

Near the beginning of Claire Denis's 2001 film *Trouble Every Day*, we see Coré (Béatrice Dalle), looking out the barred window of the house she shares with her husband, Léo (Alex Descas). As if following Coré's line of vision to a reverse shot, we see a woman, jauntily dressed in a beret and a scarf, jump out of a taxicab (figs. 1 and 2). It takes just a split second to realize that Coré is not watching this woman, but rather that the film is moving from the house to the city street, from Coré and Léo to another couple, Shane (Vincent Gallo) and June (Tricia Vessey). Thus we are not seeing what Coré sees, but rather the arrival in Paris of Shane and June Brown in a cab driven by the woman. Throughout the film, the parallel yet separate tracks of these two couples are explored, and this kind of cut—in which continuity is established momentarily, only to be revealed as a part of the overall pattern of contrast—is very common, not only in this film but in the cinema in general. But in that brief moment when Coré seems to be watching the cab, and watching not primarily the arrival of Shane and June but the woman taxi driver, something of the particular beauty of the films of Claire Denis can be grasped.

Coré is a prisoner in her house, and the woman who briefly appears to be the object of her gaze stands in visual contrast to her. This woman moves; she has a “nontraditional” job, and there is something appealing about her equally nontraditional choice of the appropriate clothing for the job. Coré's hunger lets loose a wildness, a savage destructive force; this woman's autonomy, however briefly it is perceived, is tame by comparison. Across the body of this woman we make a connection between Coré and the newlywed American couple. For a moment, the contrast between these two women—Coré the prisoner, and the cab driver doing her job—is also suggestive of a bond, a connection. This is a very small



Figure 1: Coré in *Trouble Every Day* |



Figure 2: The cab driver in *Trouble Every Day* |

moment, but it is one of many such moments that I remember vividly from Claire Denis's films. To be sure, the premise of *Trouble Every Day* is complex, suggesting the continuum between sexual desire and violence, and situated in a context where fear and anxiety are constant. Perhaps I remember this brief "encounter" because it is one of the few lighter moments in the film; here is a woman, seemingly caught within Coré's gaze, who is neither attacker nor prey (Shane's eye will quickly

be drawn to the maid in the hotel). But I think, rather, that this is one of many examples in Claire Denis's work of how the small detail, the brief moment of connection, is never taken for granted. Upon such moments are built a fascination with human interaction and cinematic vision.

Claire Denis's films teach you how to be attentive to these moments. Shortly after the arrival of Shane and June, the appearance of the nape of a woman's neck will set into motion a series of deadly desires. In other films by Denis, individuals circle each other, move through landscapes and cityscapes, to pause for a moment of connection that is all the more breathtaking for how brief it is. Daïga, the Lithuanian immigrant in *I Can't Sleep* who observes with fascination Camille, the man whom she discovers is the much sought-after killer of old women, makes physical contact with him only once. She follows him to a café, stands next to him, and asks for the sugar. When he passes it, their hands touch ever so lightly; it is almost a flutter. But the film has so patiently watched these two, and in particular has watched Daïga watch Camille, that when this moment arrives it is both poignant and momentous.

Claire Denis's films are about watching, bearing witness, and making contact. As a woman director, Denis challenges virtually every preconception about what is appropriate material. She is known as a director drawn to men, and certainly her films are often focused on a fascination with male bodies and the interactions between men, like Dah and Jocelyn, the two friends in *No Fear, No Die*, or the French Foreign Legionnaires in *Beau travail*. But Denis's films certainly demonstrate an interest in women, and often—as in the case of Béatrice Dalle's Coré in *Trouble Every Day* or Valérie Lemercier's Laure in *Friday Night*—representations of women are as challenging and engaging as the representations of men.

Denis's films are fully immersed in a world shaped and defined by the aftermath of colonization and decolonization. Denis herself grew up in several different countries in Africa, and an acute awareness of the ways in which how one looks (in both senses of the term) through the prism of race is present in all of her films. In her first feature film, *Chocolat*, a French woman returns to Cameroon and remembers her childhood there; while not all of Denis's films are so directly centered on the colonial encounter, her cinema reflects a world where people live through the complex legacies of colonialism.

My goals in the present study are, first, to explore the range of Claire Denis's career, one that is shaped by particular collaborations with actors and writers and other artists, by a love of the cinema, and by a curiosity about the ways in which people move, about how bodies perform, and how the relationship between center and margin is constantly shifting. Second, I examine her major films in detail in order to understand and appreciate Denis's remarkable cinematic vision, one in which viewers are invited to witness and to observe. As my example from *Trouble Every Day* suggests, Denis's cinema is filled with moments that may well function in relationship to the larger themes and preoccupations of a given film, but which also retain their own unique rhythm and presence.

In the first section, I examine the broad outlines of Denis's film career and suggest some of the key preoccupations of her work. I then move on to analyses of Denis's feature films. In the second section, I examine how specific forms of storytelling and visual observation occur in Denis's first two feature films, *Chocolat* (1988) and *No Fear, No Die* (1990). The third section focuses on the brother/sister relationship as it is explored in two films, *U.S. Go Home* (1994) and *Nénette and Boni* (1996). In the fourth section, I look at two intertwining themes in *I Can't Sleep* (1994) and *Beau travail* (1999–2000): the representation of the male body, and the use of the tracking shot. The last section examines the male-female couple and the city of Paris in *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and *Friday Night* (2002).

While each section is devoted to the study of particular films, all of the themes that I explore are relevant to all of Denis's work. The form of storytelling that is developed in Denis's first two feature films will be revised and extended throughout her career, but the preoccupation with witnessing and with bearing witness has been a constant in her films. The brother/sister relationship may appear to be a particular feature of *U.S. Go Home* and *Nénette and Boni*, but virtually all of Denis's films demonstrate a preoccupation with kinship, with family ties and, more often, with what takes the place of family ties. The child France's closest companion, in *Chocolat*, is the Cameroonian family servant, and while the two male leads of *No Fear, No Die* have few visible family ties, the brotherly bond between them is far stronger than the other family connections we see in the film.

Claire Denis is well known as a director who presents beautiful por-

traits of male bodies, and the two films that are most preoccupied with the representation of the male body, *I Can't Sleep* and *Beau travail*, are also the films most explicitly taken up with gay sexuality. In both of these films, the representation of masculinity intersects with the representation of women, for women have particularly important roles in both films in situating how we look at the male body. In more general terms, the connections between the body, gender, and sexuality inform all of Denis's films. Very much connected to the question of the body is the question of desire, and *Trouble Every Day* and *Friday Night* represent sexuality as both terrifying and liberating.

The films that I discuss are available on DVD or video (*I Can't Sleep* is officially out of print, but copies often surface on Ebay), with the exception of *U.S. Go Home*. The film was made for a French television series, and while it has been shown at film festivals and retrospectives of Denis's work, it has never been distributed in the United States. I hesitated about including discussion of a film that is so hard to see, but *U.S. Go Home* is such an important part of Denis's work that I decided to include it. I have had the opportunity to see all of Denis's films, but because most of Denis's short films are very difficult to see, and even though some of these films are remarkable achievements, I have kept discussion of them to a minimum.

My interview with Claire Denis took place in Paris in July 2003. Denis had just returned to the city and was about to leave the next day to shoot her next feature, a film inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy's book *L'Intrus* (2000), and featuring some familiar actors from Denis's films—Michel Subor, Grégoire Colin, and Béatrice Dalle. Denis discussed many of her lesser-known films, as well as the use of voice-over, cinematic influences on her work, and the importance of *I Can't Sleep* in her career. Denis is an extremely articulate commentator on her own work and on the cinema in general, and it was a privilege to meet her and to include our discussion in this volume. All of my discussions of Denis's career are drawn from published sources, interviews in particular (I have not sought verification from Denis for any of the statements or interpretations that appear in my book). All translations from the French (including the interview with Denis) are my own.

I began this project out of great love and admiration for Denis's films. While there is always some relief in the completion of a project, I have

to say that I am sorry to see this one end. Mostly I am grateful to have had the opportunity to examine the beautiful, moving films of such an amazing filmmaker.

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