

LOVE ME TENDER: NEW FILMS FROM CLAIRE DENIS

Emma Wilson

Now at the acme of her slow-burn career—she turned seventy-two last year—Claire Denis is producing work that is superlative. In a recent interview, when Ryan Gilbey asked her if she is happy about getting older, she answered: “It’s a disaster. It’s a wreck. To be able to stay up for three nights without sleep, to get so drunk you are in a coma—these things I miss the most. On the other hand, my body is able to move, I still have feelings, and I’m making films.”¹ Her newest works conjure feelings of an unrivalled intensity and tenderness.

Denis’s films to date confirm her position as the preeminent filmmaker in contemporary Europe, the director who has responded most fully to the thrall and horror of Europe’s colonial projects, the crimes of capitalism, the damage of the Anthropocene, and the ambient moods of contemporary existence. Her work continues to be marked by a suave visual and sonic style that makes the films as languorous as they are ethically stringent. But right now, in this decade, facing the “disaster” of aging, she seems to be reaching a new calmness and poignancy.

The films are, as ever, untethered, melancholy, marked by cruelty. Their attention to human feelings, though, is unexpectedly gentle as Denis also pursues her ethical and political concerns. Despite their differences, her films have consistently retained ambiguities of narrative that transpire only on the margins of the viewer’s consciousness. The actions of the figures in her films have often seemed to be automatic gestures or unexplained rituals, producing a sense of looking in on a world not fully understood, and fostering doubt and paranoia in viewers. Similar feelings of helplessness and of ricocheting forward without full cognition infuse her two newest films, *Un beau soleil intérieur* (*Let the Sunshine In*, 2017) and *High Life* (2018), ostensibly a French rom-com and an English-language sci-fi film, respectively.²

The two films, despite having distinct generic locales and modes, converge as forceful meditations on love and death.³



Director Claire Denis. © 2013 Alcatraz Films / Wild Bunch / ARTE
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Denis has always confronted the limits of the human in her work, through a contemplation of its forms of subjugation and misery.⁴ But these two recent films, coming together as they do in this phase of her career, imbue her central themes with an unprecedented blend of levity, darkness, and tenderness. In the world of Denis, tenderness characterizes the gentlest, most delicate feelings, but is also about vulnerability, a sensitivity to pain. Denis brings these qualities into relief as she contemplates death and a finite future through these stories of a female artist exploring relationships and of convict passengers on a spaceship. The surge of erotic feeling and a desire for risk, the intense love for a baby daughter and a desire to protect her—these are the raw drives and human vulnerabilities that Denis aligns and explores in these films.

High Life takes death—the limitedness of human existence, and the inevitability of its end—as its sine qua non. The novelist Zadie Smith was initially engaged to collaborate with Denis on the script, but the collaboration fell apart. Denis explains that Smith wanted the space travelers of this dystopian film to return to Earth, to go home. “What the fuck do you mean, going home?” Denis said she asked Smith. “There’s no one alive there anymore.”⁵ Her words refer to an Earth that is, according to the film’s narrative, light-years away from the spaceship. Further, for Denis, home has clearly been emptied as an idea, lost to these characters as a refuge because the place and its

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Robert Pattinson in *High Life*. © 2013 Alcatraz Films / Wild Bunch / ARTE France Cinema / Pandora Films Produktion

people are now missing. Her words cast a shadow, too, over the survivors in the ship. Maybe there's no one alive there either? The figures viewed are perhaps just hallucinatory memories, specters from a dying world.

High Life was being made just as Denis's mother was dying in Paris.⁶ Denis spoke about her sadness during this time in her master class at France Culture. Her openness about her feelings here and in interviews makes an encounter with the film particularly charged. Indeed, *High Life* seems rocked by the unfathomability of attending to someone dying: a sense of physical damage, rarefication of love, absurd waiting. There is in the film a leveling of feeling, a sheer sense of life as fragile, fast, fleeting, and desperate. Denis has always been sober and unsentimental about mortality and its absurdities. Now her films hazard no illusions, but take time to attend to feelings, pain, and the actuality of life when death is apparent. They move closer in to intimacies, the drive to love, and the injunction of death.

Close to the start of *High Life*, Monte (Robert Pattinson) moves around the spaceship where he is interred, the last survivor of the original crew. At this stage in his suicide mission he needs to rid the ship of any excess material, so he removes the docile corpse of each crew member from the ship's morgue, dresses it in a space suit, and guides it, like

a soft puppet, to the exit hatch. The hatch opening into deep space yields a Malevich-like square. This darkness is silently there around all the film's actions and events. Monte relentlessly pushes each corpse out into space, his gesture each time creating an involuntary squeeze of vertigo, like a small seizure, as the body passes into the void.

The ship is slowly rid of the bodies in a systematic emptying, a transition to a new order of aloneness. The corpses fall with narcotic slowness through space as the title words *High Life* appear. In this dance of corpse automata in her title image, Denis comes close to the lark and plunge of modernist prose, its mania, and fall, as in *The Waste Land's* euphoric "O O O O that Shakespearian rag . . . so elegant . . . so intelligent."⁷

The decaying vessel of a now emptied ship is the strange nursery where Monte is raising his space child, Willow (Scarlett Lindsey), whose origin story is only later revealed. This baby is magical, more than human.⁸ As she sits in her playpen, the saturated lights of the ship's control panel—red, egg-yolk yellow, pink, turquoise—are reflected all around her like a nighttime lantern or kaleidoscope. Her baby sounds are part of the heightened soundscape of the vessel. Early scenes of the film are a lullaby, long and protracted; Robert Pattinson reaches some mesmeric level of feeling as

he looks after this child. Claire Denis has described these sequences as “the most tender story possible.”⁹

Monte’s gentle care for Willow recalls shots of Boni (Grégoire Colin) face to face with his sister’s baby in *Nénette et Boni* (*Nenette and Boni*, 1996) and of Colin again in *L’intrus* (*The Intruder*, 2004) as a young father holding the scalp of his baby child.¹⁰ But *High Life* looks more closely at nurturing and comfort. It conjures feelings, about protection and being protected, that extend beyond parenting to access vulnerability, a self or world as yet unspoiled, responsiveness, memory, or instinct that is human and animal all at once. Denis’s lingering on this story is a part of the enhanced tenderness of her cinema.

Monte harvests vegetables from a garden that grows in a protected space on the ship and prepares puree for his child, baby food that he takes time to stir till it is smooth. He lies with her and soothes her, his physical stillness reassuring. His rituals have a sure sense. He holds Willow and strokes her belly gently, sensitive to her feelings. Her huge dark eyes, almost alien, make her seem full of a liquid and ultrareceptive vulnerability. Her equanimity and live curiosity add pathos to those moments where she is sleepy or needy. The warm lighting of these scenes, their shadowy colors reminiscent of snapshot and Polaroid photography, the bodily closeness, and the timelessness make the scenes seem like memories. Their calm, Monte’s perfect absorption, the net of protection he casts around Willow in this wild extra-terrestrial world make the scenes also spellbinding. It is as if they are dreams of caring perfectly, somewhere in space, for a child who never existed, or for a baby who died.¹¹

Monte is an American convict. In the time before this film opens, he killed a girl over the death of his pet dog, and ended up on death row. His character’s past is revealed in fragments that cut into the ongoing narrative. Its interwoven crime story set within the bare landscapes of Poland (Polish financing also made the film possible) recall the mood and territories of earlier Denis films, notably *L’intrus* with its frozen wastelands, human trafficking, and illegal organ transplantation.

Both *L’intrus* and *High Life* reflect with outrage on the differential valuation of life and death for those who have slipped outside the law. When Denis happened to read a report expressing indignation at the financial cost of keeping prisoners on death row in the United States, she imagined a limit solution wherein such prisoners would sign up to be sent into deep space, experimentally, with no return. This is the premise of *High Life*.¹²

These convicts are guinea pigs, human avatars in the tradition of Laika, the first living creature to orbit the earth,

and the other Russian dogs that followed her. As if making this link, close to the end of *High Life* Monte encounters another spaceship on a carceral mission. His is 07 and this is 09. Stepping inside, he finds a hellish ship of dogs, experimental creatures sent into space, some long dead, some eerily surviving, like a nightmare version of an installation by Pierre Huyghe.¹³ This other ship, with its dog mortuary, seems also like some place far in the reaches of Monte’s imagination where manifest memories of his own grief and crime still linger. His encounter with the limits of life, with the death of his dog and his killing of a girl, this horror he can’t leave behind and that has taken him into space, seems to impel his overwhelming, concerted protection of Willow, his miraculously living child.

In the face of their effective death sentence on the suicide mission in space, Monte’s will for Willow to survive appears as both obtuse and self-canceling. He and she cannot survive. He says that he should have put a knife in her and killed himself right after. They are alone facing this dilemma, after the rest of the crew have succumbed either to acts of homicide, to suicide in space, or to radiation sickness. The lone survivor, Monte, looks after Willow, raises, nurtures, and protects her, even in the sure knowledge of their shared and doomed destiny. He stays alive for her despite his apprehension of their fragility: the disavowed horror, this knowledge that he and she must both die. Claire Denis’s film brings finality to the fore through a narrative that makes this eviscerating pain radiantly present. But the tending of Willow becomes a drawn-out end in itself, even as they both wait for death.

A conundrum of *High Life*, as it isolates Monte and Willow in their ship in deep space, as the corpses are ejected from their environs and their only fellow space travelers are crazed dogs, is that father and daughter alone remain each other’s significant other. In a nightmare telescoping of time, in this fleeting life, Willow reaches adolescence. As she lies close to Monte she leaves a stain of blood in his sheets, leading him to send her back to her own sleeping bunk. Their relations at this age, at this stage of the film, look back to the cowed respect, and tenderness, of Lionel and Joséphine in *35 rhums* (*35 Shots of Rum*, 2008), but now Denis goes further. A hypersensitivity to incest is endemic to her bleak and ecstatic vision of humanity. It is simply there: subtly yet pointedly invoked, a shadow presence.

In the final delirium of *High Life*, the ship is set to enter a black hole in a bid to harness its energy for a declining universe. Monte believes they will burn up. Willow is sure they will enter. Unclear about their chances myself, I turn to Stephen Hawking, who likens entering a black hole to going



Monte's (Robert Pattinson) visual isolation. © 2013 Alcatraz Films / Wild Bunch / ARTE France Cinema / Pandora Films Produktion

over Niagara Falls in a canoe: “If you are above the falls, you can get away if you paddle fast enough, but once you are over the edge, you are lost. There’s no way back.”¹⁴

Monte’s last words to Willow are “Shall we?” Entering the black hole, dying, and consenting to incestuous love are bound as one. The film cuts to a golden, irradiated shot of his child. She is transcendent. The image has all the mnemonic force of a frame from Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962). Once inside a black hole, as Hawking says, “[a]s far as the outside world is concerned, you would be lost forever.”¹⁵ Despite the subject of incest that burns through her films, Denis’s vision of fathers and daughters in *High Life* is most full of pathos.¹⁶ Despite Monte’s protection of Willow, his policing of himself, his acts of care as the spaceship falls apart around them, his romance is still with her. There is no one else.

The ending of *High Life* is inspired by Olafur Eliasson’s artwork *Contact*, which was shown in a solo exhibition at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris in 2014. The artist collaborated with Denis on the design of *High Life*. The golden band of light and surrounding darkness are the same as in *Contact*.¹⁷ On his website Eliasson explains: “The static line of light creates a tension in the viewer’s spatial awareness, juxtaposing itself to her felt horizon, which undergoes constant change as she moves through space.”¹⁸ As the credits of

the film appear, Robert Pattinson sings an anthem to Willow, composed by Stuart Staples (of Tindersticks), with whom Denis so frequently works. Monte’s lament is amniotic and elegiac, deep in the energy of attachment and feeling, radiant, even lovesick.

Reviving the Female Monster

If the romance of Monte and Willow is at the center of *High Life*, Denis also approaches her theme of love and death, of life drastically exhausted and dried out, in other ways that draw the film closer to its immediate predecessor, *Let the Sunshine In*. Through flashbacks, she focuses on other members of the crew. She bestows attention most lavishly on Dr. Dibs (Juliette Binoche), who controls the convicts around her. Binoche also appears in *Let the Sunshine In*. In her collaboration with Denis on these two films, giving herself over so fully as an erotically alive and unsatisfied woman of fifty or more, Binoche proves to be uniquely magnetic.¹⁹ Her appearance in both films, and the recurrence of attention to female sexuality, corporeal feeling, and the fear of entropy, brings the two projects close. Indeed it is the approach to this feminist issue of aging and life changes, taken seriously in a broader span of issues about exclusion and death, that is also part of a new attention to feeling in Denis.



Juliette Binoche and Claire Denis. © 2013 Alcatraz Films / Wild Bunch / ARTE France Cinema / Pandora Films Produktion.

Dibs, played by Binoche, is white-coated with a mane of long dark hair that she holds, tends, and touches like an animal. Her eroticism evokes the flesh and hair of Courbet's paintings. She is voluptuous and Gorgon-esque. In the most lavish scene, she enters what the characters call the fuck box (a name actually coined by Stuart A. Staples), the center of her laboratory on the ship. She stretches a condom over the contraption's mechanized dildo, and then rides on its vibrating body. The shots are delirious, with Denis showing Dibs's white back, her thighs, her hair, in extensive, convulsive movement. The shading of the image, the lines of hair on flesh, the contortions, recall Francisco Goya's drawings for *Witches' Sabbath*. The frenetic energy of the scene is compulsive. Shot through with the dungeon energy and darkness of hardcore porn, these scenes are made possible by Binoche's sensuality and sense of abandon, while they also confront misogynist taboos about women, aging, and sexuality.

Claire Denis cherishes female monsters. She risks making Dibs maniacal and threatening, as well as sexy, like Béatrice Dalle in earlier Denis films. Dibs puts heavy doses of drugs in the water supply of the ship when she wants to sedate her fellow crew. She feeds pills to the guys who donate their sperm for her reproductive experiments. She examines each clotted specimen in a jar before she hands out treats. Monte alone refuses to participate, so she lies over him at night, brooding like a female insect, before she inserts him into her body and neatly harvests his sperm. She takes him without his consent, yet there's also an undeniable connection between them. He says to her: "You know you're foxy."²⁰ And she *is* in the film: sexy, vulpine, her face tired from insomnia and radiation, her hair alive.

Boyse (Mia Goth), a female convict whom Dibs is auditioning to serve as the mother of the space baby she wants to create, reveals Dibs's crime: Medea-like, she'd killed

her children. Boyse details the repeated sequence of Dibs killing each one, each child, killing them "with their little pillows," and adds: "I would have killed myself." Dibs replies simply: "I tried."²¹ Dibs has a scar across her abdomen, and down to her sex, and, as a character taunts her, a "plastic pussy."²² As she lies above Monte, she says that if she closes her eyes she may just barely feel him inside her. The frenzy of her moves in the fuck box is explained as a quest for feeling: she seeks pleasure in this numb, prosthetic space of her body. The reason for her surgery is never explained. The scar and prosthesis serve symbolically to register her failed maternity, her acts of matricide, her monstrosity, and also her aging.

As if acting against the suicide mission and finitude that are the film's subject, Dibs in her laboratory is making children in space. Since she can't do this in her body anymore, she harnesses the reproductive potential of the young convicts around her in repeated rituals of artificial insemination. The fetuses do not survive the radiation of the deep space environment, alas, but she keeps on trying, against all sense, against nature. Her last mother subject is Boyse. Like Monte, Boyse is nonconsenting. But Dibs inseminates her with Monte's sperm and makes a baby. This is the origin of Willow, the child who does survive. In a liquid image of horror, the film shows milk pouring from Boyse's breasts, unstoppable, flooding her clothes, her body alien to her. Dibs holds up Willow in her arms in sheer joy.

Countering this tender embrace of fertility is what comes next: in protest, Boyse attempts to leave the spaceship in a satellite vessel and dies violently, her body lacerated, shaken into pieces. Boyse's death lets death be apprehended as physical disintegration, her body coming apart in the vessel in one of the film's darkest moments. This is where the film also goes, even at the moments of elation about Willow's birth.²³

Close to the end of the film, the adolescent Willow asks Monte if she looks like her mother; he says no. It is true that she barely resembles Boyse. Willow is dark-haired as an adolescent, her hair starting to grow into a mane, as the film plants an unexplained resemblance between Willow and Dibs. It is as if Dibs's will to make a child and her reproductive engineering have left their mark in the girl who was conceived. Beyond nature, beyond artificial insemination, Denis imagines new forms of parthenogenesis. Rather than prescribing motherhood as imaginary destiny for menopausal or older women, Denis offers narratives of regeneration and filiation that refuse the elimination of nonfertile, monstrous, or convicted women. Dibs can deliver Willow into a mad universe of radiation sickness and lost feeling.



Dr. Dibs (Juliette Binoche) artificially inseminates a young convict in *High Life*.

Denis even shows Willow's first steps in the ship, as if referencing the first-ever steps in space.

The Existential Darkness of *Let the Sunshine In*

Binoche gives herself over to Dibs and, with Denis, creates the strongest performance of her career. But she is also radiant in *Let the Sunshine In*. The two roles are linked. Indeed, seen with *High Life*, *Let the Sunshine In* acquires resonance and darkness.²⁴ In *Let the Sunshine In*, Binoche plays Isabelle, an artist who is considering possibilities for sexual and romantic fulfillment in the next stages of her life. It has been read—with the encouragement of its poster artwork and its off-key, optimistic translated title—as a rom-com. It is also, like *High Life*, a reflection on life as fleeting and absurd. But here Denis explores this theme through a focus on unpromising amorous futures and the unmooring of existence in mid-age.

The film was initially conceived as an adaptation of Roland Barthes's beloved text *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*.²⁵

As demonstrated earlier by Denis's adaptation of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's short text *L'intrus* (*The Intruder*) into her film of the same name, her engagements with the texts of others are tangential and glancing, and the richer for it. What Denis retains from Barthes in *Let the Sunshine In* is his painstaking acuity about love: that love undoes reason, rendering its aspirants, whatever their age, as anxious children in a dance of fear, susceptibility, and misconception. It is the closeness, and concertedness, with which she looks at this intimate theme through the conundrum of a middle-aged woman's wish for love that sets *Let the Sunshine In* apart from her more muted, suggestive earlier works. She comes in close here to the smallest feelings about love.

Beyond Barthes, Denis takes on a further partner in this project: contemporary writer Christine Angot, who, in autofiction inspired by Marguerite Duras and Hervé Guibert, has created new representations of love, sex, and incest.²⁶ In several texts, Angot confronts her sexual abuse by her father when she was in her teens.²⁷ Her books also scrutinize, as a feminist act and literary experiment, the emotional and



Isabelle (Juliette Binoche) during a moment of elation in *Let the Sunshine In*.

erotic connections of her female protagonists.²⁸ The exact novel that inspired Denis is Angot's *Le marché des amants* (*The Marketplace of Lovers*, 2008). The collaboration with Angot creates a wordier film than those to which Denis's viewers are accustomed, one that is also seductively, satirically, and blackly funny. Denis describes it as a "sort of funny tragedy."²⁹ The film was made in a very short time, with a very small budget and a script "written fast in a café every day" by Angot, in a process that Denis recalls as "full of joy and trust."³⁰

Let the Sunshine In exists in a place where the urge for good sex and romantic love is inexhaustible. Isabelle, an artist in her fifties, divorced and mother of a daughter, leaves her brutish lover and starts to see other men. She appears to be newly conceiving of her life as finite, so with each sexual conquest, she thinks about whether this is the one, whether this is it. (She is Juliette Binoche, after all, so she keeps on getting dates.) Focusing on what remains of her life calibrates it suddenly with a new urgency, a quest against time to find love, to find a desirable man. The failed dates and affairs that accumulate in the film contribute each time to a creeping sense that there may be nothing more to come.³¹

The character of Isabelle is childlike, impetuous, and very human. Her fragility and failure to learn, Binoche's sunny despair, radiant and tearful, make her character

easily familiar. She is a sort of modern Emma Bovary. In *Let the Sunshine In*, Denis leaves Isabelle, her Bovary character, still dating, though desperate about the platitudes that seem to describe her future possibilities. In *High Life*, again through Binoche's character, Denis pushes further to a nihilistic Flaubertian close, where Dibs's suicidal entry into the darkness can be aligned with the black bile of Emma's death. Viewing the two films together in the proximity of their releases creates a disquieting link between the two characters, Isabelle and Dibs, and between the two endings, into a nothingness alternately comic and tragic.

The form of *Let the Sunshine In* is beautifully matched to Isabelle's elation and despair: it shows her appetite to be unflagging as she engages again and again, entering each new encounter in a series of scenarios. In these, the film apes the fragmented form of the Barthes's text but moves further in making the scenarios sequential, as if part of an evolving, unreeling narrative, with no happy end.

Some writers have criticized the film's exclusive interest in Isabelle's sexual and romantic life—at the expense of any focus on her possible fulfillment and satisfaction as an artist or on her role as the mother of a daughter whose care she shares with her ex.³² In fact, the daughter is glimpsed only in one shot in a car in a changeover scene between the parents, just

as there is only one scene of Binoche with paint, despite her ostensible vocation. (Her professional context is hinted at in a scene in which filmmaker/actress Josiane Balasko, gorgeous here, plays a gallery owner whom Isabelle confusedly accuses of sleeping with her husband.)

Isabelle—handsome, clever, and rich, an artist and a mother, too—has every reason to be happy. But she wants to be fucked. This is the film’s sex-positive feminism, and indeed Denis has been praised for the rare (!) representation of the sex life of a woman over fifty.³³ What is rare specifically is her serious attention to Isabelle’s desire and clear commitment to her desirability. This is facilitated by the casting of Binoche.³⁴ Denis films Binoche enjoying her body. Plunging necklines show the milky skin of her breasts. She is supple and confident as she moves. She is chic, *désinvolte*, breezily seductive in leather and thigh-high boots. The very fabrics she wears are sensual, comfortable, plush. Her body has an animal intensity that returns, with darker feelings, in her later portrayal of Dibs.

Binoche is a goddess. That even she, as Isabelle, is faced with so much erotic disappointment makes the film the more sardonic in its despairing recognition of the misogyny and ageist triviality women face. Men will not give Isabelle what she wants, and as the dating scenarios take on a gradually tragic turn, it starts to seem as if, on some deep bodily existential level, Isabelle feels she has no happier fate ahead of her than does Dr. Dibs on the doomed ship in *High Life*. The failure of her tender body, at fifty, to circulate satisfactorily in the misogynistic systems of love and marriage is one of the societal faults Denis decries here. This elegy to sexy women is pursued, with Dibs, in *High Life*.

The tone of *Let the Sunshine In* is figured particularly in its opening and closing scenes. The film opens with Isabelle naked. She seems to be alone, until a shot reveals the lover Vincent, a banker, played by film director Xavier Beauvois. They are having sex. He is thrusting inside her and she seems with him in their shared rhythm—“*Là*” (“There”), she says, instructing him—until she doesn’t come. She tells him just to continue, she’s good. He does. A tightly framed shot shows Binoche rocked by his moves, registering the odd disorientation of waiting. This has the feeling of a real-time sequence. She is waiting, his thrusts are urgent, and she is clearly uncomfortable.³⁵ When he asks if her boyfriend came more quickly, she slaps him and rolls over; when he rubs her back and dresses, he is still bristling. Like Michel Subor in other films by Denis, Beauvois carries himself with a solid presence, suave and a little bit threatening. Isabelle lies back again, still naked. The film cuts to its title, showing a chink of daylight through closed curtains.

The relationship is over. In a later scene Isabelle enters Vincent’s apartment, with its spacious stretch of leather sofas, wearing a leather skirt and stiletto-heeled boots. They argue. She has begun to question what pleasure she is getting. After several hesitations, she will leave him and initiate the series of encounters that represent her bids for a new amorous life. Leaving him seems a good move—given his capitalist belligerence and casual violence—but Isabelle confides to a friend that, in their sex life, thinking he was a bastard was exactly what used to make her come. When challenged, told that a character like Isabelle wouldn’t be with such a brute, Denis agrees, then confesses: “But it happened to me, too, you know.”³⁶

These scenes contain all the anger and derision of Angot’s prose and her lament for sexual relations between men and women. But as a dark comedy about heterosexuality, there is also a nonjudgmental admission that other women have been there, and done that, and wanted to. This truth is freeing, somehow, in its admission without shame of female complicity. Nor does the film offer any sense that life gets better for Isabelle after she leaves Vincent. Rather, her encounters devolve. She has one night of good sex with a prevaricating actor (Nicolas Duvauchelle) that is unseen, a failed encounter with her ex, and a short relationship with Sylvain (Paul Blain), a man of a different class whom Isabelle herself rejects, goaded by a male friend of her own social milieu who has previously encouraged her to be freer in her hook-ups. In one encounter, an intense moment of unreal promise with another man, Marc (Alex Descas), she takes his hand before he kisses her, insisting that he has to move on.

Mad humor finds its way into the film, too, in cameos by French actor, singer, and comedian Philippe Katerine, who runs into Isabelle several times at their local fishmonger’s



Isabelle (Juliette Binoche) on a date in *Let the Sunshine In*.

and, uncowed, serially invites her to visit his mother's house in the Lot.

The close of the film is bleak, though a layered and funny one. Isabelle's final man is a bulky male fortune-teller, David, played by none other than French cinematic icon Gérard Depardieu. This scene plays out as the credits roll, thereby acquiring a particular urgency and irony as a reflection on personal destiny and movie endings, unfolding just as the film itself is literally closing down.

Depardieu, physically recognizable in the role of David yet far removed from the silky youthful aura he held in his early work with Duras and others, is a relic here. His muted voice, his bulk, his familiarity with the details of her life, transfix Isabelle as she sits like a girl in front of him. Binoche plays the part with emotion, but absurdity seeps in as she describes her predictable errors and he patiently listens. She asks him about the future. He dangles a pendulum over a photo of her recent fling, Sylvain (Blain).

Narrating her life, David begins to detail how Sylvain will come back. He spells out the risks, then speaks about her chances, with twists and turns that have all the vagaries, hesitations, and conflicted affects of real life. Isabelle just wants some sign of a happy ending. David instead promises her someone weightier, sturdier, someone like himself. He says there will be other people too, offering a fluid, realistic, and unsatisfying vision. Isabelle sighs, recoiling suddenly from the exhausting familiarity of this design.

The excess of David's narrative is alarming, with its whole landscape of emotions. He offers her a story that is unassimilable and banal. He even coins the absurd title of the film, complacently instructing her to say, "*J'essaie de trouver un beau soleil intérieur*" ("I try to find a beautiful sun within"). When he asks her finally to be "open," the word said in English like a mantra, Binoche smiles, her face capturing an array of emotions. It is easy to feel tender toward her at this point. David keeps on talking and she keeps on listening, his tone so soothing he propels the film beyond its close. If the survivors in *High Life* are beings looking at the horizon line, at finitude, here Isabelle, open and smiling, is not far behind.

Both Philippe Katerine earlier and Depardieu at the close seem unsettlingly familiar, amiable, and even insinuating. Both are well-known figures outside the world of this film, so it feels almost as if they are merely visiting Isabelle's domain. Amid the desperation and lability that Isabelle shows throughout, these figures function as specters who want to make her encounter the force of her own new vulnerability. She has freed herself from a lover, but now she is effectively at their mercy.

Into the Void

These two new films by Denis, *High Life* and *Let the Sunshine In*, signal a change in the director's tone. Distinctly absurd, tragic, tender, they play out together, both equally envisaging an irrevocable and unmissable end point.

Denis has been here before, of course. Maria (Isabelle Huppert), unrelenting and desperate in *White Material* (2009), pursues her harvest of coffee single-mindedly as child soldiers pursue a massacre in the landscape around her. She is a more savage figure than Binoche's Isabelle, trying to uphold a colonial life in Africa, but their resilience is similar. Lionel (Alex Descas) in *35 Shots of Rum* observes a colleague retire, then watches as this man's life falls apart around him. The eponymous shots of rum, a nearly lethal dose, are part of the retirement ritual. Like Monte, Lionel sees his daughter grow. For all the understated hopes of the film, there remains a sense that ahead lies an alcohol coma and a plunge into the void.

What is new in these two films is the increased openness about human feelings, Denis's move to a new sense of drama, humor, and pathos. Her films still more closely expose the syncopated moves of her characters as their lives are falling to pieces. Pursuing her long-explored refutation of the differential valuation of human lives, she opens her work one degree further to tenderness, to human needs that will continue long after the end credits fade.

Notes

1. Ryan Gilbey, "He Keeps Asking Me, Is It Sad to Be an Old Woman?": Sparring with the French Director Claire Denis," *New Statesman*, April 20, 2018, www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2018/04/he-keeps-asking-me-it-sad-be-old-woman-sparring-french-director-claire-denis. Gilbey writes: "No other living director, not even Pedro Almodóvar or Catherine Breillat, has quite her knack for untangling the mysteries of sexual desire, or the role played in it by gender, race and class."
2. *Un beau soleil intérieur* (*Let the Sunshine In*) was shot over five weeks between January and March 2017, partly on location in the French department of Creuse in central France. It was released in France in summer 2017 (and in the United States in 2018). It premiered at the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 2017. *High Life* followed in fall 2018 in France and was released in the United States in 2019. *High Life* had been planned as a project for Denis ever since *Trouble Every Day* (2001), but she made other films in between. Funding difficulties held it up for five years until it was finally shot in a studio in Cologne in August–October 2017. She reports in an interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma* that the British Film Institute gave her less money than promised because the film no longer had a script by an English author. (It was originally due to be cowritten with Zadie Smith.) After despairing over

- ever being able to make the project, Denis found help from American financier Andrew Lauren. The film cost less than €5 million. See Jean-Sébastien Chauvin and Stéphane Delorme, "Tabou: Entretien avec Claire Denis," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 749 (November 2018): 34–36. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival 2018 and was also shown at San Sebastián and the New York Film Festival in the same year. It was given a rare four-star ranking and hailed as a masterpiece by Jacques Mandelbaum on the day of its release in France. See Mandelbaum, "Claire Denis sonde le désir en apesanteur" [Claire Denis sounds desire in weightlessness], *Le Monde*, November 7, 2018, 16.
3. Denis has, throughout her career, found a rhythm of variation to carry her through themes and genres. Her masterpieces in Africa—*Beau Travail* (1999), about the French Foreign Legion and its erotics; *White Material* (2009), about the pursuit of white farming in a contemporary moment of civil war—have been interspersed with other, more quiescent, interior pieces: *Vendredi soir* (*Friday Night*, 2002), with its car journey through Paris; or *35 rhums* (*35 Shots of Rum*, 2008), about the separation of a father and daughter. Such variation is found again as Denis extends her generic range. But like her three earlier genre experiments—her coming-of-age film *Chocolat* (1988), her true-crime film *J'ai pas sommeil* (*I Can't Sleep*, 1994), and her flesh-eating horror picture, *Trouble Every Day* (2001)—the latest two films also push far away from genre conventions.
 4. Novelist and filmmaker Marguerite Duras, who was born in the former Indochina, described Denis, like herself, with disparagement and understanding, as a "fille de la colonie" ("a girl from the colonies"). Denis recalled Duras's comment in a live master class in Paris. See Claire Denis with Emilie Chaudet, "Masterclass, France Culture, Maison de la radio," October 13, 2018, www.franceculture.fr/evenement/4-master-classes-en-public-a-la-maison-de-la-radio-agnes-b-claire-denis-alaa-al-aswany-et-jerome-bel. Martine Beugnet has described Denis's focus on the "more hidden implications of the multi-form experience of exclusion" in her *Claire Denis* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004), 3.
 5. Kate Erbland, "'High Life' Director Claire Denis Explains Why Novelist Zadie Smith Departed Film: 'There Was Not a Word We Could Share,'" *IndieWire*, October 3, 2018, www.indiewire.com/2018/10/high-life-claire-denis-zadie-smith-left-robert-pattinson-1202009125/.
 6. David Hudson recounts that the shoot was not an easy one: "Denis's heart and very often her mind were in Paris, where her mother was dying. 'Maybe I gave to the film, maybe, a sort of sadness,' she told Nick Newman at the Film Stage in April, 'but I put all my trust in Robert—as if I was telling him, 'I'm here for you. Otherwise I would be in the train already, to the hospital.' I'm almost crying.'" David Hudson, "Claire Denis's *High Life* Rolls Out This Fall," Criterion website, On Film/The Daily, July 13, 2018, www.criterion.com/current/posts/5798-claire-denis-s-high-life-rolls-out-this-fall.
 7. The sequence also bears comparison to Denis Lavant's legendary posthumous break dance to "The Rhythm of the Night" at the end of *Beau Travail*.
 8. The actress who plays Willow is the child of one of Pattinson's childhood friends, Denis recounts in her interview. See Chauvin and Delorme, "Tabou: Entretien avec Claire Denis," 35.
 9. Her original words are "*l'histoire la plus tendre possible*." She was speaking on the France Culture radio station on the morning of the release of the film in France. See Tewfik Hakem, "Claire Denis, 'C'est plutôt un film de prison que de science-fiction'" [Claire Denis: It's more a prison film than a science fiction film], *France Culture*, Le réveil culturel, November 7, 2018, www.franceculture.fr/emissions/le-reveil-culturel/claire-denis.
 10. Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Cambridge: MHRA/Legenda Moving Image, 2012). McMahon looks at such moments of intimate contact in Denis. Judith Mayne writes beautifully of "the small detail, the brief moment of connection" in Denis's films in her *Claire Denis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), xi.
 11. The shots also seem to provide, as if connecting across films, the missing images of Lionel (Alex Descas) caring for his daughter Joséphine (Mati Diop) in *35 rhums*.
 12. This "final solution" is explained through a flashback sequence set on a train where Victor Banerjee plays a professor who speaks about such carceral experiments.
 13. Huyghe has mounted a number of installations with his dog Human living in the gallery space, such as the exhibition *Pierre Huyghe* at the L.A. County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 2014. Living and dead pet animals—dogs, cats, and rabbits—return in Denis's filmography as she pays attention to intimate feelings for nonhuman others.
 14. See Stephen Hawking's lecture "Into a Black Hole," in Hawking, *Black Holes: The BBC Reith Lectures* (New York: Bantam Books, 2016).
 15. Hawking, *Black Holes*.
 16. This is particularly the case with *Les salauds* (*Bastards*, 2013). The issue was frankly discussed by Denis in an interview, "L'irréparable," with Jean-Sébastien Chauvin and Stéphane Delorme, in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 691 (July–August 2013). Interviewed by Chauvin and Delorme once more for *High Life* ("Tabou: Entretien avec Claire Denis"), she refers to the earlier discussion of the incest taboo.
 17. The colors of the sequence are also reminiscent of the love scene between Khari and Kris in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solyaris* (*Solaris*, 1971).
 18. The images are visible on his website: <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK109128/contact>.
 19. Denis's work with actors is one of the most important aspects of her art. When Judith Mayne asked her about it, Denis replied: "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 [you] 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." Mayne, *Claire Denis*, 144.
 20. Juliette Binoche and Robert Pattinson also portray lovers in David Cronenberg's *Cosmopolis* (2012). In an interview in *Les Inrockuptibles* Pattinson speaks about his keenness to film the scene in the car: "*Je suis très fier d'avoir fait ça avec Juliette*"

- ("I'm very proud of having done that with Juliette"). Robert Pattinson, interview by Jean-Marc Lalanne, *Les Inrockuptibles*, no. 1197 (November 7, 2018): 14.
21. She also reveals, with more ferocity, that she stabbed her husband.
 22. *High Life*, like *Solaris*, or indeed Denis's earlier *L'intrus*, has a series of images of the scarred body.
 23. Martine Beugnet argues that the horror and graphic violence in Denis's work are "the unbearable that cannot be washed away." See her *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 46.
 24. Geneviève Sellier contrasts Denis's filming of Binoche with that of Olivier Assayas in *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014), which she describes as "*une mise au tombeau*" ("putting her in the grave"). See her review of *Un beau soleil intérieur* on her excellent website, *Le genre & l'écran* (Gender and the screen), October 1, 2017, www.genre-ecran.net/spip.php?article151. As if in compensation, Assayas does rather the opposite in *Doubles vies* (*Non-Fiction*, 2018), giving Binoche both a lover and a husband.
 25. Producer Olivier Delbosc had invited Denis to adapt the Barthes for a portmanteau film. See Yannick Lemarié, "'Un beau soleil intérieur': C'est merveilleux . . .," *Positif*, no. 680 (October 2017), 42. See Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux/A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).
 26. While Denis works collaboratively on her scripts with screenwriter Jean-Pol Fargeau, she has also worked with a number of women writers. Her first script (never filmed) was a project with Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. *Vendredi soir* (*Friday Night*, 2002) was adapted from a text by novelist and screenwriter Emmanuèle Bernheim. *White Material* was a collaboration with Goncourt winner Marie NDiaye.
 27. Coincidentally, Catherine Corsini's adaptation of her text *Un amour impossible* (*An Impossible Love*, 2015) into a film of the same name was released in Paris on the same day as *High Life*. In the original text, Angot imagines the scene of her own conception, dramatizes the love affair between her parents, and depicts her early relationship with her mother. Angot's work has also been adapted by Laetitia Masson into the self-reflexive film *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil* (*Why (Not) Brazil*, 2004).
 28. Denis worked with Angot previously on a short film *Voilà l'enchaînement* (*Here Is the Concatenation*, 2014), made at La Fresnoy, the film and art school created by Alain Fleischer in 1997. Denis regular Alex Descas and actress Norah Krief act in a film about a couple, with two monologues adapted from Angot's novel *Les petits* (2011).
 29. Claire Denis, interview, *Un beau soleil intérieur*, DVD (London: Curzon/Artificial Eye, 2018).
 30. Denis, interview.
 31. Yannick Lemarié argues that the film creates "*une carte de la France et du tendre*" ("a map of France and of tenderness"). See Lemarié, "Un beau soleil intérieur," 42. The reference is to Madeleine de Scudéry's *carte du Tendre* (map of Tendre), a seventeenth-century mapping of the emotions.
 32. Two reviews make these points: Ginette Vincendeau, review of *Let the Sunshine In*, *Sight and Sound*, May 2018, 56–57; and Sellier's review on her website (see above). Angot writes fully about motherhood in her book *Léonore, toujours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).
 33. Erika Balsom writes: "It is nothing more and nothing less than a film about a fiftysomething woman's sex life, a work that takes a subject so rarely confronted and renders it with remarkable empathy, complexity, and sensuality." Balsom, "Bad Boyfriends," *Art Forum*, April 23, 2018, www.artforum.com/film/erika-balsom-on-claire-denis-s-let-the-sunshine-in-2017-75001.
 34. Alice Gregory interviewed Binoche for her fabulous *New Yorker* piece, "The Fearless Cinema of Claire Denis." Binoche told Gregory about Denis's filming in *Let the Sunshine In*: "She wanted my character to be beautiful and desirable and luminous." See www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/05/28/the-fearless-cinema-of-claire-denis.
 35. In her *Sight and Sound* review, Vincendeau writes: "[T]he opening scene promises an unusually frank female point of view on heterosexual sex" (56).
 36. Nicolas Rapold, "Parting the Clouds: Claire Denis Dreams of Something Better in *Let the Sunshine In*," *Film Comment*, July–August 2017, 10.