



## Open Wounds: Body and Image in Jean-Luc Nancy and Claire Denis

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Body and image are crucial to the elaboration of both Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy and Claire Denis's work in cinema. Nancy's short book about the body, *Corpus* (2006 [2000]), though it may initially have appeared as a minor work in his oeuvre, has since been shown, and notably since the intervention of Jacques Derrida, as the cornerstone of much of Nancy's late thought. As Derrida (2000) demonstrates, Nancy's interest in the body turns around the crucial trope of *touch* which comes to stand, in his philosophy, as the marker of the most fundamental limits that shape our understanding of and interaction with the world: between inside and outside, subject and object, matter and meaning. As such, the concept of touch frequently recurs in the discussion of art works, where the inscription of a material trace coincides with, or touches upon an evanescent sense. Nancy's discussions of artistic meaning have frequently centred around images – both painterly and filmic – as the phenomena whereby the real, in manifesting its presence, is granted a certain *sense*.<sup>1</sup> Claire Denis, in common with the vast majority of live-action filmmakers, necessarily deals in images and bodies – images of bodies – but her frequent refusal to provide the traditional cinematic signifiers of psychological depth often means that the spectator is brought up short before the strangeness of these bodies *as bodies*, which in turn opens up an interrogation as to the sense of her images. The mutual fascination that exists between Nancy and Denis is well established, demonstrated by Nancy's detailed, published

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<sup>1</sup> In French, as in English, *sense* (*le sens*) can be taken to refer either to the perceptual senses and their objects, or to meaning and signification. Nancy deliberately and repeatedly plays on these different senses of 'sense', implying that the real is granted meaning at the same time as it becomes an object for our senses.

engagements with Denis's films – *Beau travail* (1999), *Trouble Every Day* (2001), *L'Intrus* (2004) – as well as by Denis's short film portrait of the philosopher – *Vers Nancy* (2002) – and her cryptic appropriation of his text *L'Intrus* (Nancy 2000). But their engagement with each other's work appears in the image of Nancy's somewhat abstract conception of touch: an approaching and withdrawing, a momentary proximity to the other that serves as much to consolidate the stable identity of the one as it does to share in the identity of the other. Mirroring this intermittent relationship, this article will seek not to over-state the interpenetration of the two œuvres, but merely to sketch some points of contact between them, turning notably around the fascinating, but perhaps ultimately untouchable figure of the wound.

## I

For Nancy, we should not think of the body as taking up space: bodies are not full, or filled space, rather they are *open* space, that which opens space, makes it spacious rather than spatial. As he puts it, 'Le corps donne lieu à l'existence' (Nancy 2006 [2000], 16): the body is that which gives rise to (but literally, gives space or gives room to) existence. The body is that which spaces space: 'It is the very plasticity of expansion, of extension according to which existences *take place*'<sup>2</sup> (Nancy 2006 [2000], 57). As Jacques Derrida comments, this space, or this spacing of space, while not reducible to any mathematically measurable expanse, grounds, in Nancy's thinking, a kind of absolute realism (Derrida 2000, 60). The body is that which guarantees that existence has no essence: the body, for Nancy, is the *being of existence* – there is nothing preceding or underlying this phenomenon. It is not death, for instance, which appears as the essence of existence (being is not 'for' or 'toward' death), but the body, in its mortal spacing, that underscores its radical inessentiality (Nancy 2006 [2000], 16-17).

The body as it is discussed by Nancy inhabits neither matter nor discourse: it is not, nor does it exactly reside within what everyday language calls 'body' or 'mind' or 'soul'. Rather Nancy's conception of the body exists at the limits – and as the limit – between these concepts, a fracture or an opening in the continuum of matter, as in the continuum of sense (Nancy 2006 [2000], 18). The body appears trapped between sign and signification: if it is taken as a sign, then it must refer to an absent or invisible sense that can only be provided by a soul, mind or spirit; if, on the other hand, the body is taken as

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<sup>2</sup> 'Il est la plasticité même de l'expansion, de l'extension selon laquelle *ont lieu* les existences'

signification in and of itself, then it becomes the indecipherable sense of its own sign, which is to say, again, that it becomes soul. The meaningful body, it seems, can only exist as such for a mind, which causes it to become disembodied (Nancy 2006 [2000], 61-2). For Nancy, there is no sense in talking of body and thought as though they could be separate from one another, subsisting each for itself: they *are* only insofar as each touches upon the other and this touching is in itself the limit that marks the spacing of existence (Nancy 2006 [2000], 34). This attempt to think the limit and point of contact between, on the one hand, sense and signification and, on the other, the materiality of the body, bears the influence, as Ian James has demonstrated, of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of the *flesh*. The notion of flesh arises from Merleau-Ponty's conviction that the world cannot be conceived as something existing outside the body, but only as something realised in and through the body. Flesh is the medium 'through which being unveils or reveals itself as embodied existence' (James 2006, 127) and allows us to think an originary interpenetration of the sensible and the intelligible.<sup>3</sup> The fact that animate bodies at once sense and are sensed confers upon them the thickness of flesh, and it is this series of contacts or touches between bodies that constitutes being as such (or the spacing of being, as Nancy would have it). This is, then, a kind of ecology of being, stressing the interdependence of beings among themselves, the sharing of the world between bodies (James 2006, 128-9).

Claire Denis's films have, for some time now, been tightly focused around bodies, but seem precisely to pivot around an undecideable point on which the body balances between its thick, inscrutable materiality and its diaphanous, symbolic sense. In *Beau travail* (1999), Denis films bodies in such a way that they disappear into the landscape. In the opening shots of the film, Denis cuts from an image of shrubs growing in the desert to elongated shadows cast across the grey sand. The camera pans slowly right across these shadows, which move slowly, as though in the wind, eventually tilting up to reveal a legionnaire with his arms raised to the sky. In this way, the legionnaires – performing a kind of tai-chi on the desert sand – seem to emerge organically from the landscape in much the same way as the shrubs, and a subsequent cut, to show the play of light over bright blue sea water, establishes the film's non-hierarchical visual register, in which human beings seem to have no greater claim to the image than other elements of the decor. Indeed, it is the non-anthropocentric focus of Denis's *mise-en-scène* that casts her

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<sup>3</sup> Erin Manning (2007, 12) goes as far as to suggest that 'Touch creates time and space, reminding us, through every gesture, that time and space articulate this very creation rather than pre-existing it'.

legionnaires less as characters than as *bodies in a landscape*, bodies in, or as, space. Our first sightings of Galoup (Denis Lavant) in enforced retirement in Marseille show him sunk into the frame surrounded by the green lines of window and door frames, balcony railings and tree branches, and when he climbs the tree, his khaki-clad limbs disappear behind the more prominent and imposing limbs of the plane. Denis's distant, dispassionate camera constantly, if unobtrusively, questions the presence of the legionnaires in Djibouti, observing their activities with the same uncomprehending, but wryly amused gaze of the locals. The legionnaires seek at once to impose themselves on the landscape and to mark themselves off from it: shaping it, appropriating it, reconstructing its roads, but at the same time fencing themselves in and preserving their peculiar, inward-looking dynamics. Divorced of context, and without extension in meaningful action, the Legion's rigorous training exercises – filmed at length by Denis, but presented in detached fragments, without narrative logic or explanation – appear as an illustration of Nancy's concept of the spacing of space: an attempt to make sense of physical space through bodily action, an active – even aggressive – inhabiting of space through a disciplined occupation of the body.

## II

But if the body is the site of our sharing of the world, of our fleshy communion with other bodies, it is also a site of otherness and alienation. The body, as Nancy describes it, is always 'ob-jected', projected outside the self (or, alternatively, the self is subtracted, withdrawn from the body, which amounts to the same thing). In this sense, my body will always remain a stranger to me, will always be *other*, even as other people appear to me first and foremost as bodies. '*The other is a body because only the body is other*<sup>4</sup>', writes Nancy (Nancy 2006 [2000], 29). If alterity consists in *being-such*, then the endless parade of such-and-such of each successive body is the very measure of alterity. Given this irredeemable foreignness of the body, and given its status as that which is always and necessarily ob-jected, it is hardly surprising, suggests Nancy, that the body (our own or other people's) can give rise to such hatred (Nancy 2006 [2000], 11). Nancy's thinking on the foreignness of the body (the foreign body and, following his own conceptual leap, the body of the foreigner)

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<sup>4</sup> *'Un autre est un corps parce que seul un corps est un autre'*

was to a large degree inspired by his own experiences of suffering from cancer and undergoing a heart transplant, described in *L'Intrus* (2000). If his heart is giving out, or giving up, muses Nancy, then to what extent can he still talk or think of it as *his* heart? It has become a foreigner in his body. Pursuing the language of nations and borders, of exiles and foreigners, Nancy talks of his heart defecting, of being rejected or dejected by it: 'A soft slippage separated me from myself'<sup>5</sup> (Nancy 2000, 16). And when this errant heart is replaced, it can naturally only be by another foreigner, whose intrusion is followed by that of a series of viruses and infections, so many foreign bodies challenging the integrity of the body as self. Ultimately Nancy concludes that the intruder within is none other than death, or rather what he calls life/death (*la vie/la mort*), the death in life that is a necessary corollary of *being* (in) a body, that is the ultimate mark or meaning of the body's existence *as such*. He experiences 'a suspension of the continuum of being, a scansion in which "I" have/has little to do. Revolt and acceptance are both equally foreign to the situation'<sup>6</sup> (Nancy 2000, 25).

Denis's film entitled *L'Intrus* (2004), which describes itself as 'inspired by' Nancy's book of the same name, sets out, in its opening scenes a similar problematic of the body in its relation to the identity or integrity of the self, but also, through a kind of metaphorical contagion, in relation to questions of national identity, borders and foreignness. The film opens with a woman, barely visible in darkness, lighting a cigarette and speaking, in an East European accent (this is presumably, although it is not certain, the figure played by Katerina Golubeva, who will become one of the film's central, if never very clearly defined characters). 'Your worst enemies are within,' she says, 'hiding in the shadows, hiding in your heart'<sup>7</sup>. The opening credits, as they appear over this background of darkness, seem to pulse faintly, like a heart. The opening scene proper, meanwhile, takes place at a small customs point on the French-Swiss border (a slow pan from the French flag on one side of the border to the Swiss flag on the other establishes the significance of this location with a didactic certainty which will not be repeated for any other location in the film). A young customs officer (Florence Loiret-Caille) has a van searched by one of her sniffer dogs who appears to find evidence of drugs. The most striking aspect of this scene is the contrast between the excitable affection with which the customs officer treats her dog ('C'est *bien* mon chien! Il a trouvé, c'est *bien*!') and the cold hostility with which the van driver is

<sup>5</sup> 'Un doux glissement me séparait de moi-même'

<sup>6</sup> 'une suspension du continuum d'être, une scansion où "je" n'ai/a pas grand-chose à faire. La révolte et l'acceptation sont également étrangères à la situation'

<sup>7</sup> 'Tes pires ennemis sont à l'intérieur, cachés dans l'ombre, cachés dans ton coeur'

addressed and, off-screen, led away for questioning; it establishes a pattern that will be repeated throughout the film, Trébor (Michel Subor) and other characters' relationships to their dogs existing onscreen with a sensual clarity that is rarely present in the narrative relations between friends, neighbours or blood relatives.

The young customs officer returns home to her husband (Grégoire Colin<sup>8</sup>) who is looking after the children, and who builds this logic of borders and clandestine incursions into their sexual fantasy life. He playfully asks if she has anything to declare and later, undressing her from behind, tells her in a hypnotic voice that she is in a dark pine forest, 'en chasse' ('hunting'). The image of their love-making cuts suddenly into a shot of unidentified figures running through the dark forest, and it is only at this stage that the letters of the film's title - L'INTRUS - appear on screen, illuminated by the orange light from a glowing filter tip. For the forest of *L'Intrus*, in which Trébor lives, straddles the border between France and Switzerland and, as such, is a space of passage for smugglers, illegal immigrants, and brigands of various types. The film later repeats its association between sexuality and the intrusion of threatening, foreign figures when Trébor is visited by his lover (played by Bambou) in his cabin in the forest. Finding Trébor awake and watchful in the middle of the night, his lover invites him to come back to bed and he says he will be there in a moment. When the next shot shows Trébor approaching a figure from behind in darkness, it is initially possible to believe that he has made good on his promise and renewed contact with his lover; until the flash of a blade confirms that Trébor has in fact stepped outside to kill an intruder.

### III

This sense of sexuality as necessitating an intrusion of the other finds its most paroxysmic expression in Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001). In an article on this film, Nancy adds a new, and alarming angle to his thinking on bodies and touch, arguing that the imperative nature of touch means that sex threatens always to run out of control. In exciting itself, Nancy had already suggested elsewhere (2001a, 39), sex exceeds itself,<sup>9</sup> and in this sense

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<sup>8</sup> Colin has acted in several of Denis's films. He plays a lead role in *Nénette et Boni* (1996) and *Beau travail*, has a smaller role in *L'Intrus* and a bit part in *Vendredi soir* (2002). He also features in *US Go Home* (1994) and Denis's forthcoming *35 rhums*. The significance of his ubiquitous presence across these films will be discussed below.

<sup>9</sup> This works better in French: 'Le sexe s'excède par essence, et c'est pourquoi, par essence encore, il s'excite.'

the sexual relation is a carrying of the self outside itself, a breaking or bursting out of the self, just as desire exceeds itself (and thereby renews itself) in discharging itself. A body never penetrates or opens up another, wrote Nancy in *Corpus, except in murder* (Nancy 2006 [2000], 27). But in his text on Denis's *Trouble Every Day*, this comes across as the truth of desire. Nancy's reading of the film turns obsessively around a single image, glimpsed only fleetingly in the film: that of a bite mark on the shoulder of the young bride, June Brown (Tricia Vessey), who has come to Paris on her honeymoon with her new husband Shane (Vincent Gallo). The film opens with a kiss and, Nancy suggests, opens up a question about the kiss, opens the kiss as a question about desire. The bite mark on June's shoulder, as the delayed response to this question, relates kissing, and desiring, to devouring, thereby taking up its place within a long symbolic tradition that includes myth, legend and fairytale, while also passing through the Christian communion, but is most closely related to a cinematic legacy of vampires and werewolves, incubi and succubi (Nancy 2001b, 58). The kiss is here, as it has often been in the cinema, a metonymic representation of sex, but as such, says Nancy, 'it opens onto the bite, and the taste of blood' (Nancy 2001b, 58).

This view of the kiss existing on a continuum with the bite, of sex shading into killing, is confirmed in the scene of Coré's killing of a young man who has broken into her house – a scene which begins, in the tradition of much cinematic horror, with the promise of a sexual encounter. Having broken into the house, the boy finds Coré (Béatrice Dalle) boarded up in her bedroom. They initially touch each other's hands through the bars, and press their faces up close and, when the boy begins to pull the planks away, Coré raises her night dress over her thighs to reveal the promise of the dark place between her legs. The next shot shows an extreme close-up of a hairy recess on a patch of skin, which might initially be mistaken for Coré's pubis, but in fact proves to be the boy's armpit, as the camera, travelling slowly in tight close-up over the skin of his torso, explores the hollows of clavicle and breast bone before passing over the ridge of the belly to the deep black pool of his navel. A cut to a close-up of the boy's face, eyes closed in pleasure, confirms our understanding of this scene as a sexual encounter, as Coré moves first her hands, and then her lips over his torso, neck and face before sitting astride him and guiding him into her. The intensity of this scene is built partly through the gathering music – which begins with soft percussion before adding first cello, then higher pitched strings, and finally trumpets – and partly through cutaways to the young burglar's shy accomplice who remains downstairs listening to developments in the bedroom. After a first cutaway, Coré's movements grow more urgent as she holds the boy down and he first moans and then

winces as she begins to bite. She licks at his face and mouth and then, holding his neck, moves in for the kill, her head largely – mercifully – obscuring the camera's view but doing nothing to muffle his strangled scream. The blond accomplice comes halfway up the stairs to see what is happening, but is driven away by the terrible sound of the screams, and the film cuts back to an extreme close-up of Coré's mouth nibbling and chewing away at the boy's face, patches of their flesh visible only where the light glistens off the blood – strings of bloody mucus joining them together as Coré pulls away to slap excitedly at the boy's face, licking some more at his ruined upper lip.

If *Trouble Every Day* suggests that the kiss wants to bite, or devour, it suggests too that the touch wants to split, break or tear the skin. As Nancy remarks, this is a film about skin, a film that films nothing else, 'in extreme close-ups, in sections and expanses, with its textures, blemishes and bristles, with its hollows and bumps', that seems almost to confuse the skin with a screen, and the screen with skin (Nancy 2001b, 60, 62). But the skin is here to be broken and explored, under as well as on its surface. More than once, Nancy uses the verb 'fouiller' to describe the relation of the desiring touch to the skin or body of the other: it is difficult to convey in English the nauseating precision of this verb which means to search in the sense of *excavate*: to dig in and root around. 'Toucher veut crever et en crève,' writes Nancy: touch desires to destroy, and is destroyed by this desire. This is the truth of touch, Nancy suggests, from the tenderest kiss to the most terrible carnage (Nancy 2001b, 60). *Trouble Every Day* raises the question of the meaning, the sense of such violence in an era in which it is stripped of the sense of sacrifice or martyrdom, in which 'spilled blood represents only murder or madness, yet still silently spilling its bloody secret' (Nancy 2001b, 62). In this sense, as Martine Beugnet has suggested, there is a kind of grim, quiet irony to the scene in which Shane and June visit Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, whose 'superficial symbolic significance [offers] no power of redemption in the face of the malediction that threatens to destroy the newly married couple' (Beugnet 2004, 181). Instead, and in the absence of any transcendent meaning to the terrible trespass that is visited upon bodies in *Trouble Every Day*, death is given back 'all its raw powers of horror [... becoming] again the ultimate abject, the unavoidable pull of the void' (Beugnet 2004, 183). As Nancy puts it, if there is nonetheless a kind of exaltation in the film, it is 'an exaltation that is swallowed by its own darkness. There is no resolution, neither ecstasy nor appeasement: only distraction. A clenching in fits and starts' (Nancy 2001b, 62). In this godless universe, 'The truth of a body appears in its dismembering, in its tearing apart, when the blood bursts out of the skin: the skin, instead of an envelope, becomes a surface

to break. The mutilated body reveals its interiority, its depth, the secret of its life' (Nancy 2001b, 63-4).

If Coré's kill shows sex as killing, Shane's murder of the hotel chambermaid, Christelle (Florence Loiret-Caille), presents killing as sex. There has been a steady rise in the sexual tension between these two characters across the film, Christelle appearing as the object of Shane's acquisitive gaze, and her own interest in him and his young bride signalled by her snooping around their room. Still, when Shane confronts Christelle alone in the dimly-lit basement locker room, there is a deep sense of unease to the scene that stems partly from our narratively-generated expectations of horror, and partly from the unlegitimated nature of his sexual demand. For when Shane approaches Christelle in her underwear, she moves neither to encourage, nor to repel him. When he reaches out to touch her face, she leans into it, but when he takes her by the waist she backs away. When he pulls her to him, she embraces him, and when he pushes her up against the locker, holding her by her wrists, she shakes her head, fast, more in defiance than denial. This act seems only borderline consensual on Christelle's part, and the lack of any words exchanged between the pair throws the spectator back onto interpreting their ambiguous, inconsistent body language. Even if this is consensual sex, it is violent, almost a fantasy rehearsal of rape as Shane pushes Christelle to the ground, hurriedly pulls off her panties and spreads her legs, knees and elbows banging into the locker doors. It ceases to be consensual when she lets out a sharp complaint, starts to gasp for breath, choke and scream as she beats with her fists on the thrusting body that now smothers nearly all of her. The camera focuses on Christelle's contorted face as Shane fixes his mouth between her legs, finally raising his bloodied face to the camera. Afterwards, Shane drags her blood-smearred body away across the floor like a dead animal, before wiping his face and hands on a pile of white laundry.

#### IV

Whatever its profane contents, however, Nancy has argued elsewhere that the image is always sacred, provided we differentiate the sense of 'sacred' from the narrowly religious or faithful in order to qualify that which is separated, put aside or withdrawn: that which may not be touched. In *Au fond des images*, Nancy refers to this property of the image as 'the distinct' (Nancy 2003b, 11-12). As Nancy puts it simply, 'The image is a thing which is

not the thing: essentially it is distinguished from it' (Nancy 2003b, 13), and by distinguishing itself in this way, the image is marked by a force, an energy, an intensity, a *violence*. The image does not represent this force, says Nancy, it *is* this force, or activates it (Nancy 2003b, 18). Nancy argues that the image emulates the thing in the sense that it enters into a relationship of rivalry or competition with it, competition for presence. The thing is only present, or presented, it is only posed as a subject, in and as the image. For Nancy it is in this way that the image is monstrative and that there is something monstrous about it (Nancy 2003b, 46-7). The image is a tearing of being away from or outside itself and, as a result of this tearing, Nancy argues that the image bears its mark or scar within itself as the monstrously open foundation behind or beneath it ('son fond monstreuseusement ouvert au fond d'elle') (Nancy 2003b, 51). For Nancy, there is no image without the tearing apart of a closed intimacy or an undisclosed immanence and, as such, a certain cruelty always prowls at the edge of the image (Nancy 2003b, 52-3). The violence of the image does not, however, constitute a revelation, or at least it is only the violence without violence of the revelation that there is nothing to reveal (Nancy 2003b, 56).

In his book on Abbas Kiarostami, but in a sense that we can perhaps generalise to other filmmakers, and certainly to Claire Denis, Nancy argues that the reality of the image is in its access to the real itself. In the image, 'it is a matter of opening the seeing to something real, toward which the look carries itself and which, in turn, the look allows to be carried back to itself'<sup>10</sup> (Nancy 2001c: 18). In the image, the gaze is carried toward the intensity of an evidence – or obviousness – and of its justice – or justness.<sup>11</sup> This is not necessarily the evidence of that which is simply, or empirically, given, but rather the evidence of that which shows itself provided one looks.<sup>12</sup> As Ian James comments, Nancy is trying to find a language to describe the world in its 'simple, straightforward, but always already intelligible, *thereness*' (James 2006, 219) and the world of art has a privileged relation to this world-as-evidence. As a result, 'the meaning of the work of art is both inseparable from its sensible form or presentation and necessarily in excess of any fixed signification. Its meaning is the touch of sense, the transimmanence of sense and world' (James 2006, 220). A comment in *Corpus* may help to explain this further. In discussing the body as the spacing of space, the very plasticity of expansion or extension, Nancy suggests that, if the body can be thought of as an image, it is not an image *of* something, not a

<sup>10</sup> '[il s'agit de] l'ouverture d'un voir à un réel au devant duquel il se porte et qu'il laisse de cette façon se porter aussi jusqu'à lui' (Nancy 2001c: 19)

<sup>11</sup> 'porter un regard à l'intensité d'une évidence et de sa justesse' (Nancy 2001c: 19)

<sup>12</sup> 'l'évidence de ce qui vient à se montrer pour peu que l'on regarde' (Nancy 2001c: 19)

presentation of something, but a *coming to presence*. Nancy explains this by comparing the body's coming to presence to that of the image coming to the screen in cinema or television: the image, says Nancy, is not experienced as coming *from* some depth or recess of the screen but is the spacing of the screen itself, existing as the expanse or extent of the screen, and not as an idea presented to me or my vision as subject, but rather experienced directly as evidence within my very eyes and body (Nancy 2006 [2000], 56-7). As Ian James puts it, art here becomes 'the pure presentation or manifestation of nothing other than pure presentation or manifestation itself' (James 2006, 212). In *L'Évidence du film*, Nancy talks of Kiarostami's cinema being pressed from within toward an essence that largely detaches it from representation, turning it instead toward presence (and thereby reveals, as it were, that which is behind representation). Nancy adds that this presence is not the affair of 'vision', but of an encounter, an anxiety or concern<sup>13</sup> (Nancy 2001c, 31). For the evidence that Nancy describes retains a certain violence: it is not that which falls beneath our senses (which falls beneath sense), so much as that which strikes the senses (and strikes at sense). If it is a truth, it is not so by conforming to a pre-existing, given criterion, so much as by seizing upon sense in a *saisissement*: a sudden, chilling, shock. Nor is it an unveiling, since Nancy argues that evidence always keeps a crucial secret or reserve: that of its very brilliance, and provenance (Nancy 2001c, 43). If this is so, suggests Nancy, it is because the image of the evidence, the evidence of the image is filmed from a position beyond all point of view, with a gaze stripped of subjectivity – life is filmed, rather, from the perspective of death as the secret (of an) evidence (Nancy 2001c, 53 n. 4). Death, or death-in-life, becomes, for Nancy, 'the blind spot that opens up the looking' (Nancy 2001c, 18), it is the gaze through which we must look, but which cannot itself be seen.<sup>14</sup>

The cinematic gaze, then, says Nancy in *L'Évidence du film*, is an entry into space: it is *penetration* before it is consideration or contemplation (Nancy 2001c, 15). And yet, just as we saw that, for Nancy, there is ultimately no penetration of the body, there is not exactly a penetration of the world by the image or vice versa. The cinema, or the cinema screen, is an opening *in* the world *onto* the world.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Plato's Cave (to which it has often been erroneously compared), which projects a world outside itself, the cinema does not reflect an outside (itself), but, according to Nancy, *opens the inside upon itself* (Nancy 2001c, 45-7). In a paradoxical sense, then, matter, bodies, the world for Nancy are always

<sup>13</sup> 'Et la présence n'est pas l'affaire d'une vision: elle se donne à une rencontre et à une inquiétude ou à un souci.'

<sup>14</sup> 'regard par lequel il faut regarder mais qui n'est pas lui-même à voir' (Nancy 2001c, 19)

<sup>15</sup> 'une ouverture pratiquée dans le monde sur le monde même'

already open because they are that which opens space (to itself), and yet there can be no entering in to this open as though from outside it. If all things co-exist within the open, then their relation can only be one of mutual exteriority *inside*. As James puts it, 'for Nancy, matter or materiality is always an outside or an impenetrable element, since we know that objects are touched, seen, sensed and given sense only from the outside and from this relation of exteriority, of objects touching each other in a mutual distance or separation' (James 2006, 143).

## V

In *Corpus*, Nancy suggests that our age may be characterised, or summarised, under the sign of *concentration*: the concentration of the mind and a concentration of bodies; the masses, assemblies, accumulation and extermination, statistics and demographic leaps. For the first time in history, the modern era has brought us into the presence – the obsessive, oppressive presence – of the *population of the world*. But what this concentration of bodies gives us to see, or to touch, argues Nancy, is a *wound*: not the multiplicity of bodies but the uniqueness and uniformity of a wound – the bodies of poverty and famine, beaten and mutilated bodies, infected and prostituted, or else swollen, overfed bodies, excessively bulky, outrageously horny (Nancy 2006 [2000], 69). The sign and signification of all these bodies, says Nancy, is the wound: the wound signifies itself, signifies only the suffering of the body. This situation of the body, continues Nancy, is neither an unhappiness (*malheur*), nor a sickness (*maladie*), it is an *evil (mal)*: the body's extreme and ever more terrorised *concentration* within itself, faced with the endlessly proliferating *concentration* of bodies outside, or before itself, this relentlessly exterior contact with other bodies that drives the body ever further within itself is, for Nancy, a wound opening (in)to itself, a sign of the self so absorbed in itself that it is no longer sign or self.<sup>16</sup> Nancy borrows an image from Marcel Hénaff, a commentator on Sade, to convey the sense of this wound: it is 'a lidless eye exhausted of seeing and being seen'. This is the consequence of the generalised pornography of exposed, represented bodies: the body covered with stigmata, sores, fractures and scars – a wound that won't close (Nancy 2006 [2000], 70-1).

In *L'Intrus*, Louis Trébor's body is exposed, not just to the elements, not just to his age and lifestyle, but also to the constant intrusion of the other's gaze. We first see him

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<sup>16</sup> 'une plaie ouverte sur soi, signe de soi résorbé en soi jusqu'à n'être plus ni signe, ni soi' (Nancy 2006 [2000], 71)

naked in the woods, his face turned to the sun, his body sunk into the undergrowth or communing sensually with his dogs. But, as he swims in the cold lake and emerges clutching his arm and gasping for breath, the camera catches movement in the neighbouring dark forest, before a reverse shot shows a perspective of the lake from the point of view of the watcher in the trees. Later, as Trébor cycles the hills around his home, a car passes him on the road and the shadowy inhabitants seem to gaze out at him. If Trébor's weak heart becomes the symptom of this constant exposure, then his transplant – paid for with the sullied, suspicious money of the west, withdrawn from a bank in Geneva – will do nothing to heal his life. On the contrary, his fresh, raw wound – the livid scar on his chest – is more exposed than ever, and not just to prying eyes: Trébor winces under the hands of the blind masseuse in Pusan. On his travels, Trébor is increasingly the object of a curious, bemused gaze: from drunks in a street-bar in Pusan ('Look, he's all alone, he doesn't understand us... He looks lonely') to the youths cruising the streets of Papeete in their 4 x 4 and who look with suspicion upon Trébor's mourning suit. In Tahiti, the paternalism of the former colonial power (Trébor believes he fathered a child with a local woman years ago) is turned on its head as the islanders exploit Trébor's western guilt by holding auditions to find a suitably convincing 'son' to accept the father's gifts. Finally, Trébor's exposure to the gaze is most strikingly figured by the young Russian woman (played by Katia Golubeva) who seems to follow him everywhere. It is her that Trébor meets in a Geneva hotel room to arrange the black-market operation, but she also pursues him through the wintry forest, follows him, drunk, in the streets of Pusan, and turns up in Tahiti just before the body of Trébor's western son is identified in the morgue. In this respect, the Russian woman becomes more of a symbolic figure than a character of any psychological depth: as M. Emmet Sweeney puts it, she is 'the exteriorisation of his foreign, mercenary heart [...] a non-living rebuke to his relentless interiority' (Sweeney 2005). It is she who delivers the judgement that Trébor's heart is not exactly weak, 'just empty'.

## VI

In *Au fond des images*, Nancy goes as far as to suggest that 'representation' names the event or adventure of the west (Nancy 2003b, 72). This adventure came to an end, in a sense, at Auschwitz, which Nancy interprets as an attempt at a representation without remainder, a revolting contraction of the western history of representation upon itself, a

kind of revenge of the west against itself, against the openness, or opening of representation (Nancy 2003b, 86-7). And if there is to be an ethical representation of, or after Auschwitz, then the opening up of this representation must be presented not as an object or end in itself, but as the opening of the open upon itself, or the inscribing of representation upon itself, 'like the tracing of its veins, like truth upon truth'<sup>17</sup> (Nancy 2003b, 98). When it comes to representing bodies, argues Nancy, we must avoid the temptation to try to penetrate (the sense of) the body with the image. This is what accounts for a vulgar eroticism obsessed with slits and holes but that fails nonetheless to penetrate the body: its touch slides along the lines and recesses of the body as so many surfaces that inscribe or exscribe (that encrypt) the body. (As Ian James puts it, even 'if we open them up, dissect, X-ray, scan, or hugely magnify [bodies] we are simply creating another exterior surface or relation of contact-separation of sense' (James 2006, 143).) Nancy stresses that to see a body is not to unveil its mystery but only to see that which is given to see: there is nothing to imagine, interpret or decode about a body – 'There is nothing about a body to *figure out* – except this, that the figure of a body is that body itself, unfigured and unfurled'<sup>18</sup> (Nancy 2006 [2000], 42-3).

If an image is made with care, argues Nancy in *L'Évidence du film*, if care is taken over the gaze, then the real will also be cared for<sup>19</sup>: for it will take care to film, to follow or to find<sup>20</sup> precisely that which, in the real, resists absorption into, or by *visions* (by worldviews, representations, imaginations) (Nancy 2001c, 19). For Nancy, to look is to *regard*, in the sense both of gazing and having regard for.<sup>21</sup> To look is therefore also to respect, to be attentive toward something. A just regard would imply a respect for the real thereby regarded, an attention and an opening onto the force proper to that real, and to its absolute exteriority. The look will not capture that force, but rather communicate with it: the look will allow the force to be communicated to it. In this sense, concludes Nancy, looking is ultimately nothing other than *thinking the real*, rising to the challenge of a sense that cannot be completely measured or contained. To 'realise' an image (or a film)

<sup>17</sup> 'comme sa nervure même, comme la vérité sur la vérité'

<sup>18</sup> 'Il n'y a rien, d'un corps, à déchiffrer – sinon ceci, que le chiffre d'un corps est ce corps même, non chiffré, étendu' (I have used some poetic license with the translation here: 'le chiffre', in the French, means 'figure' in the sense of number – the body's formula or code; it does not have the happy coincidence with the sense of body shape in English.)

<sup>19</sup> 'Si ce regard prend soin de ce qu'il regarde, il aura pris soin du réel'

<sup>20</sup> In his article on *Trouble Every Day*, Nancy suggests that Denis's method of filming might be thought of as '*filer, filtrer ou figer*': following, filtering, freezing (Nancy 2001b, 62).

<sup>21</sup> 'Le regard est un égard', writes Nancy in *L'Évidence du film*. Verena Andermatt Conley, in the English translation that accompanies the text, renders 'égard', somewhat confusingly, as 'regard': 'Looking is regarding...' (Nancy 2001c: 38-9).

is to set free the movement of a presence presenting itself – it is the realising of a real, of the real that makes possible a respectful gaze (Nancy 2001c, 39). It is in this way that the filmmaker – the image-maker – *creates*. Jacques Derrida has remarked on Nancy's insistence upon the word, and the concept, of creation, of the creation of the world even in the absence of a creator. If such a concept is 'impossible', says Derrida, it is precisely because it is 'the impossible' that takes place. This impossibility is the condition of possibility for Nancy's thinking of the event: for so long as it is only the possible that happens – only the predictable unfolding of that which was already potential – then nothing, at least nothing worthy of the event, will have happened (Derrida 2000, 71).

## VII

For Nancy, the crucial status of the body in Western cultural representation – the representation of the body as wounded, and as wounding – along with the ambiguous meaning of touch and the sacred nature of the image come together in the potent symbolism of the Christian Resurrection. Nancy suggests that the centrality of touch to our understanding of western art, and to the elaboration of western philosophies of body and mind, cannot be separated from the invention of Christianity as a kind of religion of touch, based around the consumption of the body of Christ in Holy Communion. In the text of the same name, Nancy analyses the Biblical and painterly scene of Christ's *noli me tangere* as the exception that proves the rule of Christianity's foregrounding of touch. That which cannot be touched in Christianity, and which thereby in a sense provides the impossible ground for this religion of touch, is the resurrected body of Christ (it is the resuscitated Christ who proffers the 'Noli me tangere' to Mary Magdalene who attempts to touch him, in the scene from the Gospels that is taken up in western painting). For Nancy, it is precisely the resistance or reluctance of this resurrected body to be touched that gives it its full meaning: in being denied the touch of Christ's manifest body, we are brought into contact with his *eternal* body (Nancy 2003a, 28). If this is so, it is because, as Ian James comments, Nancy's interpretation of the religion of touch takes up and pursues his notion of touch as interstice, as hesitation between touching and withdrawing. Thus '*Hoc est enim corpus meum*' is the site of a fundamental ambivalence in Christian culture, whereby the desire to see, touch, eat, and thus to participate in or in a certain sense *be* the body of Christ, is predicated on the anguish inspired by the Holy Body's invisibility, intangibility,

and absence' (James 2006, 134). In a rather audacious move, then, Nancy uses the imagery and rhetoric of Christian Resurrection in order to illustrate and support his own philosophy of embodiment and, in so doing, he appears to ascribe to the Resurrection a meaning diametrically opposed to that which it has in Christian dogma. Nancy states quite bluntly that the Resurrection 'is not a return to life' (Nancy 2003a, 32), that instead it reveals the truth of each life as mortal, and as singular (the truth of each body *as such*) (Nancy 2003a, 35). In this way, the Resurrection becomes a parable not about the promise of eternal life, but about the inevitability of death, about the necessary inscription of discontinuity within the continuum of life and being. Ian James, following Derrida, has expressed the suspicion that this dramatic reversal of the meaning of the Christian narrative of resurrection may in fact imply a profound sense of belonging of Nancy's thought to Christian tradition, whilst Nancy's fragmented, discontinuous concept of touch would belie a reliance on an older, metaphysical certainty in which sense is present to itself: as James writes, 'it may imply a touch which, in interrupting itself as itself, ultimately maintains the horizon of unity and continuity which is being called into question' (James 2006, 120).

There are at least three resurrections in *Beau travail*. As Nancy has pointed out in his article on the film (2001d), *Beau travail*, following Melville's *Billy Budd* on which it is loosely based, can be read as the account of a Christ-like figure – Sentain (Grégoire Colin), the mysterious orphan who joins the Legion and is well-liked by all his fellows. He proves his credentials as a saviour on the occasion of a helicopter crash, rescuing one of his comrades, and the tableau that Denis composes of the two men, lying together in the bottom of a fishing boat having been hauled from the burning wreckage, has something apostolic about it, as does another scene of Sentain's companions removing thorns from the sole of his foot. This saviour is persecuted by Galoup who devises an elaborate ruse enabling him to strand Sentain alone in the desert with a sabotaged compass. Lost and exhausted, encrusted with salt, Sentain lays down by the sea to die. When, in a subsequent scene, his fellow legionnaires see a stall selling the salt-coated skulls of dead animals and find Sentain's useless, fossilised compass among them, his death seems to be confirmed. Yet Sentain survives: discovered by Bedouin camel-herders, he is last seen being driven to safety, a local woman moistening his lips which continue to form the word 'Perdu'.

But another elliptical death-and-resurrection takes place in *Beau travail*. At the end of the film, Galoup is banished from the Legion for his homicidal entrapment of Sentain and, as the film has shown – structured broadly in the form of flashbacks from Galoup's perspective, ironically in exile in his own country – he is entirely at a loss to occupy his

time and energy in the absence of military discipline. Having made his bed with all the marshall rigour that has become second nature to him, Galoup reaches for his gun and lays down upon the bed, holding it against his belly. A cut frames the tattoo of the Legion motto placed above Galoup's heart as his voiceover whispers its words – 'Sers la bonne cause et meurs'<sup>22</sup> – before the camera pans right to his bicep, where a vein pulses steadily. As the sound of Corona's 'Rhythm of the Night' fades in, the image cuts to a shot of Galoup standing alone in a nightclub. Slowly at first, then with increasing urgency and violence, he begins to dance to the music as the film's end credits roll. This is a deeply ambiguous ending and to interpret it – as Nancy apparently does – as signifying the suicide and resurrection of Galoup requires something of a leap of faith: it implies, on the one hand, accepting as reality an action that is never shown (Galoup shooting himself) and, on the other, according to the film's final image an unequivocally symbolic status that no other image in the film has had. A more prosaic interpretation would be that this is simply another of Galoup's memories. After all the space of the club – clearly recognisable by the cross-hatched panes of its mirrored wall, embedded with red lights – is one we have seen repeatedly in scenes in Djibouti. And Galoup's outfit of black trousers and shirt has also been seen during a scene of the legionnaires' nocturnal excursion into town (though itself ambiguous, since, earlier in the same scene, Galoup was dressed in uniform, and, in his black casual dress, he trails the other legionnaires from a distance which could be that of memory). It remains difficult, though, to equate the abandon with which Galoup dances on the otherwise empty floor of the club to the rigidly disciplined, self-contained officer we have seen throughout the film (even if, as Nancy notes, the dance is 'precise' even as it is 'feverish').

There is still another resurrection in *Beau travail* since the commandant Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor) is a character resurrected from another film, Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1960). The references to Godard's film are slight and few and little narrative or symbolic weight is given to them but they nonetheless settle over the character of Forestier and give him a depth he would not otherwise have, given his relatively few incursions into the film. In one scene, as Galoup, in voiceover, remembers his commanding officer, a photo of the young Michel Subor is held up to the camera. Galoup remarks, 'There had been a rumour floating around about him ever since the Algerian War.'<sup>23</sup> Godard's film, made during the Algerian war, had presented Forestier as a young deserter from the

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<sup>22</sup> 'Fight the good fight, then die'

<sup>23</sup> 'Il traînait une rumeur sur lui, depuis la guerre d'Algérie.'

French army who became reluctantly involved with the right-wing secret service, the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, eventually being blackmailed into committing an assassination for them. As Galoup continues, 'It was said that he was a man without ideals, a soldier without ambition'<sup>24</sup>, we see the older Forestier, in the mirror, remove his hands from in front of his face – a gesture made, too, in *Le Petit Soldat* as Forestier riffed upon the difficulty of ever circumscribing a person's thoughts as they evolved in real time. Aside from this fairly pointed nod towards Godard's film, there are a couple of other, buried references: Galoup quotes a line that he has heard 'somewhere', in fact from Forestier in *Le Petit Soldat*: 'Maybe freedom begins with regret'<sup>25</sup>; meanwhile, a shot of Galoup emerging on an escalator out from the Marseille metro, filmed in low angle and backlit, with the camera remaining below ground level as Galoup heads out of the frame – a shot which is not, but which momentarily appears as though it could be, the last in the film (voiceover: 'Goodbye and good riddance, Frenchie, and don't ever come back'<sup>26</sup>) – gains its sense of finality from its quotation of the last shot in *Le Petit Soldat* (voiceover: 'Now all that remained for me to do was to learn not to be bitter. But I was happy because I had a long time ahead of me'<sup>27</sup>, a line itself reflected in Galoup's opening voiceover in *Beau travail*: 'Marseille, late February: I have time ahead of me now.'<sup>28</sup>).

*L'Intrus*, too, is a film of multiple resurrections. For a start, it features both Michel Subor and Grégoire Colin, familiar from *Beau travail*. Now, although there is not necessarily any justification for interpreting a director's use of the same actor in more than one film as a resuscitation of the same character, Denis's knowing appeal to Subor's cinematic past in *Beau travail* implies that her characters can never be entirely separated from the intertextual web of film history that is inscribed in their actorly bodies. Thus, although the film offers no real legitimation for such an idea, it is tempting, briefly, to imagine the Subor and Colin characters as reincarnations – or simply continuations – of Forestier and Sentain from *Beau travail*. Thus Forestier lives a quiet life, hiding out in the woods near the Geneva of his youth (and Denis shoots the Swiss city with an eye to Godard's 1960 film, a series of brief, jittery, low-angle establishing shots up at lettering denoting international banks and hotels). He lives under an assumed name, Louis Trébor,

<sup>24</sup> 'Il disait de lui qu'il était un homme sans idéal, un militaire sans ambition'

<sup>25</sup> 'Peut-être qu'avec les remords commence la liberté'

<sup>26</sup> 'Bon voyage et bon débarras, petit Français. Et ne reviens jamais'

<sup>27</sup> 'Maintenant il ne me restait plus qu'à apprendre à ne pas être amer. Mais j'étais content parce que j'avais beaucoup de temps devant moi'

<sup>28</sup> 'Marseille, fin février: j'ai du temps devant moi maintenant'

which is itself rather suspicious (Nancy (2005) suggests that, phonetically and etymologically, the name evokes 'trouver', to find, while it is also a reversal of Robert). Meanwhile, he keeps an eye on the resurrected Sentain – the Colin character who remains nameless in *L'Intrus*, but lives on the French-Swiss border with a young family. Most commentators on the film, including Nancy, interpret this character as Trébor's son, but Trébor's one direct appellation of him as such – 'Fils' – is so casual it could easily be dismissed as a term of endearment from a former commanding officer. And, when the Colin character subsequently turns to his wife and mutters that Trébor is 'malade', is he referring to the older man's weak heart, or calling him – as the idiomatic French might imply – crazy? If all this is necessarily speculative, not to say fanciful, such intertextual readings are again encouraged by Denis's inclusion of footage of Michel Subor in an earlier incarnation. In the final section of the film, when Trébor travels to Tahiti in search of a son he believes he fathered there decades in the past, Denis inserts shots of the young Michel Subor arriving on these same islands taken from an unfinished film by Paul Gégauff entitled *Le Reflux* (1965).

But, like *Beau travail*, *L'Intrus* also contains a number of narrative resurrections. Most obviously, Trébor is given a new lease of life (if only temporarily) by his black-market heart transplant. Various images within the film help to characterise this narrative development as a resurrection: for instance, as Trébor wakes with his new heart in a darkened hotel room, the camera cuts outside to frame the cross atop a belltower in a wintry skyline (this may be a *different* outside: Nancy identifies the church as being in Geneva, although Trébor is waking in Pusan, South Korea). Later, wandering the port in Pusan, Trébor witnesses the naming ceremony for a new ship and its burst of coloured streamers and brass-band fanfare seems almost to commemorate his own renewal, although, as Nancy points out, not without irony. Nancy's own interpretation of resurrection in *L'Intrus* focuses on the Grégoire Colin character, the one who reads in Trébor's abandoned cabin references in discarded letters to a 'fils bien aimé' (even if the 'beloved son', it seems, is not him, but Trébor's 'real', though never actually encountered, son in the South Pacific). After reading these letters, the Colin character sits and cries in the darkness, wearing a crown of leaves and foliage (and looking for all the world like a crown of thorns) previously glimpsed on the head of a young itinerant girl who had also passed by Trébor's cabin. When the young man turns up dead in Tahiti, unexpectedly at the end of the film (but what *is* expected in this most unpredictable of narratives?), and with his chest roughly sewn up, it is Nancy's cue to interpret this Christ-like figure as the martyr who dies so that his father

may live. The raising up of the young man's coffin by a forklift truck as it is loaded on to a ship thus becomes a kind of ascension, signalled by a previous shot of islanders gathered around an empty tomb (Nancy 2005). But has this 'son' really provided the heart for Trébor's black-market operation? The film permits of no such certainties. For Trébor's operation scar has healed almost to invisibility by this stage in the film, whereas the young man's wound appears fresh. And what, anyway, is the body doing in Tahiti, when Trébor's operation presumably took place somewhere between Switzerland and South Korea? What of the other dead body glimpsed in the film, that of the itinerant girl seen shortly after Trébor has forsaken his cabin – what of the fresh heart that lies in the snow next to her, curiously sniffed at by Trébor's abandoned dogs? Is this, as some critics have suggested (Nancy 2005; Sweeney 2005), all a dream? The answers to such pragmatic, realist questions are doubtless unimportant: what matters is that, within the symbolic economy of the film, the sudden discovery of a (surrogate? neglected?) son with a matching scar to that of his (imagined? disowned? reclaimed?) father bespeaks and buys into a narrative of sacrifice and resurrection whose Christian undertones are unmistakeable.

## VIII

In the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy as in the film-making of Claire Denis, the body is the limit between sense and world. The body is always other – the means by which the other appears to me but also by which I am revealed to myself, as other. There is a stubborn, fleshy resistance to the body – mine or anyone else's – that will never be entirely contained by conceptual categories. But the image is also other, an othering of the real: the means by which the real reveals itself in separating itself from itself. In this way, the image always contains an excess of sense while the real only gives itself to be experienced as wound or scar. Paradoxically, then, the image enacts a kind of *embodiment* of the real just as the body is an image in the sense of a *coming to presence* of being. If the wound becomes a key image in the work of both Nancy and Denis, it is perhaps because it marks with even greater acuity the untenable limit between inside and outside: the wound opens the body to the outside, but is also an opening in, an in-folding or invagination. As such it resonates with the action of sense – with the *sense* of sense – as envisaged by Nancy: the sense of the world is not some secret content concealed within an unglimped

inner recess of matter, nor some meta-commentary existing in an inaccessible outside. There is no outside of sense, or of the world but only the inside opening to itself in a relation of mutual exteriority to that which is also inside. From this point of view, an ethical representation – the kind deployed in the cinema of Claire Denis – would seek not to penetrate the sense of its subject from an external position of authority, but rather to open representation as a question by sliding across the surfaces of sense. Denis's films, with their dislocated narratives and disconnected gaze, their incomplete resurrections and unyielding bodies – unfathomable in their depthlessness – offer just such a glide.

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