance' (Nancy 2005, 205).¹²

In Nancy's reading of *Beau travail*, both Melville's Billy Budd and Denis's Sentain are Christic figures thrown into an atheistic world. Referring to the battleship named the *Athée* (the Atheist) in Melville's tale, Nancy writes that 'the tragedy of Billy is that of Christ in a world without God (...)' (2004, 15). *Beau travail* presents a similarly atheistic world but

¹² *Dis-Enclosure* (2007), the translation of *La Déclousion* (2005), was not available at the time of writing; translations are therefore my own. It is worth noting that although *La Déclousion* appeared four years after 'L'areligion' (2001), its central argument had already been set out in 'La Déconstruction du christianisme' (Nancy 1998), an article written three years before 'L'areligion'. Thus the ideas sketched in the 1998 article can be seen to prefigure to some extent the 2001 reading of the film.

one which is dense in Christic allegory. As Nancy notes, the film presents Sentain as a lost saviour (no doubt there are deliberate echoes of 'Saint' in his name): he rescues a soldier, offers water to a victim (Combé), wanders lost in the desert and is (possibly) resurrected at the end.¹³ Nancy's point here though is that this reworking of Christological themes takes place within an 'a-religious' context. Denis is drawing on these themes in order to deconstruct them in a way which appears to resonate with Nancy's own project of the deconstruction of Christianity. If the world constructed by Melville is that of 'Christ in a world without God', as Nancy suggests, then the world deconstructed by Denis becomes a response to this, a response to the aftermath of atheism. Posing itself as a form of post-secular theological questioning, *Beau travail* becomes an inquiry into what happens after the thought of the death of God. As Nancy puts it in *La Déclosion*: 'We are *in* the veins of Christianity; they keep hold of us, but *how?*' (2005, 207).

As a symbol of the secular French Republic, the Legion is constructed in opposition to any religion: in *Beau travail*, as Nancy points out, it is not only Christianity that the Legion is shown to sublate but also Islam. Galoup's punishment of Combé's desertion of his post (to attend the Mosque for Ramadan) emphasises the way in which the Legion constructs itself through a disavowal of religious difference.¹⁴ Yet as Nancy focuses on the ritualistic or 'monastic' order of the Legion, he suggests: 'This order, this religion, is posited in the face of religion' (2004, 16); this non-religion is also a religion, 'an a-religion that defines itself in closely similar terms to the Christian one' (ibid. 16). (Nancy notes for example Galoup's vow to Forestier: 'Here I am, Commandant, like a watchdog. I guard your flock.') The Legion works to ground an a-religious body in an atheistic world. This pertains to what is at stake in Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity, for, as noted above, Nancy sees atheism as but one further stage in the logic of Christianity's self-overcoming. The Legion can be defined as 'a-religious' precisely because it remains indebted to the structures of religious thought it ostensibly rejects. Denis's use of Christological motifs thus forms part

¹³ Denis herself suggests that the scene in which a Djiboutian woman revives Sentain with water is 'filmed as a resurrection' (Renouard and Wajeman 2004, 31).

¹⁴ When Galoup reprimands Bakka for appearing to sympathise with Combé ('You're not an African anymore, you're a Legionnaire'), the disavowal of Combé's religious difference is linked to a disavowal of racial difference, gesturing to the relation between the legacy of colonialism and the ongoing influence of Christianity in Africa, even in its a-religious guises. Although Nancy does not emphasise this in his reading, it is important to note that such issues are crucial for Denis. A reading of the relation between Christianity and colonialism in her work would necessarily extend for example to include other films such as *Chocolat* (1988).

of her own deconstruction of the myth of secularisation upon which the Legion, and, by extension, the ideals of the Republic are founded. Thus although Nancy does not explicitly name 'community' in his reading, the figure of 'a-religion' acts here, I suggest, as another term for operative community. It is 'operative' because, as Nancy argues, the Legion is 'a body of observances closed upon itself, referring only to itself (...)' (ibid. 16). It is 'a-religious' because what subtends it is nostalgia for an archaic form of community, which can be read as a desire to regain a structure of Christian fraternity perceived to be lost. It is thus that the Legion can be said to be a religion defining itself both against and 'in closely similar terms' to Christianity.

In terms which further underline the Legion's positioning as both operative and sacred, Nancy writes that the film bears witness to

the literalness of hieratic and hierarchical ordering in the proper sense of both terms: sacred power, the sacrality of power and the power of the sacred making up a full, autonomous and exclusive order, representing for itself the immanence of its own transcendence, appropriating it in its self-image. It is none other than fascism as fascination of auto-sacrality and of auto-figuration. (Nancy 2004, 17)

Conjuring up the spectre of fascism, Nancy appears to gesture to the model of totalitarian community examined in *The Inoperative Community*. Just as there he describes the logic of fascism as 'dominated by a will to absolute immanence' (1991b, 12), here the *corps d'élite* of the Foreign Legion presents itself as a fascist body, closed upon itself, representing its own image of sacred power back to itself (as Denis notes, 'the legionnaire is always identical to his image' (Renouard and Wajeman 2004, 24)). This ordering, Nancy suggests, is both hieratic (from the Greek *hieratika*, meaning 'priestly') and hierarchical (from the Greek *hieros*, meaning 'sacred', and *arkho*, meaning 'rule'). Here sacred power confirms its own image to itself, 'representing for itself the immanence of its own transcendence', subordinating each element in a hierarchical ordering reigned over by the figurehead of Forestier. Yet equally, by extrapolating this out to the wider context of Nancy's work on community, we can see how the fascist 'auto-figuration' detected here might extend beyond the specificity of the Legion; the 'auto-sacrality' of the Legion becomes a figure for the West at large, bolstered by the mythologisation of its own sacred, powerful autonomy, exhibiting what Nancy refers to as 'the self-consciousness of a modern

world that has exhausted itself in the fabulous representation of its own power' (1991b, 46).

Between self-presentation and exposure

Having discerned what is at stake in the reading of the Legion as a form of 'a-religion', I want to turn now to probe Nancy's analysis of the film's aesthetic. For, as he moves the focus of the discussion from content to form, he goes on to associate this 'a-religion' with the status of the image itself:

The image signifies itself in its prestige, in its power, to the point of becoming a cult of itself: it even makes the film into a kind of icon of the image and of cinema, an icon in the strong sense of the term – in other words, an image which itself gives birth to the presence it represents. Everything in the film indicates something of a non-representational, non-figurative affirmation of the image: the power, the intensity, the very searing of a self-presentation. (Nancy 2004, 16–17; translation modified)

The image in *Beau travail*, then, is here being compared to the order of the Legion: it is that which communes only with itself. Turning itself into an icon of cinema, the image does not represent anything other than itself: it presents itself to itself, in a closed circuit of self-reflecting immanence. Nancy thus draws a parallel between the closed, self-referential body of the filmic image and the closed, self-referential body of the Legion. Yet it is perhaps here that we can see the terms of Nancy's argument beginning to strain in order to contain the film's aesthetic. For the parallel that Nancy draws is anchored in an implicit reference to the highly stylised scenes of the Legionnaires' exercises: it is in these scenes that the image reveals its true self-referential, iconic status. Though Nancy does not refer explicitly to these scenes, his description of the film as 'a work on beauty: body, light, appearance, harmony, majesty' (ibid. 16) echoes his earlier description of the Legion in terms of 'an accomplished, powerful and harmonious beauty' (ibid. 16), gesturing inescapably to the scenes of synchronised ritual in which the Legion is seen both to commune with itself and to set itself up as icon. Nancy's argument for a structure of self-presentation underpinning both the a-religious order of the Legion and the filmic image in *Beau travail* thus depends upon a felicitous parallel between content and form which is reliant upon these iconic scenes of harmonious, communal movement.

Yet just as Denis deconstructs the closed, self-referential body of the Legion, so she can be seen to be unravelling the 'self-presentation' of the filmic image. *Beau travail* is a film which perpetually gestures to that which is outside itself, opening up the image in a number of ways. It is in this sense that we might return to Nancy's own concept of *exposure* (one of the central themes in his discussion of community) in order to approach the aesthetic of *Beau travail*. Exposure is figured by Nancy as the 'with' of community; it is that which continually interrupts any thought of being as closed and self-sufficient. Mapping this onto the way in which Denis constructs the images of *Beau travail*, we can identify at least two main ways in which the image is opened up, exposed, and brought into contact with an outside: both through narrative ellipsis and through the use of off-screen space. As the film switches between past and present, between Djibouti and Marseille, it privileges a lack of orientation and narrative explanation, forging connections resistant to interpretation in terms of linear cause and effect.¹⁵ The film thus turns upon a set of temporal uncertainties which leads to a confusion between the objective and the subjective as it becomes unclear whether what is being presented is anchored in Galoup's viewpoint or not. Thus the image is neither self-evident nor self-sufficient; its status is indeterminate – it gestures to that which is outside itself.

Similarly, Denis makes use of off-screen space throughout in order to allow the framing of particular scenes to allude to that which is not shown, thereby opening up or *exposing* the image to contact with exteriority. Significantly, this occurs when the film is at its least stylised, for example, when the Legionnaires are gathered around the table for a birthday celebration. Both Sentain and Forestier are shown, at different moments, to look at something outside the frame, potentially in the direction of one another. However, Denis denies the shot-reverse-shot which would confirm this, thereby resisting the conventional recapture of off-screen space which would bring it back into the closed system of the film. Refusing to suture these shots as a definite exchange of looks, Denis allows off-screen space to encroach upon the scene. As each glance points to something beyond the frame, it gestures to an exposure to an outside which opens up the image, rupturing its self-sufficiency. As in Nancy's model of community, this is the 'with' of the image, that which interrupts any ontological claim to autonomy and self-presence. Thus in

¹⁵ *Beau travail* has lent itself to a reading in terms of the Deleuzian time-image. See for example del Río 2003.

place of what Nancy suggests may be 'an absolute order of self-presentation, a form which finds completion in its representation of itself' (2004, 17), I would suggest that Denis privileges incompleteness in representation, or what we might call an aesthetic of *opening* and *exposure*.¹⁶ Rather than the form of the film echoing and replicating the self-sufficiency of the sacred order it presents, what we find in *Beau travail* is that as the 'closed body of observances' of the Legion opens up, so the image is similarly exposed and pushed *hors de soi* ('outside itself').

As Nancy's reading suggests, *Beau travail* poses questions not only for theology and politics but for aesthetics too. For if Melville's tale 'can be read as a parable of an art which would be the substitute for redemption in a world without redemption' (ibid. 17), then, Nancy contends, 'Denis's film can be understood as a sustained, nervous inquiry into what could be called Melville's religion (...)' (ibid. 17). What is posed as a question for Christianity becomes also a question for aesthetics, inasmuch as these two are bound into a mutually inextricable relation within the development of Western thought. When Nancy asks of *Beau travail*, 'Can beauty save itself? Should it not, rather, save itself from itself?' (ibid. 17), is this not also the question which, as he suggests in *Dis-Enclosure*, Christianity poses to itself? The process of Christianity's '*auto-dépassement*', as Nancy conceives it, is precisely a question not of saving itself but rather of *saving itself from itself*. The structure of the self-overcoming of Christianity is mimed here then by the structure of the self-overcoming of the aesthetic. Describing *Beau travail* as 'an art (...) worried precisely by what one might mistake for self-satisfaction' (ibid. 17), Nancy hints that Denis's film in fact allows a residual vulnerability to surface within this structure of self-sufficiency. Thus he implies that the self-overcoming of the aesthetic might consist in the artwork's turning away from self-satisfaction, in a moment of vulnerability, indeed, in a movement of *ouverture*. This resonates with what he describes as 'the essence of Christianity as opening: opening of the self and the self as opening' (Nancy 2005, 210).

Nancy's reading thus situates the film as a critical moment of intersection between *désœuvrement* and *auto-dépassement*, between community's undoing and Christianity's

¹⁶ Nancy has identified this aesthetic of *ouverture* in *Beau travail* elsewhere, describing the film as an instance of 'cinema opening onto its own image as onto something real (...) aiming for somewhere beyond any "point of view," with a look devoid of subjectivity, with a lens that would aim for life from the vantage point of the secret of death as the secret of something evident' (Nancy 2001b, 52n4). Crucially, the themes of opening, finitude, and an unravelling of subjectivity explored above all intersect in this one brief observation.

self-overcoming. Can *Beau travail* bear the weight of being thus read as a parable of the self-overcoming of Christianity, community and the Western metaphysical, aesthetic and political traditions at large? These are grand claims. Yet it is precisely the forfeiture or 'escheating', as Nancy puts it, of the theologico-political order that he sees as the strength and astonishment of this film. And thus he writes: 'To the fascinating and perverse sufficiency of an 'a-religion', what affirmation can we oppose; what atheist art which would neither be closed on itself, nor submitted to injunctions of meaning?' (2004, 17). *Beau travail* is a film which sets up its own 'perverse sufficiency' in order to then deconstruct it: both in content (the *désœuvrement* of operative community) and in form (the aesthetic of exposure which opens up the image). The tensions I have underlined between self-presentation and exposure are arguably already signalled then by the 'neither/nor' of Nancy's final question, as he allows for the possibility of the film *not being closed upon itself to remain open*.

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