

Interview with Claire Denis |

This interview took place in Paris in July 2003. I had spent the previous month in there, and I had the opportunity to see all of Denis's short films, which are usually not shown outside of film festivals or retrospectives. In our discussion, Denis provided background and context for many of those films. While it is unfortunate that these films are not more readily available (in France or in the United States), Denis's discussion of them gives insight into the range of her career. Denis also discussed the use of the voice-over and the influence on her work of filmmakers such as Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard, and Shohei Imamura.

JUDITH MAYNE: Could you say something about your current project?

CLAIRE DENIS: It's a complex project. It's not really an adaptation; it's inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy's book *L'Intrus* [*The Intruder*, 2000]. I worked on the screenplay with Jean-Pol Fargeau, and it's being made on a very small budget, just like *Beau travail*, and it's produced by ARTE. I made the short film *Vers Nancy* [*Towards Nancy*] for the series *Ten*

Minutes Older, because I was working on the screenplay for this full-length film. It's based on the idea of intrusion.

JM: One of the striking aspects of your career is your continuing collaboration with cinematographer Agnès Godard, screenwriter Jean-Pôl Fargeau, editor Nelly Quettier, not to mention the actors with whom you've developed a special relationship—Alex Descas, Grégoire Colin, Béatrice Dalle. This collaboration isn't just reflected in your own films; you've also appeared in the films of other directors: Laetitia Masson's *En avoir (ou pas)*, Tonie Marshall's *Vénus beauté (institut)*. You also have developed close relationships with other filmmakers. You share screenwriting credit, for example, with Yousry Nasrallah for his film *El Medina* [2000]. Could you talk about how that collaboration came to be?

CD: Yousry had seen *I Can't Sleep*, and he wanted me to help him work on the part of *El Medina* that takes place in Paris. We worked together in the fall of one year, and he filmed the "Paris" part of the film a year later; in between, he shot the beginning of the film that takes place in Cairo. Yousry is someone who works quickly, and who really learns from everyone he meets. He changed the "Paris" section of the film enormously from what we had worked on together. For me, what was important was not sharing the screenwriting credit, but rather it was talking to him about Paris, and sharing with him the conception of his film. When he came to Paris to shoot, I wasn't there (I was shooting on location), but by that point he had his own clear idea of the Paris sections of the film. He speaks fluent French and knows France well; I simply served as a facilitator, a fellow filmmaker, to help him create the section of the film that takes place in Paris. *El Medina* is a beautiful film, and he has just recently completed another.

JM: It has been interesting to see your short films, particularly those filmed in black and white. In some, like *Pour Ushari Ahmed Mahmoud*, the black and white seems just the right choice for the depiction of the city of Paris. Could you talk about how you came to make *Keep It for Yourself*, also a black and white film that takes place in New York? It's an intriguing film on a number of levels. Obviously, it is your only American film, and it's a very funny look at New York City as perceived by a young French woman (Sophie Simon, who also appears in *I Can't Sleep* as Mona's sister). Unfortunately, it is a difficult film to see. But it's

also interesting in relationship to your later work, since this is the first time that you worked with Vincent Gallo.

CD: In a way, *Keep It for Yourself* was a bit of a joke, because it was a commissioned film. I had just made *No Fear, No Die*. Philippe Carcassonne, the producer, had begun working with Kees Kasander, in Holland. The two of them were producing Peter Greenaway's film *Pillow Book* [1996], which was in coproduction with a company in Japan. At the time, Kasander received an offer to make publicity films for Nissan, the car company, and there was a very large budget. Kasander said, why spend all of this money to make individual publicity films, when it could be used to make a feature-length film? I agreed to be a part of the film. The idea was to have a three-part film, set in three different cities, each of which used the same Nissan deluxe replica car. An Argentinian director, Alejandro Agresti, made *Library Love*, set in Paris, and Kaizo Hayashi made the film set in Tokyo, *Man from the Moon*. I was told: you'll make the film set in New York City. So I arrived in New York with the car, which was shipped over. Then I had one week to shoot the film. I met Jim Schamus, who was in charge of the production, and we really got along well. I brought a French actress (Sophie Simon) with me, and I worked with people I knew: Jim Stark, who played the next-door neighbor, had been Jim Jarmusch's producer; Sara Driver, the film director, played the part of the woman who befriends Sophie. And that is where I met Vincent Gallo for the first time.

John Lurie did the music for the film, and I was friends with him. He had worked with the Lounge Lizards, and that group split into two, and the group Jazz Passenger was formed. The man who played the "intruder" in the film, E. J. Rodriguez, was the percussionist for Jazz Passenger. All in all, *Keep It for Yourself* was really a film made with friends.

JM: One of the distinctive aspects of your career is how well you work with actors. It is obvious in your films; and in interviews, you've discussed how important it is for you to create and maintain a special bond with actors. You've used terms like "solidarity" to describe your relationships with actors. I've been able to see televised interviews with you and actors from your films, and it is really quite amazing to see you "in person," as it were, with these artists. Your special and unique relationship with them is obvious. Alice Houry [*U.S. Go Home* and *Nénette and Boni*] and

Béatrice Dalle [*I Can't Sleep* and *Trouble Every Day*] are two very different actresses, at different stages of their careers when they worked with you: Houri was a young teenager, and she seems quite shy in the public eye, whereas Dalle is a well-known actress with a very strong, sometimes very intense, public persona. I mention these two because I happened to see interviews where you appeared with them, one right after the other, and the relationship you developed with these two very different people was so extraordinarily visible. Even through all of the conventions of the televised interview, you can really feel how much you connect with your actors, and how much they connect with you (in an interview about *Nénette and Boni*, another participant in the show, who had nothing to do with the film, even commented on what a wonderful relationship you had with Houri, just on the basis of the televised program alone!). You can sense the affinity; it is almost magical.

CD: Alice Houri was fourteen when I met her (she lied about her age to get the part in *U.S. Go Home*). She is an extraordinary girl. It's true, I have a vital connection with her, and it's not a maternal connection. I've maintained a very strong connection with her.

JM: Obviously collaboration is a central part of your career. Yet it is rare for you to adapt a text written by someone else; even the adaptation of Emmanuèle Bernheim's novel *Vendredi soir*, which you've described as a very "close," i.e., literal, rendering of the novel, was cowritten by you and the novelist. I'm curious about how your collaborative work with actors extends to situations like the one with Jacques Nolot [who appeared in *Nénette and Boni* and *J'ai pas sommeil*], when you are not only working with the actor as an actor, but as a writer as well, as is the case in *The Hoop Skirt*.

CD: I made *The Hoop Skirt* for ARTE. Playwrights were asked to write a monologue, and then several filmmakers were asked to film the monologues. Jacques wrote his, a monologue in a woman's voice. I said to him—this is crazy, you are the one who wrote the text, it is so close to you, you are the only person who can really recite this monologue. So we came up with the idea that he would recite the monologue to a woman who listens. I know Jacques very well, and he thought that I understood his text quite well.

In *I Can't Sleep*, Nolot's role was supposed to have been much bigger. [*When Daïga runs into a movie theater to escape a man who is pursuing*

her on the street, she sits next to Jacques Nolot. The scene is hilarious; Daïga didn't realize she was in a porn theater. She is surrounded by men who look at her as if she were an alien creature. She bursts out laughing. —JM]¹ The scene in which he appears, in the porn theater, was partially responsible for the film which he wrote and directed that takes place entirely in a porn theater, *La chatte à deux têtes* [Porn Theater] which came out last year [2002].

In *I Can't Sleep*, the scene with Nolot was initially longer, and he invites Daïga to dinner. The scene was quite long. The film was completed just before the Cannes festival, and there was a moment of panic. The producer said the film is too long; you have to shorten it. I think he (the producer) really wanted me to cut that particular scene. I said okay, I cut the scene, I said, it's probably a good idea. . . . and later I really regretted it. That was the only time I had to cut a scene.

JM: Of all of the films I've had an opportunity to see—i.e., the short films, like those we've just discussed, and films that aren't easily available—the one that I think of as a great revelation is *U.S. Go Home*. Unfortunately it isn't distributed in the U.S.

CD: It has been shown in the U.S., but no, it isn't distributed there. ARTE—the producers of the televised series *All the Boys and Girls of Their Age*, for which *U.S. Go Home* was made—had a small budget, but great musical freedom. For the televised series, the films could only be sixty minutes long, which is too short for a commercial release, and the cost of paying musical rights for a commercial release would be enormous.

JM: Why is it that some films in the series—like those of André Téchiné and Olivier Assayas—are feature-length films?²

CD: Those directors said, we'll do the television series, but we're going to make feature-length films, and then you can show shorter versions for ARTE. I was the last one who signed on for the series, because I was shooting *I Can't Sleep*. *U.S. Go Home* had to be completed in September, and I began shooting in July. Every time someone wanted to make a feature-length film (to be shortened for the television screening), it was in conflict with the contract and involved a big debate with ARTE. I said, fine, I have two months to complete the film, and I don't want to get into this complication. Téchiné completed shooting very early, and there was a long discussion about whether he could do the feature-length

film, and Olivier Assayas also finished a good year before I did. There I was, in the space of two months I had to shoot, edit, and complete the film to have it to ARTE by September. I said, fine, I won't pursue the option of a feature-length film.

JM: How did you come to direct *Nice, Very Nice*, which stars one of your favorite actors, Grégoire Colin?³

CD: That was a strange thing. The guy who proposed the film wanted us to do an homage to Jean Vigo's film *A Propos de Nice* [1930]. I was in the midst of preparing *Nénette and Boni*. I said, listen, what you are asking would require a year's worth of work to do it well, to do a real work of commentary on Vigo's film. I preferred to use this as an opportunity to do some preparation for *Nénette and Boni*. I had read in the newspaper about a young man, in Nice, who was ordered to kill another man who was a pizza-maker, and that became the subject of my film.

JM: One of the most intriguing films you've made is also quite unlike anything else you've done: *A propos d'une déclaration* [*About a Declaration*]. Many of your films are about sexuality, but this one—in which a woman shaves her pubic hair in a bathtub while a rubber duck looks on—is nonetheless quite distinct.

CD: When I was commissioned to do the film, it wasn't to be projected on a screen; it was to be part of an installation at the Cartier Foundation. The exhibition included paintings and sculptures, and four filmmakers were invited to make video installations that would be looped, continuously on display. The other filmmakers were Olivier Assayas, Raymond Depardon, and André Bonzel [*eventually Hal Hartley and Nacer Khemir were included as well*—JM]. When I was invited to participate in the project, Philippe Sollers was the curator, and the exhibition was called "The Declaration of Love" (eventually it was called "Love"). So I began with my portable digital camera, and since the theme of the exhibition was "a declaration of love," I thought of Nagisa Oshima, and of how, in *In the Realm of Passion*, the man asks the woman to shave her pubic area for him. Sollers and I had talked about Oshima, and the film I made was an homage to that scene. Afterwards, the Cartier Foundation thought that the film was too "indecent" for their exhibition, and they asked me to make a film about "Love" in general, and therefore to get rid of what they found offensive. Sollers insisted that my film remain as a part of the exhibit. What interested me was a film about that scene in *In the Realm*

of *Passion*, but I was doing publicity for another film at the time, and I was working on *A propos d'une déclaration* in the evenings. By the time I was finished with the film, Cartier removed things from the original exhibition. Once they removed the scene from Oshima's film, the exhibit was much more general, about "love" rather than specifically about the declaration of love. They no longer wanted my film; they thought it was offensive; Sollers was the one who insisted that my film remain.

JM: Could you talk about the film you directed for Amnesty International, *Pour Ushari Ahmed Mahmoud*? It's quite beautiful.

CD: When Amnesty International invited me to make a film, there were twenty cases that were to be featured in the films. Amnesty International's approach is to select a particular case and to write letters to the president on behalf of the individual. For the series of films, Amnesty International had an idea that I thought was a good one: each film would be a joint effort with two people, i.e., a writer would work with an actress, a director with an actor, etc. The principle of each film was the reading of a letter. I said, listen, I really don't know how to choose "my prisoner," I will make the film about whichever prisoner you like. So they proposed a Sudanese man, a professor, who was in prison. Alain Souchon, my partner for the film, who is a singer, and I made the film. We began by writing a letter that Alain would read aloud in the film. Then I said, listen, Alain, since you're a singer it might be better for you to "sing" the letter. But when we were ready, Amnesty International learned that the prisoner might be released. So they told us, don't say his name aloud in the film, because if you do, they might take it the wrong way and send him back to prison.

I went to twenty different rooming houses in Belleville, and I found two young Sudanese men who barely spoke French, and I asked them to participate in the film. They did.

JM: On various web sites, I've seen reference to other films by you, but they don't seem to be distributed. For example, *Portrait of Jean-Louis Murat* [a popular singer in France who wrote the title song for *I Can't Sleep*, as well as the song — "Le lien défait" — that Camille lip-syncs in his performance — JM].

CD: That film was never completed. I worked with Yousry Nasrallah on it, in Egypt. We all enjoyed making the film, but the record producer didn't think it was good publicity for Jean-Louis Murat. They refused to

pay for the completion of the film, which angered me a bit, but I said, sooner or later, I'll finish the film myself. I've tried to recover the rights for the film, so that Jean-Louis and I can finish it ourselves.

JM: . . . and *Boom-Boom*?

CD: That was the original title for *U.S. Go Home*. "Boom" is the French word for party, and there is a Chuck Berry song called "Boom Boom." I didn't use the song in the film, so I changed the title.

JM: . . . and *Ni une ni deux* [*Neither One Nor Two*]?

CD: *Ni une ni deux* is a film I began to make for Antenne 2 [*a French television company—JM*], about Cameroonian women—one was a television announcer, one was a pharmacist, another was a city planner, and another was a deputy. They all had fairly important jobs. They spoke about how difficult and impossible their lives were, even though Cameroon is not—compared to other countries—a horrible place. But for them, life was really hard—doing their jobs, raising their children, living with their husbands. They were always in conflict with their in-laws, who thought that their careers were too important in their lives. That was the theme. These were brilliant women. The film was never finished because, first of all, the producer was having enormous production problems at the time, and, second, Antenne 2 wanted me to do a voice-over. All of the women spoke French with a slight Cameroonian accent, but Antenne 2 wanted a voice-over. I said I thought it was a shame that these women couldn't speak for themselves, that it had to be me who told their stories. So that became a matter of principle for me. There was no reason why they couldn't speak for themselves. I said, listen, this just isn't right. Why does there always have to be this exoticizing means of separating the voice from the person? The women spoke very well. So that was that . . .

JM: You've spoken, in interviews, about voice-overs, and how they never work unless they are really an integral part of the film.

CD: This was different, because this was using the voice-over to objectify the women, so it wasn't acceptable to me. There are many films with voice-overs that I like, but I think it's very difficult to do well. The voice-over has to be very clearly defined; either it is the voice of the filmmaker or the voice of a character in the film. For me, the most beautiful example of voice-over is Godard's *Le Petit soldat*. Michel Subor [as Bruno Forestier] does the voice-over, but it is Godard who

is speaking. For me, that is a perfect example of a voice-over. I don't think I've ever really succeeded with a voice-over. The voice-over is a strong expression of the filmmaker's position in regards to the film. In other words, does the director need to be in the film? For me, it's as if I'm already in the film, in other ways. To me, doing a voice-over is like redoing the same film, adding something once it is completed, and that's not something I've been able to do. Maybe someday I'll find myself in a situation where I want to do a voice-over, but it hasn't happened yet.

I made the effort for *Beau travail*, because that film is somewhat dedicated to *Le Petit soldat*. Denis Lavant's [as Galoup] first spoken words are the last sentence of *Le Petit soldat*.

JM: But in *No Fear, No Die*, Dah has a voice-over, particularly in the beginning of the film.

CD: Sort of, yes, because we were quoting Chester Himes.

JM: There is an interesting play with the voice-over in that film. At the very beginning of the film, we see the Chester Himes quotation as a title, and then Dah repeats the quotation in voice-over. Then he says, "I don't know who said that, but it isn't important." The scene reminded me of the beginning to another Godard film, *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* [1967], when Godard recites an introduction to the actress Marina Vlady, and he says almost exactly the same thing: "Now, she's turning her head to the left, but it isn't important" [Godard 1971: 21].

CD: Perhaps . . . I thought it was in Dah's character not to know who the quotation was from. You come to the cinema with your experiences and your life, and Godard came to the cinema as someone who had written about the cinema, so perhaps he felt the need to continue to write about his work in the form of the voice-over. As for me, I lived in a world where Godard's extraordinary and revitalizing creative force was difficult to take on as any kind of model. Instead, his films were to be loved and admired, as I love *Le Petit soldat*. But in my admiration, I don't want to reproduce something, to imitate it, because I would feel ridiculous doing so . . .

JM: But there are very strong ways in which your films admire other films and other filmmakers without ever being imitations or copies. I suspect that you really love the films of Robert Bresson. Take the scene in *I Can't Sleep*, where the first murder of an old woman is presented (well over halfway into the film). The woman opens the outside door to

the apartment complex, and she is followed by Camille and Raphael. It is very quiet, except for the footsteps of the old woman, clicking across the pavement. You've described that scene as borrowing a bit from the codes of the horror film, using silence and the sounds of footsteps to suggest suspense and anxiety and the sense that something bad is about to happen. But for me that scene is a strong evocation of Bresson, and the ways in which the exaggerated sounds of footsteps mark the passage of human movement, as well as the sense of space that is filled, but also hollowed out, by the presence of human beings. In the scene in *I Can't Sleep*, the footsteps become, briefly, the center of the scene, and they mark the presence as well as the absence of the old woman.

There are many moments in your films that evoke Bresson, from the footsteps in *I Can't Sleep*, to the vast, seemingly "empty" spaces of Djibouti that are inhabited by the Legionnaires in *Beau travail*. In saying this, I don't mean to suggest that your work is in any way derivative, or even that your films are homages to Bresson (or any other director). Rather, it is as if there is a consciousness, in your films, of cinematic traditions, of cinematic history, and of cinematic authorship. In your films, you reflect upon what cinema is, and that reflection seems to take you across different traditions and different moments in the conception of the cinema.

CD: It's true; it's difficult to have seen even just one film by Bresson and not to have been marked by the experience. The first Bresson film I ever saw (I was quite young) was *Mouchette* [1967]. I had the impression that this was a very concrete and brutal way to approach cinema. I think often of this film, because I had the impression that, above and beyond Georges Bernanos [*whose novella was the basis for the film—JM*], or religion, or purity, or a pure soul and its contamination, there was something very concrete. Later I might have intellectualized this concreteness, because now I can think of *Mouchette* in different terms. I was a teenager when I saw the film. It felt like a film of the time. When I saw Bresson's film *The Devil, Probably* [1977], I felt it was a film about my life, about people my age in a Paris that I knew—perhaps a little more bourgeois than I was, but I felt as though the film was grounded in the concrete, in my own life.

One never forgets Bresson. Admiration is a very complicated thing. It's like an alchemy; you admire something and then one day you realize

that this admiration has permeated your skin. You don't have to say: "Am I going to approach this situation as Bresson might have? Or not?" It's there, it's a reflex. Then afterwards you might say to yourself—aha, yes, perhaps that was a Bressonian moment.

JM: The moment in *I Can't Sleep* when Daïga follows Camille to a café and there is that brief fluttering touch of their hands—that seems to me a very Bressonian moment.

CD: That light touch, yes . . . the scene was written to be very brief; they met in the café; he looked at her; she looked at him, and she wanted him to know that she knew, that she understood. We had very little time to shoot that scene, and the mise-en-scène was done very quickly and very simply. And it was only afterwards that I said to myself, yes, that works. But at the time, there was the street, the café, and little by little we moved towards that one moment when they touch.

JM: It's a beautiful moment in the film. The reception of *I Can't Sleep* was complex; many saw you as reviving the Thierry Paulin case, even though the film doesn't work in any way as a "serial killer" film. I love your films, yet I was fearful of seeing *I Can't Sleep*! Like many people, I wondered how you could possibly succeed in making a film about a black, gay, HIV-positive serial killer, without falling into the very stereotypes that characterized news reports about Paulin in the first place. But you made an amazing film that takes the recognition of murder and violence to a whole other level. Now I know you've said that you don't like provocation, but how is it that you are drawn to these potentially controversial subjects?

CD: I don't like provocation because I take no pleasure in provoking people. You have to enjoy provocation to do it, and I don't. I always approach situations with curiosity, and sometimes my curiosity might make me audacious. But the motivation for my curiosity is never the desire to provoke. One day someone proposed that I adapt a true crime [*fait divers*] story—not the Paulin case. I worked on that project, and after six months, I realized that it didn't really interest me, so I dropped it. The people who had proposed the topic, including the producer Philippe Carcassonne, said, well, what true crime story does interest you? And I said that I'd like to work on an obscure true crime story, one that hasn't received so much attention and commentary, one that would retain an aura of mystery for me. What had always interested me in the Paulin

case was that people who knew him thought he was a very nice guy . . . and also the fact that, one day, a mother reads the newspaper and sees her son described as a monster. That is something very strange, very odd. With true crime stories, journalists know that it's good to get an interview with the mother, or the brother, or the sister of the criminal. It brings an emotional hook to the story. But this is also the most uncomfortable thing, because one has to say to the mother: Your son is a monster. He was the monster of the eighteenth arrondissement, and even his lawyers were relieved when he died before the trial began. In France, there isn't a popular media conception of the "serial killer" like there is in the U.S. People were baffled by Paulin, and by the fact that the murders were not sexual.

When I agreed to use the Paulin case as the inspiration for the film, I said that I would focus on the people who knew him. I wouldn't focus on him. So I made a film about the people who knew him without knowing what he did. That, I thought, I can do. Jean-Pôl Fargeau and I worked for two years without stopping, but then we did stop because I began to have terrible doubts about what I was doing. And I asked myself, who is going to be willing to produce a film like this? Finally Olivier Assayas introduced me to Bruno Pesery. I told Olivier that I wasn't afraid myself, but I was afraid of not being able to communicate with a producer about a project like this. Pesery was willing to embark on the adventure, and so it happened. But frankly there was always the feeling of being a bit in the dark, and I tried to translate that in the film. There was a circular movement around him, and then he died. He evaporated.

JM: When you think about the work of an individual filmmaker, like I'm obviously doing in the book I'm writing on your films, it's hard not to think about which film is your favorite. But perhaps a more interesting way to think about "favorites" is to ask what film, or films, made a difference. I don't remember exactly when I saw *Chocolat* for the first time, but I believe it was shortly after it was released in 1988. The film was widely acclaimed, and people I knew were discussing the film in relationship to postcoloniality, to autobiography, to the relationship between past and present. But what has always stayed with me, in *Chocolat*, is that incredible ending: the adult France, with a slight smile on her face, turns away from the window at the airport. We then see the three Cameroonian men loading the plane and then taking a

break. The camera approaches them and then stops. The scene lasts a fairly long time, and it's a beautiful conclusion, one that rests on a kind of ambiguity—the woman whose memories have taken us to the colonial past has moved out of frame, and we are seeing—at a reserved distance—a moment of friendship between men. France's return has been neither happy nor tragic, but the film takes us away from her and towards something else.

When I saw *I Can't Sleep*, I thought that this entire film followed, in a way, from the conclusion of *Chocolat*. Seeing *I Can't Sleep* for the first time, I felt as though I was seeing something I had never seen before on screen. It felt like love at first sight.

CD: For me too, because that film was a real process of discovery. I understood the film while I was making it, because while making it, I was sharing the film with the actors. In that particular film, the actors became real partners. They weren't people who just showed up in the morning; they were really involved in the film. The young man who played the role inspired by Thierry Paulin [Richard Courcet], he wasn't an actor; he was completely invested in the project of the film. Jean-Pôl and I worked on the screenplay, but when it was embodied by the actors . . . Béatrice Dalle said it better than I could: "What was written on paper became flesh." All of a sudden, the violence on paper became something very different. The day that we began to film, there was desire, as if all of the different elements of the film had come into place.

There is a film by Shohei Imamura, called *Intentions of Murder*, which was made in the sixties. I saw it in the 1980s; Serge Daney had talked about it, and one summer in Paris there was a retrospective of Imamura's films. When Imamura spoke of the film, he said that it was the story of a sow. The film tells the story of a young Japanese woman, on the heavy side, who is forced into marriage to a man who doesn't love her. She is totally and completely a prisoner of this marriage. One day, her husband is away on business, and she is alone in the house. A thief breaks into the house and initially he doesn't see her. He is stealing things, and then she moves, and he sees her. He rapes her. At that moment, her life turns upside down. She has been so abandoned, and so mistreated, that she says hardly anything; for her, her body is useless flesh, and her role in life, as an object purchased by her husband, is to be the "female." All of a sudden, the rape makes her aware that this violent

act is preferable to the relationship she has with her husband; she feels she has more dignity as a woman who is raped than as a woman married to her husband. The man who raped her looked at her, whereas for her husband she was nothing but an inert object. The woman begins to go out in the afternoon, when her husband is at work, and she begins to have an independent life. Then, one day, the rapist comes back. They see each other, and she leaves behind everything—her husband, her child, everything—to be with him.

This film was also based on a true story. I found the film to be extraordinary, because a violent action reveals something very unexpected—the awareness that one is alive, even though the violent action is truly horrible. Things that you just assume about life can suddenly take shape in an event—it doesn't necessarily have to be a violent event—and all of a sudden, you realize that you exist, there, in that event.

JM: Much has been made of the fact that your films demonstrate a real curiosity about men. You collaborate with both men [Fargeau] and women [Agnès Godard, Nelly Quettier], and despite the common assumption that your films are male-centered, there are great female characters in your films as well—Nénette in *Nénette and Boni*, Coré in *Trouble Every Day*, Laure in *Friday Night*. How do you see yourself as a “woman filmmaker”?

CD: I never think about the question. I think about it when a film is completed, but rarely do I think about it beforehand. Since I'm a woman, I always have the impression that the film is “female” from the outset, but I share it with men and with women. So the film becomes a relationship—with Jean-Pól Fargeau, with Agnès Godard—and that is what's important, the relationship. Even if I'm at the origin of the film, and the film is therefore “feminine,” the work of filmmaking is a relationship. It's a relationship with the actors, and it is a very erotic relationship. One day Béatrice Dalle said to me, “I'm heterosexual, and if Claire were a man we'd be married by now!” And I understand what she was saying, because when you make a film, when you share the making of a film, it's very intense.

You can't do something that isn't part of who you are. When male directors move towards female characters—something they've done quite a bit of—that's where their desire, whether it's heterosexual or

homosexual, crystallizes, around the representation of a female icon. It's all about desire. . . .

Notes

1. In the original screenplay for *I Can't Sleep*, Nolot's character speaks at length to Daïga's character in the porn cinema, and they leave together to have dinner. For a complete description and dialogue of the scene, see the original screenplay (Denis and Fargeau 1997: 65–66).

2. Three films in the series were also released as feature films under different titles. André Téchiné's film *Les Roseaux sauvages* is the expanded version (for theatrical release) of the film shown in the series. Olivier Assayas's *L'eau froide* is the feature-length version of *La Page blanche*, and Cédric Kahn's *Trop de bonheur* is the expanded version of *Le Bonheur*.

3. The film is a short (ten minutes) contribution to the omnibus film *A Propos de Nice, la suite*, in which nine different filmmakers participated.

