

## The IDEOLOGY of FORMLESSNESS?

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As the first book-length study in English of French film director Claire Denis since the groundbreaking monographs of Martine Beugnet (2004) and Judith Mayne (2005), this collection of original essays is most welcome. Between then and now, not only has Denis added to her impressive oeuvre with such significant films deserving of attention as *L'Intrus* (*The Intruder*, 2004), *35 rhums* (*35 Shots of Rum*, 2008), and *White Material* (2009) but a number of important articles have appeared to shed further light on this enigmatic director (see Beugnet 2008; Williams 2009–10; Asibong 2011; and Galt 2014). This new collection begins with a series of interviews with cast and crew members: musicians Dickon Hinchliffe and Stuart Staples, editor Nelly Quettier, actor Alex Descas, and Denis herself. Twelve essays by academics then follow, divided into three sections: "Relations," "Global Citizenship," and "Within Film."

Denis's films have focused on French nationals in colonial and postcolonial Africa (*Chocolat*, *Beau Travail*, *White Material*) and on excolonial subjects in the European metropole (*S'en fout la mort* [*No Fear, No Die*]; *J'ai pas sommeil* [*I Can't Sleep*]; *35 rhums*). (Denis herself spent her childhood in Africa as the daughter of a colonial administrator. In France, she studied economics before going to film school, and she has actively campaigned for the rights of *sans-papiers*.) The subject matter of Denis's films thus invites a political reading, but the style with which she approaches these subjects tends to pull away from plot and character, even from figuration itself, making political readings problematic. For example, *Beau Travail*

concerns French foreign legionnaires in Djibouti, but it is “far more assertively a film of surfaces rather than politics (or characters): of bodies in motion and at rest and of the coiled potential within them” (219), as Adam Nayman and Andrew Tracy note in this essay collection. Denis’s emphasis on the *informe* (the inchoate, the nascent, the transitional) poses a particular challenge for critics interested in the ideology of form. Her filmic experimentation with tactility, embodiment, affect, and immersion—these being some of the modes in which the *informe* manifests itself in her work—has provoked considerable critical reflection regarding what politico-aesthetic concepts, if any, might be adequate to an understanding of her films’ peculiar “formlessness.”

In an essay on Denis’s depictions of (often immigrant) labor, Rafael Ruiz Pleguezuelos notes that “very often the only realistic passages” in her films are the ones “devoted to job routines” (137), and he infers from this that “Denis seems to be very interested in showing how humiliating this *work for foreigners* can be” (141). If one approach to the problem of discerning the politics of Denis’s films is to focus on their most social-realist moments, another is to find in even the most sensory and immersive of her movies a sociopolitical allegory, as Florence Martin does when she reads *Trouble Every Day*, often cited as an exemplar of this director’s “cinema of the senses,” as showing how “the Other from the ‘developing’ world remains subjected to the First World neo-colonialist eager to frenetically produce and consume” (130). In this way, the sensory experiences in and of the film are bound into making political sense.

Still other contributors look for a *via media* between realism and allegory, exploring the possibility of whether there

could be a politics of or within the *informe*. Firoza Elavia defines Denis’s *L’Intrus* as a film of Deleuzian “time-images” in which “actions become indecipherable and ambiguous when words evaporate, moving in amorphous ways” (194). Adding to the amorphousness are scenes that call to mind Deleuze’s “crystal image of time, where there is no way of orienting ourselves between what is real and what is imaginary” (195). Elavia argues that, as a result of these “interstitial disjunctions,” the “spectator invariably creates connections between the spatio-temporal gaps” and that “unexpected ways of perceiving, remembering or understanding” are thereby made possible (197). This viewer-response approach effectively conveys the sometimes radical ambiguity of Denis’s films, but without more attention to the specific prompts her movies provide, this reading threatens to dissolve into a series of purely individual subjective responses. Laura McMahon considers the “dancing bodies” in Denis’s oeuvre as “an ethical and political model of syncopated togetherness” (176), arguing that in *Beau Travail*, as the French legionnaires dance with African females, the “uniform(ed) queer body of the Legion is shown to be dispersed by the racial and sexual difference of the Djiboutian women” in an exhibition of Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of “*being-with*—that is, a mode of commonality without communion, without hypostatization into any one collective identity” (178). This intriguing notion is nevertheless quite abstract, leaving us to wonder about the political specifics of the dancing relation discussed here: Is it one of social or gender equality? Are we meant to think that the bodily contact between dancers temporarily overcomes the power imbalance, and if so, what real transformative efficacy does such contact have? Interestingly,

when McMahon discusses lead character Galoup's solitary dance at the end of the film, one that he apparently imagines while dying, she implicitly acknowledges that *this* dance may have been without social efficacy within the world of the film, but she argues that it functions as an "ethos of gesture," a bodily appeal to the spectator for "empathy" beyond conventional notions of "identification" (French with French, male with male, or the like) (181). Here McMahon is more specific than Elavia about the kinds of ethical cues that Denis's somatic cinema may provide to viewers.

Seeking to define the originality of Denis's editing practice, Sam Ishii-Gonzales differentiates it from standard "montage" leading to "consensus"; instead, Denis's cutting creates a "collage" resulting in "dissensus"—with this last term borrowed from Jacques Rancière and his notion of a "true political community" as one that "preserves 'the solitude of being together'" (79), not subsuming entities into a predetermined unity but "leaving open the question of what it might mean to exist in relation" to one another (87). Henrik Gustafsson develops a similar idea in connection with point of view, arguing that Denis "follows a logic of 'scars' rather than 'suture'" (209). Instead of suturing the viewer to the imperialist gaze of a character surveying the colonized landscape (as in *White Material* where, "insisting on her belonging and right to the land, Maria refuses to perceive her own foreignness" [212]), Denis "inflict[s] a cut that breaks up the link between subjective viewpoint and physical environment" (209) (as at the end of *Chocolat* where the camera floats free of the no-longer-privileged gaze of a character named France as she sees the backs of some excolonial Africans, one of whom may have been her former servant).

These concepts of scar, collage, dance, and dissensus help us to see Denis's experiments in "formlessness" as ways of imagining new modes of relationality involving "a movement of approach rather than appropriation," which McMahon likens to "Emmanuel Levinas's thinking of ethics as a relation to irreducible alterity" (182–83). However, as several contributors rightly point out, establishing a positive relation to others and to the otherness within is much easier to envision in the abstract than it is to enact in historical reality: "Notions of hybridity and third space," Cornelia Ruhe notes, "might work well in theory but are hard to live with on a daily basis" (119). Sometimes it seems as though one's sense of "being with" the world must constantly run athwart historical reality, as when Nénette (in *Nénette et Boni*) "revels in the water before being violently extracted from this reverie . . . to the harsh reality she faces: a teenage pregnancy" with its social opprobrium (Noëlle Rouxel-Cubberly, 168). Even when one is able to bridge the social divide between self and other through a kind of somatic sympathy, how can one keep from becoming appropriative or assimilationist? When Maria shelters the wounded African rebel in *White Material*, is this "a connection between two subjects who have been ideologically positioned as each other's 'Other,' but who, in a sublime instant of transcendence, have been permitted mutual touching and protection that can take place only within a quasi-mystical space of exception" (Asibong 2011: 159)? Or is this "momentary connection across gender and race . . . more like narcissistic identification on her part" (92), as James S. Williams suggests? How can a physical compassion for the other be translated into historical reality and not just into a "quasi-mystical space of exception" from it? How

can we know whether a “felt” connection to the other is mutually beneficial and not consuming or narcissistic?

In her provocative book *Cinema and Sensation*, Martine Beugnet (2007: 17) argues that, “as flowing, embodied forms of thought,” films like Claire Denis’s “can help us imagine ways out of the dead ends down which dual thinking leads us”—including the thinking that divides us along gender or racial or national lines. Sensory connections could possibly enable a flow between cultural divisions, dissolving reified social formations, but we must also consider the extent to which the body is not some “outside” to culture but instead intimately involved with it. As Laura U. Marks (2000: 145) asserts in *The Skin of the Film*: “By paying attention to bodily and sensuous experience, we will find that it is to a large degree informed by culture. Perception is already informed by culture, and so even illegible images are (cultural) perceptions, not raw sensations.” Can (a cinema of) the senses really elude, exceed, or challenge social structuration? It is to the credit of this fine collection of essays on Claire Denis that it provokes substantive thought on this significant question.

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