

Icon of Fury: Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day*¹

Jean-Luc Nancy

On the young bride's shoulder is a mauve bite mark: the outline of a mouth, a double arch, teeth marks, open jaws, lips raised up over hard enamel. Not the barely open lips of a kiss on the skin; open, rather, as for a kiss on the mouth, but this time penetrating the skin: a bristling kiss with the teeth bared, extreme – at the limit of the kiss, or beyond. A cruel kiss: a kiss of flesh (*cruor*, bloody flesh). A young couple kisses in a plane: the beginning of the film. Later we will see this icon, not knowing when it was imprinted, like a tattoo or a branding with the red hot iron of some ancient justice.

What is a kiss? This is the question posed by Claire Denis's film. Or rather: what is fucking?² It has long been accepted and repeated that kissing is a kind of devouring. It belongs to a core of imagery and metaphor that includes fairy tales (Little Red Riding Hood, ogres), the fascination with cannibalism, the symbolism of Christian communion and that of the lacerations of Dionysos, Osiris or Acteon, together with ghouls, striges and vampires, werewolves, incubi and succubi. This entire carnivorous breed is concealed within the film. It is recalled in its entirety, evoked by the gesture of Coré, the sick woman (if we can put it like this), standing on a bank, filmed from a low angle raising her coat above her shoulders to bring to mind for a moment the silhouette of Murnau's *Nosferatu*.

The vampire's true formula is only revealed when one says 'the kiss of the vampire'. That is what is at stake here, allowing for the fact that we are no longer in the era of vampire stories: the kiss as vampire.

It is not a question of any particular kiss, but rather that the kiss, in itself, opens on to the bite, and the taste of blood. And consequently it is a question of another well

¹ The word *acharnement* in Nancy's original title ('Icône de l'acharnement') has no direct equivalent in English, signifying a 'furious energy' or 'desperate eagerness'. The article was first published in *Trafic*, No. 39, autumn 2001, 58-64.

² 'Qu'est-ce donc que le baiser? [...] Qu'est-ce donc que baiser?' The noun 'le baiser' means a kiss; the colloquial verb 'baiser', to fuck.

known coupling, that of Eros and Thanatos: not in a dialectic of opposites, but in a mutual excitation and exasperation, each asking the other to go further, to go all the way to the end, to get completely lost.

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It is about kissing, or about fucking: but precisely in so far as fucking, here, or if you will 'sex', is related to the kiss, rather than the reverse. Sex becomes a metonymy of the kiss: the kiss is broader, deeper, more encompassing than sex. We must understand that the bite of the kiss, here, devours the sexes (their organs), not by castration, but by an absorption which opens on to a kind of horrific sublimation: not that of sex in which a body takes pleasure, but that of an entire body in which sex bursts out and is spattered with the body's blood, with its life/death and with that which explodes it: that which exposes it in splashes, drops, streams and stains, clots and ribbons that will never again be restored to a form. We might say that the film's entire story is the allegory, and its entire image the literality of this: the unbearable tearing apart of orgasm.

It is about the kiss that bites, but not a kiss unlike any other: the kiss in as much as it bites, the kiss as power of the bite, or of death [*puissance de morsure et de mort*], as exposing/putting to death of the *raw*. This is why the young bride, she who remains intact and from whom the dreadful force turns bitterly, desperately away (although we don't know what will happen after the end, back home), nonetheless bears the mark of the passage from kissing to devouring, the bite mark, skin gnawed to the point of bleeding, icon of fury.

She, intact, unpenetrated and unpleasured, is the virgin with a flower of blood on her skin (on the surface or beneath? everything here passes through the skin), skin flushed with blood, blossoming with an imprint that signals at once the ardour and the restraint of her husband, carried away by her kiss yet frightened by the knowledge of his fury. She remains intact, undecidedly intact on the edge of a return which might halt everything or make it worse; on the point of leaving she wears leather gloves in red and white: a second, more brilliant flower, a second skin of blood that at once protects her and exposes her for what she is – she as much as anyone else – that is to say a body of blood (a living body is a body of blood: blood is not simply one of its contents, it *is* its blood, it lives in its blood).

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The kiss wants blood. The received image of the kiss is of a contact that brushes the skin, the lips, that touches the skin without breaking it and that, when it joins mouths, exchanges breath and saliva, but not blood. Such is the image of the kiss or the kiss-image that opens the film, like a quotation of this cinematic imagery: the plane, the honeymoon, the kiss, the languid, suave eroticism of a long-haul cabin at night. Yet the quotation keeps its distance: outside, in the night, the aeroplane is carried in the cold altitude and the noise of the engines, there is a threat somewhere. The question already creeps in: what is this kiss? what does it want?

The film will answer later with the bite mark, the icon of flesh on flesh. It will answer that the kiss is the beginning of fury. Not for nothing does it place lips on skin. It is not only touching, or rather it takes touch to its most extreme point: where touching becomes searching, touching under the skin, tearing out what it covers up, what it protects and announces, what it signals as the layer and the stream that it encloses.

The breathy kiss mingles souls. The bloody bite explodes the soul: blood, life, spirit, desire, irrigation giving way to irritation in the impossibility of coming to an end, of getting to the end of the soul without becoming lost, gorged with blood. Throughout, it is a question of this soul, that is to say of the form or idea of a body, but via the dizzying mystery of a body that takes the form of its own disintegration. Here, the soul is the acting out of devourment, and the act gives access to the soul: to that which is impalpable in the body, to its dispersed substance, and to pure passion like pure rage, pure fury. A martyrdom of pleasure (*marturos*: witness).

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That in itself, such an access, can but lead to fury: to an exasperation that destroys the skin. In truth, touch desires to destroy, and is destroyed by this desire.³ This truth is singularly monstrous, like all truths: it is at once the truth of the most tender kiss, and of the most

³ 'Toucher veut crever et en crève'

horrible carnage, it is tenderness and cruelty in a terrible chimera, exchanging roles, as though it were a question of fresh meat (tender flesh) and the splendour of blood (*cruor*, blood erupting outside the skin, distinguished from *sanguis*, the blood circulating in the organs).

Killing, breaking the skin: the film is made entirely on and about the skin. Literally: exposed skin. (*Pellicula*, little skin.⁴) Not only is the skin present in the image in extreme close-ups, in sections and expanses, with its textures, blemishes and bristles, with its hollows and bumps, navel, nipples, pubis, body dismembered in the image, cut up, marked off, a neck, a cheek, a belly, but this skin is also everywhere emerging from a camera in its fury to capture this fragile access to a force unleashed. It is also the image itself, the film, its skin, that caresses and ravishes and tears its luminous chemistry in red and black until, when the furious Coré lights the fire, what we see is the burning of the film itself, rather than any décor. The fury reaches the soul and the image – the substance of vision – at the same time: a vision like livid, exposed flesh. Eyes full of blood, eyes injected with blood, plunged into a scene where the only thing to see is unbearable, invisible excess, where screams and groans disgorge the saturated colour, the screen like a sponge.

(Naturally all of this is crammed with technical mastery and artifice. But it is not ordinary trickery, that which allows a murder to be filmed but not committed. It is on the contrary the art of filming that which is not a murder but an instance akin to death at the heart of desire. It repeats: I am not representing anything, I am not what is known as a 'horror film', which plays with representations, with images of violence that remain imaginary: on the contrary, I am allowing you to see that which is not representable, that which is not imaginary and belongs only to the deep structure, to the real of the kiss, the exasperation, exaltation, the boiling and expiration of orgasm – whose name means *anger*.)

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The emblem of this skin, of this tender(ed), torn access to the bloodied soul, is the truck stopped for what its driver thinks will be a quick fuck. Huge and red, heavy and powerful, the truck is filmed from behind as it reverses towards the girl, its hazard lights blinking like

⁴ The French *pellicule* (and the Spanish *pellicula*) mean both film and skin, membrane.

flames of desire, its tarpaulin pulled taut, pushing toward our gaze which it penetrates with its weight until the camera moves to the side and the man climbs down from his cab and comes forward, trembling with desire, surprised, avid but vaguely uncertain, already condemned, inevitable prey to we know not what but to something that is vaguely signalled by the reverse shot on the girl whose pout we can tell is not so much greedy as insatiable, and whose lips are impatient to lick at blood, to suck on it until drunk, the jaws of a ghoulish who could have crushed the entire truck in order to spill its metallic paint.

And the girl will paint, later in the film. On the wall of her room where she has massacred the young man who was looking for her – who, perhaps, was looking for just that – , will be drawn improbable curves, like arches or vaults, like action painting or lyrical abstraction, a triple arcature which picks up the motif of the bride's arcing icon, the projections of blood transformed into a blueprint for both a painting and a temple, like the layout of naves in a sanctuary, a demonic iconostasis.

It is, then, a ritual, just as the kiss is a ritual, and just as fucking too can be a ritual. To kiss or be kissed, to make love, these are not only acts: they are signs, propitiations, promises and prayers. They are gestures that are at once granted their own meaning and that special significance that holds only in the execution of the gesture, or in its performance. Fucking is only a means to pleasure in so far as this pleasure executes something other than pleasure: a mystery, a world-order.

In this sense, any artistic act constitutes a ritual, and this is one measure of art: there is no art without rite. A ritual is that which is accomplished under its own pressure, or under its own oppression. It is here that all can become confused or split: at the point where the accomplishment of the act is worth infinitely more than the act itself. At this point, the symbolic and the real meet, or collide.

This singular collision, which also occurs in love, is what we could call the imaginary. But not in the vulgar sense of something unreal or invented: rather in the sense in which the image brings us into presence. In the sense in which the image presents that which is within it (*Au sens où l'image présente ce qu'il en est*).

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So it is with skin. The film films nothing else. Tenderly, attentively, with difficulty and at length it makes an image of the skin: it doesn't just show skin, but slips it into the plane of the image, it tends to confuse the screen with the skin, it *films* skin where filming would mean following, filtering, freezing⁵. The film bespeaks also a bitten, broken screen. 'To burst out of the screen', an old expression to describe the exceptional quality of the presence of an actor, a presence that emerges from the flat image, tearing forwards from it toward us, but also backwards, 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 screen is torn into a wound streaming with blood. The image becomes an image of a torn image: no longer an image, or a figure, but an icon of access to the invisible. The invisible, that is *sanguis*, the blood nourishing the body, life itself, pulsating beneath the skin. Once the skin has been bitten to draw blood (to the depth of the blood and at the level of the blood), the blood becomes *cruor*, spilled blood, a jet which no longer irrigates but which spurts out like one or other of the sexual liquids, male or female cum. The spilled blood of sacrificial cruelty, the revelation of a raw life which serves not to live but to grant access to that which is more than life in a splash of blood, of meaning, of presence.

Spilled blood, spurting blood, blossoming into the icon, gives us to see that which should only be seen through the transparency of the skin over the vessels. It is the most unbearable of sights. 'I will not see it!' cries Lorca in his lament for a matador whose blood is spilled in the ring. Tauromachy, erotomachy, sacrifice and sacred stupour. Suddenly a film plunges without reason into that perpetual history of cinema that is the cinema's taste for blood, and in which it takes over from painting, with all its Christs and its martyrs. A self-analysis of cinema as sacrificial or tragic scene (the one emerging from the other), and leading to the question: what comes after the sacrifice, after the tragedy, after martyrdom, when spilled blood represents only murder or madness, yet still silently spilling its bloody secret. Silently: this is almost a silent film – what dialogue there is is often in English, and nothing is said about the blood. But the music has nothing to do with murder or madness: it moves in procession with the image, a celebration of something.

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⁵ In French 'filer (to thread, spin or trace), filtrer (to filter), figer (to freeze)'

The image itself shatters. It is not the image of a shattering, it shatters itself. It is materially, visually smashing itself, chopping itself up on the screen. There is no longer any screen, seeing and showing have become exasperated, saturated one into the other and exalted. The film exalts in itself too, no doubt, but with 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. There is no end to it. Trouble every day.

Fury clings to the flesh, searches it. Drunk on the bloody flesh that it devours, not feeding itself but splashing, flooding, anointing itself, becoming in turn a sticky liquid sprayed from the skin that is bitten onto the skin that bites. From the skin of death onto the biting skin. Covering oneself on the outside with the raw, warm inside that the skin suggests and envelops. This inside is the secret, the sealing of life in death by the fragility of the skin, the sealing of the body in a scream, of sense in blood. The fury wants this secret that is nothing other and that contains nothing other than the tearing apart of the integrity of life. This tearing apart is death, but it is also desire: it is the troubling and tricky proximity of the two. Fury is the desire that wants to gnaw and suck on the source of desire itself: not 'pleasure', but fever and fury until groaning stupour.

And desire is that or nothing: exacerbated exasperation. The film constructs a rigorous allegory of desire that turns on an ambivalent axis. The furious truth of desire is split into vampiric-erotic symbolism on the one hand and, on the other, a savage act of rape by biting the sex. It is split into mythology and sickness (and perhaps also, more deviously, into the sickness of mythology and the mythology of sickness). Into the madwoman who comes to an end in flames and the maniac who knows no end. A woman and a man. A hyperbole and a monstrosity joined to each other: the film takes the risk of slipping in between them.

In between the two, the inverted figure of their ambivalence: the sorcerer and the innocent virgin. The manipulator of strange cultures and the young woman still on the edge of womanhood. Black man and white woman. He beneath his helmet shining like destiny, she beneath her shawl like a nun.

There is the great allegory of a mad desire for flesh and the suspicious fable of a diseased brain – another chunk of fresh meat but drained of blood, sliced neatly across its folds and fractal convolutions with a curious brown colour that must have come from a fixative. A brain like so many slices of flan or like the hiding place of neuronal, possibly

genetic, accidents: this contemporary form of knowledge, attached to the reminder of Nosferatu, is a way of demonstrating how the unknown grows in proportion to the known.

Even less known, if possible, is the waiting endured by the young men in the neighbouring house and by the chambermaid in the hotel. They are the skins offered up, the exposed skins⁶: the skin and the prey. Prey to fury, to desiring and to devouring, the one indiscernable from the other, and yet distinct, even opposed to each other since Shane kills Coré. He seeks deliverance from himself, as from the other that rages inside him.

There is no deliverance, everything is closed – the aeroplane cabin at night, the boarded up bedroom, shutters drawn, test-tubes sealed, corridors and basements, greenhouse, laboratory, helmet, truck. There is no way out and it begins again – trouble every day. It is not a condemnation but a furiously stubborn interrogation.

What this fury is after is the truth of a body in so far as it is made up of that which exceeds its enclosing, in so far as it is something other than an arrangement of organs and limbs, something other than its more or less attractive shape. 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. Unity is given only to be broken, releasing the infinitely fragile secret that the soul and the breath, the desire, the passion for the unique and the infinite are the same as the wrenching of the body from itself, the *membra disjecta* and their very dissection exposed in the raw. In every sense, the soul *blows through* the body⁷.

The kiss that bites would have this in common with death: that both are carried to the impossible site of a dissection, which is the site of a conjunction of a soul and a body, or of several bodies in an endless sharing. A body never stops composing or decomposing, being born or dying, configuring itself in the assumption of an identity and dividing itself into zones of desire, pleasure and pain, into fragments and shards of ecstasy, because

⁶ Nancy writes 'les peaux expeausées'.

⁷ '*l'âme souffle le corps*': in French *le souffle* is the breath and *souffler* means to blow or to blow out (e.g. a candle). But it also means to whisper, to suggest or prompt (e.g. when an actor has forgotten a line) and, colloquially, can mean to steal away from, to dispossess.

ecstasy is shattering. Ecstasy shatters the image of itself (the image of self and the proper image of ecstasy).⁸

Shattering: that which opens up and shuts down vision at the same time. This film is shattering. It risks going behind the film, shutting out the gaze by opening it onto a wound, a bite mark. It is the kiss, it is love that bites – just as the cold can bite, or acid, or flames. It is that which pierces, drives a sharp point into the flesh with repeated, rough blows. Love – that by which we are bitten (as colloquial language would have it). Not an anatomical dissection but that which bursts and destroys the flesh leading not to death but to something that resembles it: to an irradiation causing a stabbing jolt to the heart, a contraction that at once freezes the blood and spills it out. This – this thing or this beast –, this chilling heartbreak, love, the transfixion or transfusion of that which (of he or she who) thought itself alone with itself, the breakdown of the specular and of the resembling image: the image bleeding, blinding.

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Translated by Douglas Morrey

⁸ '...jouir ne fait rien d'autre qu'éclater. Jouir fait éclater sa propre image (l'image du propre et la propre image du jouir).' *Jouir* and *jouissance* refer specifically to sexual pleasure. *Propre* means both 'one's own' and clean, proper.