



Introduction: Claire Denis and Jean-Luc Nancy

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For a number of years now, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and the filmmaker Claire Denis have been describing intriguing circles around each other's work, commenting, admiring, adapting, drawing inspiration from each other's writings and films in order to pursue their own inimitable trajectories within philosophy and cinema respectively. Nancy's interest in cinema was confirmed by his publication of a book devoted to Abbas Kiarostami (Nancy 2001a), part of a wider consideration of visual culture in his thought that notably takes in sacred Christian art (Nancy 2003a) and perhaps culminates in his lengthy theorisation of the image, *Au fond des images* (Nancy 2003b). The exchange between Nancy and Denis began in 2001 when Nancy wrote a short article (Nancy 2001b; 2004) about Denis's *Beau travail* (1999), an article which, as Laura McMahon points out in this issue, can in retrospect be understood as part of Nancy's elaboration of a deconstruction of Christianity which would culminate in the publication of *La Déclosion* (Nancy 2005a). Nancy subsequently devoted another article (Nancy 2001c) to Denis's next feature, *Trouble Every Day* (2001), an article we publish here in translation for the first time. Denis repaid the favour by making a short film, *Vers Nancy*, a contribution to the portmanteau film *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello* (2002), essentially consisting of a debate between Nancy himself and a student, in which questions of foreignness are discussed. In 2004, Denis borrowed a title – *L'Intrus* – and a central image – a heart transplant – from Nancy's short, autobiographical text (Nancy 2000) that uses his own medical history as a platform from which to explore the key trope of the (foreign) body, a thematic nexus that is also approached by Denis's singularly evasive and difficult film. Nancy, in turn, responded with another lengthy article on the film (Nancy 2005b). Most recently, Denis made a guest

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appearance in a book of dialogues about dance between Mathilde Monnier and Nancy (2005), in which it was, again, question of *Beau travail*. The present collection of essays for *Film-Philosophy* explores the relationship between Nancy and Denis, necessarily devoting particular attention to *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* and picking up themes that have become common to both authors: foreignness and exile, intrusion and intertextuality, community and Christianity.

As is now well known, Claire Denis grew up in the French colonies of West Africa, where her father was an administrator in the colonial services, a childhood evoked in Denis's debut feature *Chocolat* (1988). As Martine Beugnet demonstrates in her excellent monograph on the director (Beugnet 2004), questions of exile and foreignness have been central to Denis's cinema ever since. As both Beugnet and Anja Streiter point out in their contributions to this issue, the history of French decolonisation which marked Denis's youth, and the destructive blow that process dealt to political and ethical certainties, as well as to personal identities, has also had a lasting effect on the life and work of contemporary philosophers like Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou, while questions of ethnic identity and the integrity of the nation have become commonplaces in French intellectual debate in recent decades. Nancy's own relatively early work on community (Nancy 1986) was a significant contribution to this debate, asking what could serve as the foundation to a community in the absence of former certainties such as strongly polarised ideological oppositions, or the nature and meaning of work. Nancy's radical response to this question, neatly summarised by Streiter, is that 'community makes palpable the interruption of sense'.

'Interruption', of course, as word and as concept, is close to intrusion, and it is the figure of the intruder that is central to the relationship between Nancy and Denis – that might, indeed, provide a figuration of that relationship, as though Nancy's philosophy had intruded upon Denis's cinema, and vice versa. In Nancy's *L'Intrus*, the intruder is, first and foremost, the foreign heart that has been transplanted into his chest, but, by metonymic extension, the intruder is the body itself, or as a whole. This is the central idea of one of Nancy's most significant works, *Corpus* (2006 [2000]), in which he argues that our bodies remain irrevocably, irreducibly foreign to us, and that the other, or the foreigner, appears to us first and foremost in and as a body. To pick up Streiter's vocabulary, the body is that which interrupts sense – it is the limit of sense, both the point at which phenomena are sensed (perceived), and an impassable stumbling block for sense (meaning). Hence the significance of touch to Nancy's philosophy, as the figure or phenomenon that renders, or

creates – *touches* – that limit. For instance, sex, for Nancy, as discussed in *L'“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (Nancy 2001d), is always a troubling encounter with the other, but precisely inasmuch as it is only ever a partial encounter, the sexual relation finding its meaning – as with any touch – as much in the withdrawing, the pulling away, as in the coming together. Nancy builds this sense of bodies and touch into his reading of *Trouble Every Day*, suggesting that the violence of the film is like a paroxystic expression of touch's frustration, its desire and constituent impossibility of ever adequately finding the other.

What the articles in this issue demonstrate is the extent to which film form, in Denis's cinema, is itself marked by intrusions. Denis's films are prime examples of what Beugnet, in a recent study of sensuous cinema, has termed 'haptic visuality', that is 'a mode of visual perception akin to the sense of touch, where the eye, sensitised to the image's concrete appearance, becomes responsive to qualities usually made out through skin contact' (Beugnet 2007, 66). If the image offers itself to a kind of touching, then it intrudes upon vision, or vice versa – the boundaries between subject and object of perception are challenged. In 'Open Wounds', I discuss the way in which Denis films bodies not – as in classical cinema – as the coherent outer shell of a questing consciousness or narrative agency, but rather as inscrutable objects, stubbornly resisting easy interpretation. For Nancy, *Trouble Every Day* is, at one level, nothing other than a film about *skin*. But this is not only a recent development in Denis's cinema: Streiter reminds us of the pivotal scene in *Chocolat* in which the young France (Cécile Ducasse) and the Cameroonian servant Protée (Isaach de Bankolé) develop a complicity over their shared burning of a hand on a hot pipe, a gesture that symbolises the impossibility of touch between them. For Nancy in *L'Évidence du film* and *Au fond des images*, the real itself, as caught on film, is violent in its *evidence*, that is both in its obviousness, and in its testifying force, a force that the cinematic gaze must seek to communicate with rather than to capture or freeze into reified meaning. In the article on *Trouble Every Day*, he writes of a real that 'bursts out of the screen', but if it tears forward, toward us, it also tears backward, 'toward a background that is all the deeper and more distant for being contained within the image, on the surface or the skin of the image'.

The uncertain status of the image in Claire Denis's cinema, its immeasurable limits, whether forward into the spectator's perceptual space, backward into the abstract terrain of signification, or sideways within its own narrative space – Laura McMahon discusses the crucial use of off-screen space in *Beau travail* – tends to create a distinct sense of unease in the spectator, or what Beugnet identifies as paranoia. This is also related to Denis's use of

genre. There is something almost Kubrickian about Denis's play with genre in a way that consistently thwarts expectations. *Beau travail* is a film about the military but one with little action, where even the training appears redundant. To offer a revisionist, 'queer' reading of the film around latent homoerotic desire is at once too obvious and misses the point – which rather seems to lie somewhere in the impenetrable reality of these male bodies. As Nancy points out, a single shot of *Trouble Every Day* – that of Béatrice Dalle raising her coat above her shoulders like bat-wings – is enough to evoke the entire history of the horror genre, yet the film teases us with horror clichés (such as the erotic/horrific encounter) before showing us what is truly unyielding in the mystery of the body and desire. Meanwhile, as Beugnet suggests, there is something monstrous about Trébor (Michel Subor) in *L'Intrus*, as though he were a refugee from a vampire movie that had wandered into a spy film.

Beugnet further implies that, along with this atmosphere of paranoia that hangs over Denis's filmic universe, there is also a persistent sense of guilt, though it is a guilt that is often uncertainly attributed or imperfectly felt. The emblem of this guilt is the young Russian woman (Katerina Golubeva) who dogs Trébor's steps in *L'Intrus*, apparently seeking retribution for some unspecified crime in the protagonist's past. Sometimes, the distant origin of this floating guilt seems to be colonialism, as in *Beau travail* where the legionnaires' (unnecessary) road-mending work makes them look, for all the world, like prisoners on a chain gang under the constant, impassive – never quite accusatory – gaze of the local population. Elsewhere, the burden of responsibility is filial, as in *L'Intrus* where it ultimately appears that Trébor's son (Grégoire Colin) has been killed to provide the older man with a new heart, although, as I argue in 'Open Wounds', Denis's elliptical film admits of no such causal, or indeed parental, certainties. These questions of descent – the unspecified weight of the past that hangs over Denis's characters – is further complicated by her explicit intertextual references, themselves problematised by her frequent recycling of the same cast. Thus I discuss not only the intrusion of *Le Petit Soldat* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1961) upon *Beau travail* and *Le Reflux* (Paul Gégauff, 1965) upon *L'Intrus*, but also the way that one film by Denis trespasses upon the territory of the other, Subor and Colin's characters in *L'Intrus* suspiciously inflected by their previous incarnation as legionnaires.

But the notion of filial guilt and responsibility brings us, finally, to the question of Christian themes as they circulate within the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Claire Denis. To be crass about it: Jesus Christ perhaps figures as the ultimate intruder for Nancy, while his is also the wounded (and untouchable) body *par excellence*. Several papers here discuss

Nancy's readings of both *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* as Christic allegories, Grégoire Colin appearing in both films as the sacrificial figure, although I argue that the resurrections performed by these films are multiple and ambiguous. Streiter and McMahon discuss the interpenetration of Nancy's thinking of community and Christianity. McMahon usefully defines Nancy's concept of 'a-religion' as 'an order which, whilst seeking to embody an ideal of secularised community, remains reliant upon a quasi-religious system of ritual, symbol and observance'. If the Legion in *Beau travail* constitutes such a community, Denis's film nonetheless lays bare its worklessness (*désœuvrement*), in keeping with Nancy's thesis in *The Inoperative Community*. But, if Denis deconstructs the Legion, at the same time McMahon argues that she resists even what Nancy sees as the immanent self-presentation of the image, creating 'a film which perpetually gestures to that which is outside itself' through some of the narrative and formal intrusions already mentioned. Ultimately, suggests Streiter, it is perhaps Denis's films themselves that appear as a model of Nancy's inoperative community, works that resist a finished form or unequivocal meaning in order to open an indefinite interrogation, creating a space for both artists and spectators to 'expose themselves to questions they have no answers for'. Those questions provide the subject for this issue of *Film-Philosophy*.

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