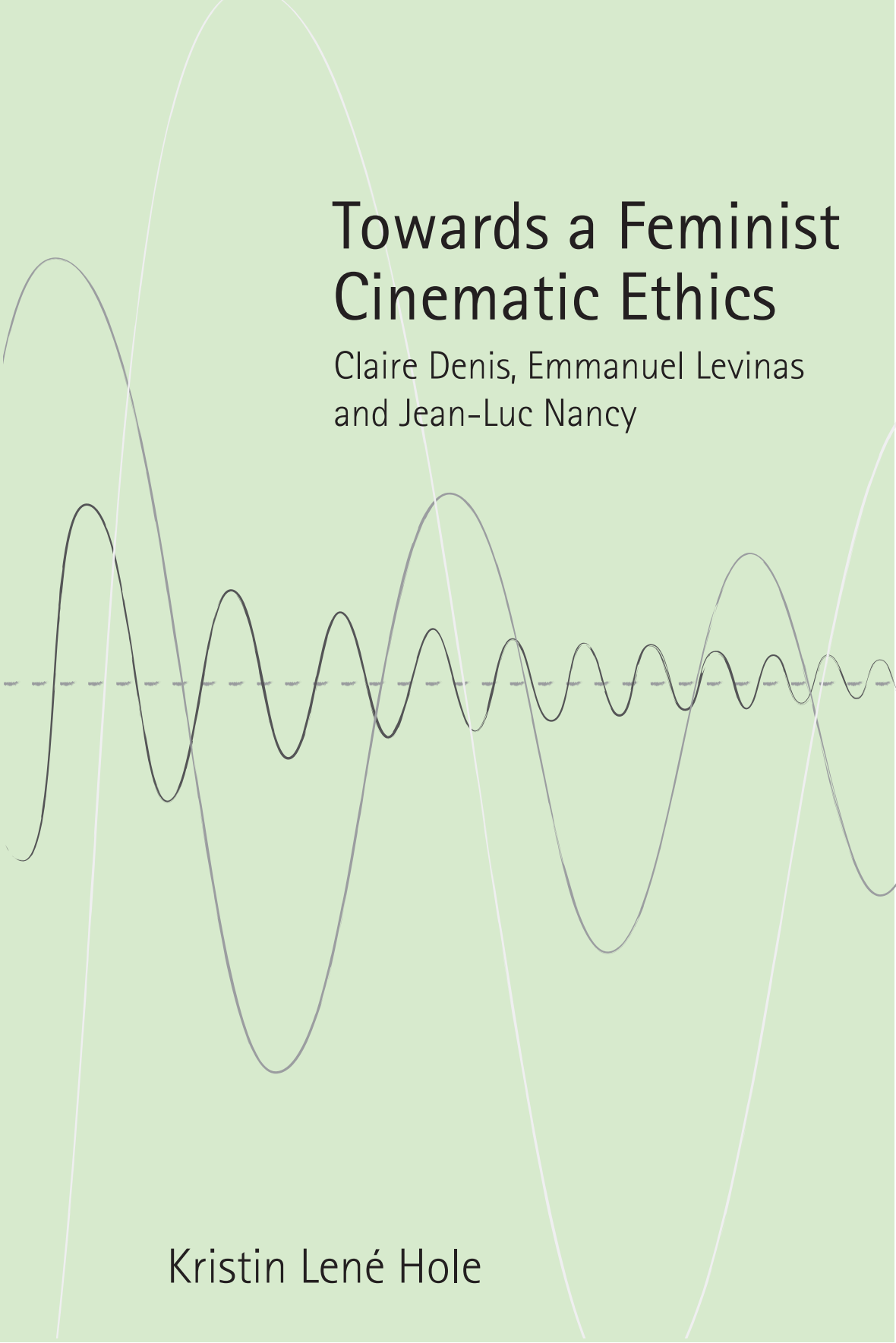
Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics

Claire Denis, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy



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CHAPTER 1

Encounters, Intrusions: Denis, Levinas, Nancy

> . . . for me, cinema is not made to give a psychological explanation, for me cinema is montage, is editing. To make blocks of impressions or emotion meet with another block of impression or emotion and put in between pieces of explanation, to me it's boring . . . [A]s a spectator, when I see a movie one block leads me to another block of inner emotion, I think that's cinema. That's an encounter . . . I think that making films for me is to get rid of explanation . . . you get explanation by getting rid of explanation. I am sure of that.
>
> Claire Denis[1]

> The issue of intrusion has resonances for so much in life – phobia, rejection, desire. Intrusion is always brutal. There's no such thing as a gentle intrusion.
>
> Claire Denis[2]

INTRUSIONS: ENCOUNTERING ETHICS IN THE FILMS OF CLAIRE DENIS

This book is about encounters: between philosophy and cinema, spectator and film, characters on screen, sound and image, body and text. The encounter is always also an intrusion, undermining the supposed discreteness of *any* body and offering us an ethical way to position ourselves towards one another. In what follows, intrusions generate a feminist cinematic ethics through the encounters staged amongst the work of Claire Denis and of two philosophers, Jean-Luc Nancy and Emmanuel Levinas, although other voices interrupt throughout. Denis is one of the most challenging and distinctive filmmakers working in France today. Despite the significant amount of

scholarly attention that her filmmaking has received, the contribution that she makes to a cinematic ethics has not received any sustained analysis. Yet, my argument in what follows is that the ethical facet of her work is one of her main contributions to a cinema of ideas. I title the two permutations of a feminist cinematic ethics an 'ethics of sense' and an 'aesthetic of alterity', the former the result of an encounter between Denis and Nancean ethics and the latter between Denis and Levinas (these are dealt with in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively). Both an ethics of sense and an aesthetic of alterity are intimately connected to spectatorship as a bodily encounter that challenges dominant Western conceptions of subjectivity. I elaborate on the affective and visceral valences of this encounter in Chapter 4.

It is significant that the two books in English focusing exclusively on Denis (by Martine Beugnet and Judith Mayne, both titled *Claire Denis*) identify her filmmaking as 'ethical', yet never unpack the term 'ethics' itself to explore the sense in which this complex category is deployed.[3] Referring to Denis's resistance to discussing her films in terms of political motivations, Mayne writes, 'This suggests that she is less interested in making films with a particular political perspective than in making films that explore the very possibility of a range of (cinematic) perspectives . . . A scene that Denis decided not to shoot in *Beau travail* suggests that perhaps it is more appropriate to think of the political dimensions of her work in terms of ethics.'[4] Mayne is referring to a scene where a local woman would have been depicted in a way that could have consequences for her safety once filming was over.[5] Here it is implied that ethics is located at the level of the director's relationship to the practice of filmmaking and the content of her work. Near the end of Beugnet's monograph she writes of Denis that 'her work reveals a strong sense of ethics'.[6] What ethics *means* in the context of her films and whether it refers to the relationship between spectator and film, between director and characters or subject matter, or is situated at the level of form or narrative content, is never put under close scrutiny or generalised to a theme in Beugnet's book. Yet her classification of Denis's work through the themes of transgression, exile and difference suggests a fruitful direction for thinking about the ethical dimension. So does her comment that 'Each time, the primacy of the suggested over the stated allows for the characters not to be trapped into categories and stereotypes, even if this means abandoning certitudes and conclusions'.[7] Moving away from the certainties of identity and focusing on difference is entailed in the ethics I elaborate. Unlike the books by Beugnet and Mayne, however, this monograph is not an overview of Denis as an auteur. I select specific films in her oeuvre to examine various facets of the ethics I see at work in her unique visual and narrative style.

Putting philosophy in contact with cinema gives flesh – both metaphorically and also literally, in the sense of centring the material body – to the concept

of ethics. This is not an ethics that is conveyed didactically or in a straightforward narrative manner, since Denis's films persistently avoid a moralising tone. There is no 'moral of the story' in a Denis film. For example, as I discuss in Chapter 3, in the film *I Can't Sleep* (1994), which deals elliptically with the story of a serial killer, we are not brought to an easy conclusion about who is a bad person or a good person within the narrative, nor how we ought to view life or the world as represented in the diegesis. Instead, we are made aware of complexity, ambiguity and disjunctive connection. We are given a window into a world coloured in shades of grey and left to sit with otherness, as opposed to feeling able to clearly distance ourselves from the characters and images on screen via moral judgements.

Ethics is a slippery term, in that it is used so commonly in everyday speech that we all have some sense that we know what the word means. Like many terms used in philosophical or theoretical discourse, the term 'ethics' as I employ it must be first emptied of its conventional semantic associations and then re-semanticised through the concepts expounded in this book. Unlike deontological, consequentialist or virtue-based systems, what I elaborate in this project is a less normative understanding of ethics.[8] By less normative I mean that it does not enumerate fixed principles for action (i.e. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you') and that it is based in a non-foundational, non-autonomous subject. It requires a practice of sensitivity, unlearning and encountering that guides our ways of being with others, in modes that work against systems of dominance, stereotyping and violence. It is also an ethics that is material and embodied – felt in the encounters between bodies, privileging a level of experience prior to the cognitive or apprehensive. As I will show, Denis's work stages these types of open and visceral encounters between film and spectator.

The ethics are feminist in their commitment to seeking a more inclusive and relational conception of existence and their basis in a non-identitarian body. As Victoria Hesford argues in her archaeology of the 'second wave' of feminism, the radicality of the women's liberation movement was precisely due to the ways in which it challenged normative identity categories.[9] This includes a dedication to practices of unlearning expectations and questioning received knowledge about the world and those who populate it in order to open us up to new and unforeseen futures that are more equitable for all. In her writing on Levinas and postcoloniality Sarah Ahmed links an ethical mode of encounter to the possibility of future transnational feminist collective building. She asks us to consider 'how feminism involves strange encounters – ways of encountering what is already encountered – in order to engender ways of being and acting in the world that open the possibility of the distant in the near, the unassimilable in the already assimilated, and the surprising in the ordinary'.[10] Denis's films sensitise us to the limits of identity, offering us a series of strange

encounters. Key to this is an ethical disposition towards the world, a sensibility that resonates both on screen and off.

The bigger claim that is implied here is that we desperately need new forms of attachment, new dispositions and new ways of seeing to meet the challenges of our contemporary moment. For this reason an account of ethics that challenges the meaningfulness of any claims to identity and sensitises us to what remains *other* in each of us may cultivate a heightened awareness of the facility with which the past repeats itself, or, put differently, of our own capacity to commit a myriad of micro-oppressions on a daily basis. The respect for an unmasterable alterity, combined with a commitment to the difficulty of revealing *sense* outside of fixed semantic signification, is key to Denis's cinematic ethics.

Alongside Denis, Nancy and Levinas offer a way to conceptualise an ethics that is less normative and works against violence, dominance and totalitarianism. In a Levinasian framework, the other is absolutely so, meaning that I cannot understand the other or relate her back to myself in any way that would result in systems of labelling or prejudice. Furthermore, my encounter with the other is formative of any selfhood and happens in an ethical realm that is prior to the ontological. What this means in practical terms is that I cannot represent the other or my encounter with her in a way that will ever capture or do justice to her. The necessarily failing attempt at representation, along with a deeply unknowable other, is central to Denis's complex, oblique and non-psychologised screen worlds. Nancy also prioritises a sense that both precedes and exceeds signification. The attempt to remain faithful to an origin that is always plural and that resists an integrated subject, people or world and instead insists on the differential and the fleeting is present in both Nancy's and Denis's work. For all three there is a movement of the other's singularity that always eludes our grasp and it is through becoming aware of and attentive to this that I argue Denis's work can teach us about this off-centred ethics. Although Levinas and Nancy may seem odd bedfellows, I am interested in the generativity and new possibilities that are opened by staging encounters between the three idea-makers in this project – the two philosophers and Denis herself. The thematic of 'intrusion' given in the chapter's title can apply to the ways in which the ideas of each interlocutor intrude upon or interrupt one another, preventing this account from providing a totalising or closed description of what ethics might mean or do in cinematic practice. In this way, my methodology mirrors the very practice of the ethical that I articulate in this work. I am staging an encounter, then, not only between two quite different philosophers and a filmmaker, but also more broadly between philosophy and cinema.

Intrusion is a major trope in Denis's body of work. One can find it in her films from the colonial presence in Cameroon in her debut film *Chocolat*

(1988), to her acclaimed *Beau travail* (1999) in which the disruptive intrusion of a young legionnaire called Sentain proves unacceptable to his superior Galoup's existence; from Katja's arrival in Paris from Lithuania at the beginning of *I Can't Sleep* to the unwanted child inside Nénette's body in *Nénette and Boni* (1996). The multiple others who come and go in Denis's films offer encounters with alterity that centre on the body and sensation, and that refuse any easy knowledge of psychological motivation or character interiority. Her films display a persistent interest in difference and in bodies and the connections amongst them. Likewise, Nancy has stressed in his own writing that the body is always other to itself and that our birth into the world is always preceded and exceeded by any timeline of our existence. We are profoundly *with* others; we are singular plural at each moment and each time differently. Intrusion, then, is a human condition. For Levinas it is by virtue of the ethical relation – our responsibility to and for the other – that we come into being as a subject. The other constitutes us and Levinas constantly emphasises the bodily ways that this responsibility is felt – even to the point that being pregnant with the other becomes a major metaphor of the ethical condition. Denis introduces intrusion narratively and thematically, as suggested in the examples above, but also through strategies of parallel editing, through her exploration of bodily boundaries in films such as *I Can't Sleep* and *The Intruder* (2004), through her use of marginal and interruptive scenes that refuse to close or fix the meaning of the film, through her inclusion of sensuous dream sequences and through her eschewal of dialogue in favour of music, sound, touch, smell and taste, which intrude upon the viewer's own body and allow the body to intrude upon the cognisable meaning of the film in favour of an unthematisable encounter.

Although there are other filmmakers in whose work can be found strains of what I define as the ethical, I contend that Denis is a primary exemplar of it, and her work shapes my understanding of a feminist cinematic ethics.[11] The unique visual language and elliptical narrative structure that she develops challenge a notion of film as a medium of narrative comprehension and closure and open us up to encounters with difference that refuse full thematisation. In her work, ethics becomes that which reveals our interconnectedness in a visceral way and works against any notion of a self-sufficient and immunised subject. Denis's concern with intruders, with the body and with the connections between us suggests a feminist and ethical filmmaking that provides a counter to dominant Hollywood film language.

Within this framework, I do not mean to designate Denis as an ethical filmmaker over and against other 'unethical' filmmakers, such that the latter would be a negative value judgement. Ethical is meant in a descriptive sense, although it can be taken prescriptively in that there is definite value to films that operate in a counter-Hollywood manner akin to Denis's.[12] This however

is not to say that all films ought to (normatively) espouse the strategies I discuss. Additionally, films can be morally driven rather than concerned with the ethical as I define it. A moralising filmmaker, in contradistinction to an ethical one, would focus narratively (and formally their work would support these narrative conclusions) to establish a maxim or moral principle(s) within the film. For example, a character has a profound realisation about how her life choices have been wrong, or we are made to see the evils of an issue, such as child labour.[13] There is undoubtedly a time and a place for these movies, but they are not what I am concerned with here. Instead, I look at an ethical attitude or disposition that film can help cultivate or develop in us. This is not the result of didactic storytelling but has to do with the film's formal strategies and how it approaches its subject or the kinds of encounters it fosters between viewer and film. It is possible that the kind of ethics I am proposing here could result in a way of acting in the world that is perhaps more just or sustainable and less selfish – that is, it could lead to more normative claims – but my work is not focused on developing normative principles. What I am concerned with is an ethical awareness that stems from a particular understanding of our own subjectivity and inter-relationality and that challenges an autonomous intentional knowing subject who enacts, for example, moral imperatives. The subject, in my account, starts at a place that is much more in question, and more passive, as opposed to willing or intentional, before she moves into the capacity to act from the spaces of ethical awareness. I am inspired by Levinas's commitment to thinking difference in such a way that the *sense* of the ethical relation sets a foundation for action such that it would be almost impossible to oppress the other if we were acting from that sensibility.[14] If we challenge a sense of ourselves as immune from and able to recognise the other, if we learn to privilege other ways of knowing than seeing as knowledge, we act from a place that is much less likely to dismiss or dehumanise the other based on ontological categories of difference (such as sexuality or ethnicity, for example).

My emphasis on otherness resonates with an explicitly feminist attention to difference and the ways in which systems of knowledge and categorisation contribute to the marginalisation and oppression of peoples.[15] Denis's films share feminism's investment in keeping foundational categories such as 'the human' fluid and open.[16] Part of their radicality is that they depict bodies in such a way that our stereotypes or labels no longer hold and we are asked to be vulnerable to these images. Consequently, we must explore the bodies on screen without the interpretative 'safety net' that categories such as race and gender provide. In contrast with the dominant Hollywood mode of telling stories, which I elaborate on below, Denis's films explore difference without trying to master it or make it a known quantity. For example, in Chapter 4 I discuss her filming of love scenes. Instead of a more conventional style of filming, the body is shot in fragments, emphasising textures and senses, tactility and exploration. The

viewer cannot find her bearings in images that become increasingly difficult to discern, which emphasise the sharing of flesh over gendered sexual norms or fetishised shots of breasts, muscles or thighs. The montages of bodily fragments in films such as *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and *Friday Night* (2002) privilege an exploration of otherness that refuses a position of visual supremacy. This staging of bodies has feminist overtones in its refusal to objectify, its offering of new and badly needed images of sexual intimacy that do not reduce women and men to conventional sexual scripts, and its critique of 'able-ist' notions of the body as a space of unity and autonomy from others and from technology. Denis's insistence on opacity as opposed to psychological disclosure further adds to the sense of curiosity and blind probing that we participate in with her love scenes.[17] The exploration of difference also occurs through Denis's interest in characters who are not white (in contrast to the vast majority of European and North American cinema), in teenagers with little hope for the future, in criminals, in underdogs and in those whose desires render them deviant, all of which resonates with feminism's interest in opening up the category of the human to make it more inclusive to those who are subject to the violence of marginality, invisibility, or stereotypical and stock representations.

Given Denis's ongoing engagement, however elliptical, with France's colonial history, it would be remiss not to think intrusion also in relation to the violence and instability of borders in a postcolonial and global capitalist context.[18] Denis's preoccupation with borders and the refusal of clearly demarcated identities is a product of her interest in the legacy of colonialism as it shapes her characters. This concern has autobiographical dimensions: Denis spent the greater part of her childhood in various African countries, as the daughter of colonial administrators who themselves were highly ambivalent about their role in Africa. Not belonging in Africa but neither feeling at home in France, Denis's interest in displacement and intrusion is resolutely influenced by her materially and historically located experiences of colonialism.[19] Postcolonial theory shares common ground with feminism in its interest in thinking about otherness and representation. However, historically postcolonial theory has been limited in addressing issues related to gender and sexuality, even at times committing to notions of nation and culture that occlude feminist or queer positions.[20] In her work, Denis troubles the borders of gender, age, language and nation in the aftermath of colonialism.

Nénette and Boni, discussed in Chapter 2, centres on racially ambiguous characters living in Marseille, an ethnically mixed and classed city, and subtly points to the geopolitical past of France as well as to contemporary immigration-based (often xenophobic) discourses. The subplot of stolen phone cards and clandestine international communication further emphasises the network of interruptions and transnational border crossings that produce our world. *I Can't Sleep*, the focus of the third chapter, introduces diasporic brothers who

relate to their homeland in different ways. Théo creates an imaginary utopia out of Martinique, to which he longs to return. Camille rejects this fantasy, but his marginalisation and isolation, racially and also sexually, cannot be viewed in exclusion from the violence he commits. Existing alongside these brothers is the well-networked Lithuanian community in Paris that we encounter through Daïga, extending the film's concern with borders to contemporary patterns of immigration that may be unlinked from colonial histories. Finally, in *Trouble Every Day*, the focus of the final chapter, Paris is haunted and victimised by her own history of economic and epistemological colonisation. A disease, originating in the former colonies, undoes the European fantasy of immunity and autonomy. Western science and religion are impotent in the face of what cannot be assimilated within available discursive frameworks. Whereas Nancy and Levinas do not adequately address that theorising the subject as open, porous and vulnerable speaks to a Western construction of the subject, Denis makes this dimension visible and gives it weight. She brings a historical, material specificity to the ideas she communicates through her films and this makes her better able to address contemporary ethical and political issues than Levinas or Nancy. As I argue, the ideas she shares through her time-images reveal the power of film to speak back to and *with* philosophy, giving a greater role to the medium than a mere example of certain philosophical concepts.

Denis's films undermine a hegemony – cinematic and otherwise – that privileges white European bodies and subjects, without attempting to speak for or from the position of the 'other'. In her film *Reassemblage* (1982), feminist filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha repeats the phrase 'Don't speak about. Speak nearby'. Trinh is critiquing the ethnographic film and its collusion with a patriarchal and racist history of attempting to know, categorise and master (to 'speak about') the other. Denis tends to 'speak nearby' her subjects, in fact hardly speaking at all – preferring image and sound to propositional language – yet she does so while offering a model of cinema that is more accessible than something like Trinh's work, which is more avant-garde in its strategies of alienation. The visual pleasure of Denis's films brings them to a larger audience and engages the spectator's body, rather than distancing it from the image. Though her films are visually stunning and often pleasurable objects (contra Laura Mulvey's now infamous statement that feminist filmmaking should destroy pleasure), they nonetheless encourage a mode of seeing that is sympathetic to feminist aims.[21] In this way Denis carries on an important tradition of critiquing dominant representational systems, while maintaining a broader appeal through her desire-fuelled images. Her work, then, gestures towards an ethical feminist filmmaking practice that is both sensual and challenging.

Many commentators have noted the sensuality and tactility of Denis's films.[22] A turn to the body, emotion and affective sensation has been a femi-

nist strategy for correcting a Cartesian tendency to denigrate the (feminised) corporeal in favour of the (masculinised) mind, both to revalorise the body as a source of knowledge and meaning and also to undermine a mind/body dualism. Affect and haptics (or a focus on tactility and touch) have been influential in recent feminist film theorising.[23] I connect the affective and haptic element of Denis's films to thinking about ethics, as one valence of the meaning of ethics as it unfolds in this project. The body is a necessary concern of ethical theory and is central to the films under consideration. From Béatrice Dalle's erotic mutilation of her would-be seducers in *Trouble Every Day*, to the unwanted child living in Nénette's adolescent body in *Nénette and Boni*, to the foreign heart that Louis Trebor needs to survive in *The Intruder*, Denis's output has both represented bodily intrusions on screen and has potentially, through an emphasis on extravisual sensation, intruded haptically and affectively into the bodies of its spectators.

Cinema has the power to take the account of the body and the bodily intimation of the ethical that can be found in both Levinas and Nancy and give it colour and flesh. In this respect, it illustrates in material terms the reality of bodies as they are situated according to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and age, even while it undermines these categories' explanatory power. These categories are easily flattened in the abstract language of philosophy but are really *felt* in the encounter with the image. This is further reinforced by film's synaesthetic nature – it communicates so much to the viewer that is extravisual and the use of music adds a bodily and non-cognisable affective layer of 'sense'.[24] Denis furthers Levinas's and Nancy's discussions of the body by staging an encounter with difference through which we can *feel* the reality of our bodily openness and vulnerability and that makes the tension between identity categories and their denotative insufficiency more evident.

A feminist approach need not explicitly be concerned with gender. In its sometimes uneasy overlap with queer theory, feminist theory has always negotiated the difficult necessity of claiming shared experiences of oppression and understanding that the same practices of oppression are in many ways reinforced by the very identity categories that must be claimed in resisting them. Put differently, feminism has always been invested in the deconstruction of categories and in challenges to oppressively normalising systems of representation, while realising the political need for claiming these categories (what theorists such as Gayatri Spivak have called 'strategic essentialism').[25] While approaches that analyse how representations of women operate in culture are undoubtedly useful, at the level of theory and visual culture it is equally important to further deconstruct these identity categories whether or not we need them in a political and pragmatic sense. The tension between identity and its deconstruction and the creativity this tension engenders is part of what makes feminist theory so groundbreaking and generative. While reiterating

identity categories *can* be a feminist approach, in Denis's films they are made strange. Thus her work both visually registers 'difference' or the classifications of gender and race that we use to understand the world, while also emptying them of their assumed or expected content. This process of unworking categories is another kind of feminist practice. Although this book does not constantly invoke gender or 'women', it reflects a feminist commitment to new ways of thinking about bodies and the images that populate our daily lives in a way that is less limiting for all. This would be a world where we are resensitised to the surprise that the other should be for us, where we operate less on identity-based assumptions and search for the unknown in others. It would be a future where we ask new questions that get closer to the heart of our shared existence.

Just as Denis's own work challenges identity-based ways of understanding character and plot, I resist positioning her cinema exclusively under the rubric of women's films. She herself refuses any tidy categorisation as a 'woman director', or any approach that would read her work always in relation to other female directors.[26] In interviews where gender is explicitly discussed, Denis problematises the reduction of women's creative work to a unique and essential female perspective, maintaining the broader artistic integrity of her and her fellow female cineastes' output. In this way her position with respect to her craft parallels that which she cultivates in her films, whose characters refuse to be limited by our expectations, even as they may be constrained by the larger social structures/cultural contexts in which they act. This, however, does not preclude us from treating Denis as a feminist filmmaker, as feminist projects are not defined by a creator's self-identifications but rather in the meanings the work produces or the kinds of encounters it facilitates. Judith Mayne reads Denis as a feminist auteur. However, she notes the ways in which the French tradition of auteurism has enabled French women to be directors to a unique degree, with its 'vision of the cinema as personal, intimate, and more open to the concrete experience of everyday life'.[27] This may contribute to Denis's reluctance to explicitly identify as a 'woman director'.[28]

One of the effects of not overtly thematising gender is to gesture towards a future where gender will no longer be a category for controlling bodies and their possibilities. This is not to say that gender has not also been a productive category for feminism, but rather that other futurities are opened up when we attempt to think with alternative frameworks. As Wendy Brown cautions, we must be aware of the ways in which the very categories we use to claim inclusion commit us to certain paradigms – in the case of identity politics those paradigms include particular constructions of the sovereign subject and notions of equality that occlude singularity.[29] In her sophisticated treatment of the historical and material particularities of the encounter combined with the more general ungraspability of the encountered, Denis's work gestures

towards the ways in which the categories that we rely on in the present shape the futures possible to us. Bodies still act in excess of the categories of race, gender, ability and age in which we place them, despite the continued prescriptive and material power of these categories at our historical moment. The performative non-identitarian body is one place where feminism and queer theory share concerns with one another. The gaze in Denis's films cannot be read through dominant identificatory models. As Geetha Ramanathan argues with respect to *Chocolat*, 'The unsettling of the male colonial gaze is no longer the issue in Denis's work, the politics of post-coloniality being accepted. Denis seeks to map out an aesthetic that would not depend entirely on looking power for specifying its politics.'[30] Mayne concurs, stating, 'Women don't have to be central characters to have an impact on the stories that Denis tells. Watching those characters, they quietly mark the charged boundaries of politics and gender, and subtly undermine the paradigm of the man who looks and the woman who is looked at.'[31]

While the two philosophers I discuss in this project, Nancy and Levinas, do not overtly engage with feminism in any meaningful way, Levinas makes sexual difference central to his early theorising on responsibility and Nancy offers accounts of embodiment that are often surprisingly 'queer' in their implications. Part of my project involves mining these thinkers for the elements of their thought that are useful for a feminist cinematic ethics. I am preceded or guided in this respect by Denis but also by several philosophers. Diane Perpich is central to my account of alterity aesthetics as I elaborate in Chapter 3. Her reading of Levinas in terms of a politics of alterity, rather than recognition or identity, makes Levinas available to my analysis. Perpich has also been useful in providing one of the few feminist interpretations of Nancy – her insights have influenced my reading of the Nancean body in terms that are queer and disability-positive (see my elaboration of this in Chapter 4).[32] Anne O'Byrne's reading of Nancy through the role of birth in his philosophy is also crucial to my analysis of *Nénette and Boni* in terms of an ethics of sense in Chapter 2.[33] I elaborate on and contribute to these interventions by relating them specifically to film and exploring how Denis challenges and builds on the potential in Levinas and Nancy. I explicitly articulate the ethics of their projects in terms of feminist concerns, as I argue that the aspects of their work that are useful to thinking a feminist cinematic ethics are brought into relief when they are put in conversation with Denis's cinema.

AN INTERRUPTIVE ETHICS

Interruption is a thematic thread throughout this project, sharing a conceptual proximity with my interest in intrusion. I take the notion of interruption from

Nancy's writing on myth, where myth stands for the kinds of totalising or complete accounts of the world that I align with more traditional filmic narrative and visual language. For Nancy, interruption is associated with literature, which I extend here to the kinds of practices Denis's filmmaking enacts. Interruption is the intrusion of the singular and fleeting in that which pretends to universality and permanence. It prevents meaning from being fixed and insists on that which is always in excess of any attempt to create an unchanging, all-encompassing narrative about existence, the world, or humanity. In my extension of Nancy's concepts of myth and literature to different ways of doing film, I maintain both the necessity and the impossibility of representation. This tension between the desire to witness the other, to glimpse other perspectives, or to draw attention to injustice, and the limitations that are imposed on the world and the other in the name of telling a story are present throughout the ethics and films discussed in this work.

Typically when we think of ethics we think of a system that will tell us how to act. In this vein, a good ethical framework addresses questions that range from our daily behaviour to more extreme (and usually unlikely) ethical quandaries (for example, a bridge is collapsing and one must make a choice amongst lives to save). Whether ethics takes the form of utilitarianism, a set of principles (be it a deontological or consequentialist model), the cultivation of virtue, or addresses questions of the good life, it tends to take the subject as a given. The subject is not herself called into question, but is presumed in giving an account of the proper conduct of the subject.

Both Levinas and Nancy radically shift the terms of the discussion. Far from a system of clear values, norms or principles, ethics becomes something much more difficult to grasp. It shifts down to the very constitution of the subject herself. Ethics is interruptive. For Nancy, the myth of the subject is a dominant Western story that is *interrupted* by the ongoing singularity of each one, each time. I argue that ethics read through three creators – Levinas, Nancy and Denis – comes to centre on a bodily encounter with otherness, which reveals our originary relationality – in other words, our sense of self-sufficiency and discreteness is interrupted in every way by our relatedness to others and to the world.[34] In this vein, both Nancy and Levinas radically think through Heidegger's claim that being (*Dasein*) is originarily being-with (*Mitsein*). For Nancy, construing the origin and our being as always plural has meant a deconstructing of the autonomous subject, rendering existence as porous, infected with alterity, and, importantly, always shared.

Levinas argued for ethics as first philosophy, meaning that the ethical relation comes before the ontological. Put differently, for Levinas my relation to the other is what inaugurates me as a subject. The other is *absolutely* other. As prior to and conditioning of my existence, she cannot be represented or rendered known in her difference. This concept of the radical alterity of the

other has been useful to many feminist philosophers, specifically for thinking through sexual difference, but also about otherness in general.[35] I use Levinas's thinking of difference to develop what I call a feminist aesthetic of alterity, which is one branch of a feminist cinematic ethics, elaborated in Chapter 3. From a Levinasian standpoint, ethics *interrupts* being from within Being itself. The trace of the other intrudes within our daily life and this trace refers to a pre-ontological ethical relation. It is sensed in the body – a meaning that cannot be put into the language of experience but which forces us to recognise the impossibility of not being concerned with the other. Levinas's concept of the *saying* over the *said* bears structural and conceptual similarity to the myth/literature distinction found in Nancy. I elaborate on this concept, which I find particularly useful for thinking about film and ethics, in Chapter 3. The saying, as that which unworks the fixity of representation by exposing an ungraspable alterity, *is* the ethical. It is the singularity of the other that interrupts my plenitude and autonomy or my attempt to control or know the world. In film, as I conjecture, it is the movement of the unknowable other that denies, or interrupts, the film's plenitude.

For Levinas, our relational constitution is dyadic – I exist in the accusative, through being called to ethical responsibility for the other. For Nancy, the origin is plural: I am constituted in a world of difference that precedes and exceeds my coming into being. In both cases, this generation in difference means that the subject never achieves a stable location – others constantly interrupt her claims to identity.

Levinas and Nancy reveal ethics as a refusal of totalities. In declining to formulate principles, or produce a systematic framework, they respond to their historical moment – what we need is an ethics that doesn't establish borders, nations or subjects in need of defending. What they imagine is an ethics that refuses a clearly fixed referent, so that we approach the other with wonder and receptivity rather than a standardised action plan. As Jane Bennett argues in her own writing on wonder and ethics, wonder at the everyday world may inspire the kind of affective attachments that are necessary to ethical dispositions and sensibilities.[36] Counter to narratives of postmodern disillusionment, Bennett sees in wonder a fleeting and affective 'foundation' to a concern for and investment in the world. As I argue, Denis's films stage wondrous and sensual encounters that tune us in to different modes of perceiving and being-with. Nancy's and Levinas's philosophies also privilege an ambiguity that asks us to sit with it and to relinquish the need for knowledge as cognition and mastery. This in itself begins to enact a practice of ethics, as it is reimagined in their writing.

In my reading of Levinas and Nancy, the bodily also becomes central to how we understand ethical subjectivity. While several authors have written on the use of bodily metaphors or concepts such as the caress in Levinas,

less attention has been paid to the viscerality of the ethical subjectivity he describes. By viscerality I refer to the bodily immediacy of Levinas's account of ethics – the shuddering and the trembling as affectively undergone, as opposed to the body as a source of metaphors or conceptual language.[37] This visceral dimension comes to prominence particularly in his last major work on ethics, *Otherwise than Being*, and it provides an important point of connection amongst Levinas, feminist concerns about embodiment and subjectivity, and theories of spectatorship. In Levinas, the bodily intimation of responsibility is an inversion of the seeing, active intentionality of the phenomenological subject. The body is affectively charged with responsibility. In this definition, the subject is passive in its affection by difference. In fact this affection is what gives rise to the subject. The body bears traces of the encounter with the other and our responsibility for the other is a physical burden felt from the inside out. Our bodily affections belie any notion of ourselves as immune from others or as able to *not* concern ourselves with them.

Nancy has also given touch and the body a central role in his thought.[38] He works against a notion of the body as a space of propriety and collapses the clear distinction between body and mind, organic and technological, and privileges fragmentation and becoming over progressive development. His writing on embodiment resonates with queer and critical disability studies perspectives, as I elaborate in Chapter 4. Although Nancy is not thought of primarily as a philosopher of ethics, this facet of his thought emerges alongside the major themes in his work – his emphasis on a co-existential understanding of being, his interest in community, and his deconstruction of Christianity.[39] While few feminists have taken up Nancy in a sustained way, his work offers us a conception of the body that overcomes the mind/body dualism characteristic of Western metaphysics.[40] His non-essentialist account of the body provides a contrast to both Deleuzian and phenomenological accounts of the body, as outlined in connection with theories of film spectatorship in the following section. Furthermore, as Diane Perpich points out, Nancy's emphasis on bodily fragmentation provides us with 'significant resources . . . directly beneficial to critiques of prevailing gender norms and that permit us to reconsider the theoretical adequacy and critical and political power of discourses of bodily integrity'.[41] In Nancy's work, a lack of bodily integrity is a positive rather than negative thing, an ontological condition to celebrate. I connect the fragmentation of the body in Nancy to the fragmentation of narrative and image present in Denis's films. Her films enact the practices of anti-identitarian pluralisation theorised in Nancy's texts. This bodily valence of the ethical is part of what makes Levinas and Nancy so useful for approaching film as a sensuous and material medium – an encounter with difference between the body of the spectator and the film itself.

While Levinas never addresses film as a sustained theme, Nancy engages

with it at length, particularly the work of Denis and Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami. In his monograph on Kiarostami, he emphasises film's ability to show the real in its unrepresentability. He writes,

> . . . evidence becomes that of passage rather than some epiphany of meaning or presence. Cinema is truly the art – in any case the technique – of a world that suspends myths. Even if it has put itself in the service of myths, at the limit, it finishes by taking them away; it carries off all epiphanies of meaning and of immobile presence into the evidence of movement. A world that links by going from one film to the next, and that learns thus, very slowly, another way of producing meaning.[42]

Here we see the privileged role that film plays in the interruption of myth and also the ways in which film's foregrounding of movement and duration aids in its ability to represent the failure of representation, or to unwork its own pretensions to meaning. I elaborate on these facets of film, but do so through Nancy's extra-filmic writing. I choose not to engage at length with his writing on film, in part because this writing has been dealt with elsewhere, and in part because it is his writing on other themes that speaks productively 'nearby', rather than about, Denis's films.

Nancy and Denis have an ongoing relationship, collaborating and commenting on each other's work in print and in film.[43] This has resulted in a subsection of Denis scholarship that discusses her work in relation to Nancy's philosophy.[44] Most of these discussions focus on shared concepts found in Nancy and in particular films of Denis, often centring on notions of the body and touch. I contribute to these ongoing discussions by turning to Nancy's under-examined writing on ethics and developing through Denis's films what I term a cinematic ethics of sense, the other branch of a feminist cinematic ethics.

Levinas himself has almost nothing to say about cinema, and never takes it up in his work as a sustained theme. Furthermore, I am not aware of any known connection between Levinas and Denis. A small body of Levinasian film scholarship has developed over the last decade, almost none of which deals with Claire Denis and which lacks any in-depth account of the body and affect in Levinas as it relates to ethics and cinema. Levinas's critique of the phenomenological tradition's emphasis on vision as knowing provides a useful tension with phenomenologically based accounts of (embodied) film spectatorship, which tend to reinscribe more traditional notions of subjectivity.[45] Yet, by pulling out the affective traces present in his account, I argue that we can come to a non-phenomenological while still bodily account of film. Levinas's embodied ethics sheds light on how Denis's cinema of mysterious others, whose bodies we can feel but whose minds we cannot know, resonates on a level that is read as ethical.[46]

The most notable work on Levinas and cinema includes Sarah Cooper's book *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (2006), Joseph Mai's book on the Dardenne brothers (2010), Sam Girgus's *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Alterity, and the Feminine* (2010) and *Clint Eastwood's America* (2013), and a 2007 issue of the journal *Film-Philosophy*, which applies Levinas's thought to a range of cinematic offerings from action films to Tarkovsky to *Shoah*.[47] By way of situating myself in relation to this work, my focus is in part on the aforementioned *bodily* dimension of the Levinasian encounter. Rather than elaborating on how certain films suggest Levinasian concepts in their narratives, I examine the ways in which particular formal and narrative strategies engage the spectator in an ethical encounter with otherness. Additionally, I enumerate in detail the aspects of Levinas's thought that are helpful for thinking through his relation to cinema, attempting a more systematic engagement with his philosophy – one that also addresses his critique of vision and the paradox of applying his work to film.

Levinas and Nancy produce valuable insights for feminism and for feminist film studies in relation to each other. Both make the body central to the encounter, both emphasise the relation(s) that constitute us, and both resist the urge to answer questions, to provide easy definitions and to fix reality into tidy representations. Levinas's emphasis on the singular other provides a needed counter to the plurality of others that tend to blur together in Nancy's philosophy. Levinas reminds us of the danger of assuming that seeing is knowing and Nancy inserts joy and surprise into our limitlessly interconnected co-existence. Read together, they can teach us what it means to be intruders in a world where we ourselves are exposed to the gift of constant intrusion. Denis reveals this world of intrusion in a way that refuses spectatorial mastery and relies on affective connections. By bringing together Denis, Levinas and Nancy I work towards a theory and practice of non-colonialist, non-masculinist and ethical filmmaking. Film, when it shares these principles, engages us in an ethics of spectatorship that fine-tunes our ethical sensibility with repercussions beyond the cinema doors.

Anyone familiar with the writing of Levinas and Nancy will recognise that bringing them together involves negotiating their considerable differences. Foremost amongst these differences is their position on transcendence. Levinas gives the other a transcendent position, while Nancy is concerned to avoid precisely that. For the latter, there is no external grounding or foundation to this existence: he uses the term 'transimmanence' to convey a notion of difference that can allow for space and movement within an immanent world. These choices reflect varied theological commitments; where Levinas's thought remains tied to a Judaic tradition, Nancy has undertaken a deconstruction of Christianity in his body of work. However, in what follows the focus is on how they can be read nearby each other in productive ways.

Emphasising the similarities between Nancy and Levinas rather than their (significant) differences is a conscious methodological choice.[48] Rather than their incompatibility, my focus is on what bringing them together enables or *does*, including how they both highlight the relative strengths and weaknesses in each other's accounts. Denis's films are included in this notion of the productivity of staging encounters around ideas that don't always perfectly line up. These imperfect alliances are a strength in this account, as they reflect a commitment to a practice of openness and play, to creativity over truth, that is precisely what is central to the ethics elaborated here. Frameworks are there for us to use, and certain frameworks may do more justice to our contemporary moment, to urgent issues, or to our shared existence at any given moment. What matters is the kinds of questions they allow us to ask or how they enable us to better approach the field of problematisation out of which our projects arise.

Watching Denis with Nancy and Levinas opens up many new pathways of thought, most notably a way of thinking about the ethical in relation to spectatorship, and film's formal and narrative qualities. In addition, it highlights the bodily dimensions of the ethical as found in Levinas, making them available to feminist scholarship, and brings out the concepts in Nancy that share an unexplored affinity with queer and disability perspectives on the body. Reading them in conversation with Denis also connects the philosophers to a more radical notion of identity and embodiment than perhaps has been recognised within feminist theorising – both offer new tools for thinking about the tensions between the categories of identity and difference as they operate in our daily lives.

FILM, EMBODIMENT AND SPECTATORSHIP

Historically, within debates about spectatorship, film theory has been centred on notions of subjectivity, representation and language. As Steven Shaviro writes in an early contribution to affective approaches to thinking about film,

> It is odd that semiotic and psychoanalytic film theory – in striking contrast to Benjamin and Vertov – remains so preoccupied with the themes of ideology and representation, that it associates visual pleasure almost exclusively with the illusion of a stable and centered subject confronting a spatially and temporally homogeneous world, and that it regards editing primarily as a technique for producing such an illusion, by 'suturing' the spectator and perspectivising the gaze. A wide variety of cinematic pleasures are predicated explicitly upon the decentered free-play, the freedom from the constraints of subjectivity, that editing and special effects make possible.[49]

Psychoanalytic film theory has focused on how film relates to the psychic formation of the subject, be it through negotiating unconscious fears and desires, and/or operating akin to the mirror stage in activating Imaginary relations.[50] In this framework, spectatorship tends to be reduced to a psychic phenomenon. These approaches typically focus on the individual subject, desire and identification and tend to have a less robust conception of the affective or bodily aspects of viewing. Because psychoanalytic models are committed to an understanding of the psyche that is based in sexual difference (even when a bisexual attitude is posited on the part of the viewer), they start from a spectatorial position that is ultimately sexed and which adopts a psychic attitude toward the film. Furthermore they read the film in terms of significations both conscious and unconscious, that is, as a text whose deeper psychic meaning can be brought to light and understood. Semiotic models similarly tend to privilege significance or meaning and focus on representational and language-based readings of films.[51] Critiques of semiotic and psychoanalytic models have focused on their inability to account more fully for non-representational bodily pleasures, the anarchic and sensual de-subjectified experience that film can offer the viewer.[52]

Writings based on a phenomenological model, such as that put forth by Vivian Sobchack in *The Address of the Eye*, were important attempts to bring the body into our understanding of spectatorship. In Sobchack's narrative, the film is not a series of flickering images interacting with a disembodied psyche, but rather, 'Dependent upon existence and embodiment in the world for its articulation as an activity, the act of viewing as the commutation of perception and expression is both an intrasubjective and intersubjective performance equally performable by filmmaker, film, and spectator.'[53] The body in her writing is deeply imbricated in how we make meaning at the movies. Furthermore, the film itself is given intentionality as a viewing subject, where the relation between spectator and film 'is a dialogical and dialectical engagement of *two* viewing subjects who also exist as visible objects'.[54] Somewhat problematically, we can see here that her explanation depends on a relatively coherent subject, where processes of recognition and communication between viewer and film are emphasised.

Phenomenological accounts after Sobchack have continued to fall short of truly challenging the hierarchy of mind over body in describing the viewing experience, still relying as they do on notions of intentional consciousness and subject/object splits. An additional limitation is that phenomenological models commit us to thinking about film in terms of structures of meaning. What I seek in the account I give here is based less on signification than on moving toward the affective and sensory. I also replace notions of recognition with those of alterity and uncontainable difference. That is, I am interested in what must remain unrecognisable and cannot be interpreted, 'read' or given a

clear meaning, although it may be deeply felt. Jennifer Barker's phenomenological account in *The Tactile Eye* makes a valuable contribution to thinking about film and the body and the film as itself a body. Yet Barker describes the film/viewer relationship as intersubjective, where the film is structured according to a human model – it is constructed to be empathetic to our understanding, to give us music when we need music or a close-up when we need to see more. Like Sobchack, in Barker's elaboration even the film is given intentionality. She writes, 'it is through the tactile experience of the film that we come to understand. Through the skin, we gain a clearer picture of ourselves in relation to others and to history, and we come to recognize that relationship as one of mutual permeability.'[55] The film, then, becomes an occasion for the phenomenological subject to move towards a greater understanding of her world. Although the spectator is here given a body that haptically engages with the image, the medium and viewer are seen as two separate entities, which realise their mutual ability to be affected by one another.

The problematic notion that the viewer has a stable, discrete subjectivity is left intact by phenomenological models. I move towards a post-phenomenological and material account that offers more useful vocabularies for thinking about cinema and ethics. Understanding every image in relation to a larger whole becomes less of a goal. Rather, Denis's films emphasise our inability to make meaning. I argue that Denis's films show us the meaning that the world *is*, outside of linguistic or other sign systems that work to fix its ever shifting and dynamic existence.[56] Meaning, then, is in the act of signifying itself as the opening of *sense* onto the work.[57] Sense, as elaborated in Chapter 2, is a key concept for my approach to film. Sense operates in excess of any referent of a given sign or representation – it is the material sharing out of singularity. Philosophically, we simply *are* meaning and do not have to find meaning in any referential or comprehensive system.[58] Film can show this meaning, be this meaning, by offering encounters with the sense that the world is. In a Nancean framework, cinema is thought of less in terms of representation and rather as an exposure or an interruptive contact that alters without mastery. It is not that representation is irrelevant to films, but rather that representation when thought of in terms of meaning and language always limits or misses something of what film is about. It so happens that this relational, extra-linguistic and felt dimension is what may matter most when we think about ethics. This is not to denigrate the intellectual engagement with a film in favour of a purely affective account, but rather to gesture to the reality that the affective pull of a film may disturb our attempts to cognitively master it. Moreover, the subversion of total meaning is important, because it makes the film available for a less hierarchical and scripted encounter.

Deleuzian models have offered one response to the limitations of phenomenological approaches. These approaches centre the body, sensation and the

proliferating pleasures, the non-human becomings and machinic assemblages that film makes possible.[59] In his work, Shaviro gives a Deleuzian account of film perception:

> The dematerialized images of film are the raw contents of sensation, without the forms, horizons, and contexts that usually orient them. And this is how film crosses the threshold of a new kind of perception, *one that is below or above the human*. This new perception is multiple and anarchic, nonintentional and asubjective; it is no longer subordinated to the requirements of representation and idealization, recognition and designation.[60]

What I argue through Nancy and Denis is that this model of perception need not be situated at a pre-personal level. In other words, we do not necessarily need to move beyond the human to shift our understanding of perception to that which is always mediated, is often non-intentional, asubjective and multiple. In this vein, in critiquing the subject that classical film theory constructs as its viewer, Shaviro *assumes* that subject and then dismisses it as 'human', and in need of displacement. Therefore, in his account, we need to move above or below the human level to cross to a new form of perception. In this way he leaves the subject of classical theory intact and moves elsewhere for an account of film perception. Rather than completely shifting away from the human, however, I argue that the human is not limited to the 'subject' that film addresses, nor does classical film exhaust the reality of human perception or definitively account for what is 'natural'. The concept of the human is contingent, mutable and flexible. It can stretch to encompass changing notions of modes of perception, new ways of understanding the body, and challenges to false dichotomies such as natural/technical or human/animal. Neither above nor below the human, we need to think the human itself as not subordinated to the requirements of representation. Furthermore, we do not have to escape the category of the human to get a perception that is always already becoming-other, technological, often non-intentional, and without guiding consciousness.[61]

Like Deleuzian models, I argue for a way of thinking about film using concepts that focus not on cognition and referential meaning, but instead on forces and material encounters. In contrast to a Deleuzian approach, however, I think through these encounters in terms of subjects. But in my reading the subject is constituted inter-relationally or in alterity. This understanding works to dismantle oppressive formulations of the subject that have been historically dominant in Western thought. The subject is not thought of as autonomous, discrete or as having mastery over her environment. She is not easily able to separate self and other or to categorise others on the bases of various adjectives.

This de-subjectified subject makes it difficult to operate in ways that are dominating or that reduce others to a known quantity. In contrast to Deleuzian anti-humanism, I formulate here an ethics that uses humans, but humans refigured or thought otherwise. Operating from the standpoint of ethics and wanting to hold on to a notion of responsibility, the particular perspective I am moving towards here maintains a notion of a subject, however interrupted.

Paradoxically, models of ethics that try to completely move away from the subject often in fact become solipsistic – and the web of relations in which we are enmeshed and act recede from view. Here I refer specifically to Deleuzian formulations and their roots in Spinoza and Nietzsche. From Spinoza the emphasis on positive affects as a basis for forming adequate thoughts from which to act in the world, while inspiring, requires a great deal of elaboration to convincingly argue that it can address the ways in which our responsibilities and relatedness may often *diminish* our powers to act or *undo* us in necessarily painful ways. The Nietzschean emphasis on an active forgetting of the past and a willing singular affirmation in the present, while it absolves us of our guilty consciences in ways that can be affectively liberating, may let too many off the hook in terms of our ethical accountability and responsibility. I worry that it may absolve precisely those who have played the greatest role in past atrocities that have diminished and continue to diminish the power of particular peoples. A considerable amount of work must be done to make a convincing argument that Deleuze and Guattari's ethics can encompass a notion of responsibility, although their focus on desiring productivity and lines of flight provides needed resources for thinking about resistance to the dogmas of late capitalism. Tamsin Lorraine attempts such a reworking through her argument that Deleuzian assemblages can be read as larger groups or communities, extending their framework beyond the individual-as-assemblage, to which it falls prey conceptually.[62] Lorraine further reasons that by limiting others' lines of flight, I limit my own, therefore my power to act is dependent on the ability of all to act. While these modifications help to broaden a Deleuzian ethics and give shape to a related world of beings, for the purposes of my project here, Nancy and Levinas offer a framework that I find more productive. Whatever the category of the human may mean, there is a way in which the life form that has been given that title is uniquely responsible to and for the world. By world, I mean to other beings, including animals, to their histories and to the environment. It is the case that 'humans' seems to be particularly adept at damaging the environment, animals and each other. This is the category of life, however historically contingent, that I mean to address as potential spectators. Although a traditional notion of subjectivity is undone by both Levinas and Nancy, there is still a subject, just one that is dependent on, vulnerable to and constituted *with* others. There is also room for animals and plants and even rocks (particularly in Nancy). For these reasons, I find Levinas and

Nancy more compelling than Deleuzian approaches for thinking through the *ethics* of film.

Finally, in contrast to Deleuze-and-Guattarian models, which tend to move away from the language of difference and towards that of becoming, my account is still invested in formulating how to conceive of difference. The model developed in Chapter 3, drawing on Levinas, emphasises difference based on the unknowability of the other as opposed to a recognition or identity-based model.[63] The feminist perspective offered here attempts to forge a complex middle ground between approaches that are entrenched in sexual difference as the key to understanding spectatorship and Deleuzian approaches which may miss sexed identity altogether in their emphasis on flows and molecular becomings. As Elena del Río writes in her book on *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, 'A Deleuzian model of the body as an impersonal flow of forces may arguably fall short of meeting the political needs of a feminist position that still finds it necessary to differentiate between the sexes, and to maintain a distinct notion of female subjectivity as individuated molar identity.'[64] Rather than completely doing away with identity, I acknowledge the tension between real and materially productive categories and their inadequacy with respect to accounting for the world and our capabilities. Chapter 2, for example, discusses *Nénette and Boni*'s depiction of teen pregnancy and the ways in which Denis challenges stereotypical images of motherhood to move us towards something else entirely; that is, a focus on an exposure to the other's singularity, a sensory and dynamic encounter that cannot be fully understood or finalised. This is in contrast to a notion of representation that enables clear meaning and completion. Rather than turning to Deleuzian forces and syntheses at the pre-individual level, the focus is on how we encounter the other through cinema. As Adrián Pérez-Malgosa writes in his book on affect and intercultural cinema, he wants to 'theorize film and cinematic reception as areas of cultural tension where the subject both emerges and is constantly questioned'.[65] In a sense, the emergence and interrogation of the subject is a process that my project echoes – cinema participates in producing particular forms of subjectivity, and is also a site where it is continually brought into question and reconfigured. The ongoing solidification of the subject and its paradoxically tandem dissolution applies both to the spectator and to the characters within Denis's filmic worlds. The tension between identities and their limitations with respect to accounting for our interrelated and complex experiences are key to the model put forth here.

In contrast to the film theoretical approaches discussed, my project moves towards a different vocabulary that is more useful for understanding Denis's cinematic work in particular and the account of ethics I derive from it. I am teasing out the subtle distinctions between the approach offered here and phenomenological, psychoanalytic and Deleuzian frameworks because no one

model should always be adhered to or is inherently better than the others. Each has its utility and explanatory power. Psychoanalytic and other approaches have been and continue to be extremely valuable for analysing film, and each has added important feminist insights into how we understand cinema. From an understanding of how sexual difference operates in classical cinema to an account of embodied meaning, each framework captures one facet of the complexity of film viewing. Particular approaches are certainly more or less relevant to specific films. Denis's work itself demands a trans-theoretical model that combines theories relating to affect, feminism, postcoloniality and ethics. I have outlined the gaps or tensions that Levinas and Nancy help to address and aim to provide, with Denis, a model that puts forth a particular notion of the ethical. This ethical model is the most illuminating way to think *with* Denis's oeuvre.

CINEMA AND ETHICS

Film is a medium that has the potential to access large audiences and which engages us in many processes of meaning making that are largely unconscious.[66] In addressing us as spectators, film also constructs us as spectators – it not only caters to desires, it creates them.[67] As a form of mass culture that plays a 'key role . . . in the profound restructuration of subjectivity', film is an important site for examining different ways of seeing and for encouraging a more ethical sensibility.[68] Additionally, cinema offers us a sense of the possible. Often it is only when we see uncommon images that we realise the extent to which our expectations about the world are shaped by what we are exposed to. For example, images of fearless and technically proficient women of colour in science fiction or crime dramas still provide a refreshing counter to the majority of roles for black, Hispanic or Asian women in television and film. Cinema is able to challenge our way of thinking about the world and to address us *differently*, making possible different senses of ourselves as viewing subjects. Earlier theories of spectatorship such as those offered by Raymond Bellour, Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz analysed film in terms of the ideological or psychic modes that catered to the desire for or illusion of spectatorial supremacy. Denis's films, however, undermine the (illusory) supremacy of the viewer by offering partial and fragmentary glimpses, and refusing character psychology and causal plot motivations. They drift away from what we may think is important in the diegesis to show us something else, reminding us that the story world of the film is always incomplete. In their interruptive, fragmented and non-linguistic way of unfolding, Denis's films work against ideology rather than reproducing it. In the process they address us as different kinds of subjects – as porous and feeling the world more than rationally *knowing* it.

Additionally, cinema occupies a privileged role here because of my focus on the encounter with singularity as key to ethics. Film is a relational space; we are receptive to the images on screen because viewing is a matter of being open to encountering what we cannot anticipate in advance. In its capacity to alter us, film breaks down the clear boundaries between self and other. Cinema takes place over time – it is a medium of duration.[69] It has the potential to foster a relational space of encounter that is multisensory and can cultivate an awareness of things that are pre-thematic and never fixed, because the image always exists *through* time. As a partly visual medium, film registers difference but also has the power to challenge our assumptions about what that difference will mean or look like in practice. As Denis states, 'I think in fact, if my films have a common link, maybe it's being a foreigner – it's common for people who are born abroad – they don't know so well where they belong. It's not the kind of thing you find in literature, music or photography – being from abroad makes you look different.'[70] Presumably, it is the way in which cinema acts in duration that separates it from photography. In contrast to literature, cinema is able to immediately register an impression of bodies without relying on language for its affective power. This, Denis shows, is one of the reasons why film has such potential for exposing an ethics of sense and an aesthetic of alterity.

Cinema offers us multiple encounters with alterity that can help us in honing an ethical sensibility. It shows us things that *alter* us and exposes us to that which we cannot know in the traditional sense of knowledge (for example, in the sense of formulating logical propositions that give us factual information about the world or about various situations). In contrast to the kind of bodily encounter available in the films I consider here, the dominant tendency in Hollywood cinema has been towards characters' psychological legibility and full narrative closure.[71] Affective responses tend to be channelled towards clear judgements such as evil and good, which are easily identifiable, and all loose ends are resolved and tied together by the end of the film. Shots and editing function to create a comprehensible narrative and to make sure that the viewer understands what she is looking at. Many older Hollywood films (such as the pre-code films from the early 1930s, or even many generic b-films) appear less 'finished'. They introduce plot elements that are left unresolved at the end of the movie or characters who seem important in the narrative only to suddenly disappear without explanation.[72] The sense that some of these earlier films do not quite work is based on the fact that they haven't yet mastered the Hollywood formula, formally and narratively. Shots are confusing, the editing doesn't make sense spatially or temporally, or the narrative seems incoherent in places. Conversely, Hollywood films that consciously play with the entrenched film language codes are seen as clever or more artistic. For example, cheeky uses of slow motion or long takes, the inclusion of more experimental montage segments, or unconventional uses of sound all func-

tion to make a film seem 'edgy' or even 'experimental'. These exceptions to the well-worn patterns of Hollywood cinema serve to prove the ubiquity of conventions for making meaning in film that are largely unconscious to most spectators.[73] Our common sense tells us that movies should make sense – that is, we should know whose side we're on and we should feel some kind of a cathartic resolution, be it a couple united or a child saved from danger. By bringing everything into the light, more conventional film language typically denies the viewer the chance to experience a world that exceeds cognition and labels. By contrast, Denis offers us a counter practice where sense comes from the body before any cognitive act and resides in images, in music and in fragmented glimpses of characters who touch each other through intrusions both physical and emotional.

When film offers the illusion that we can know the other – that the other is capturable, rather than complex, opaque and singular – or when it strives to make legible who characters are and what we need to know about them to understand the plot, it works against the ethics I elaborate from Denis's own practices, which interrupt any illusions of fullness, completion or spectatorial control. She privileges the fragment both narratively, in her inclusion of marginal and unexplained scenes, and visually, in her filming of the body as a collection of tactile parts. She refuses psychological and plot motivation in her choices of scenes for inclusion and her ordering of those scenes. Her films interrupt the narrative to privilege a song and/or a body dancing or to expose a sensual visual and auditory dreamscape. They challenge the viewer's expectations by offering feelings and encounters *other* than the sort they have come to expect at the movies. The belief that people can be neatly classified into categories is present in forms of nationalism, fascism and neocolonialism, all of which rely on self/other distinctions for their efficacy. From the standpoint of ethics, we must move away from the belief that we can accurately represent or know through representations and be open to difficulty and unknowability in order to start from a place of openness rather than anaesthetised knowledge. Ethics involves sitting with the difficulty of the world and, eventually, not being afraid to take responsibility within that complexity.

PHILOSOPHY AND FILM

> I had never thought about a heart transplant. But the idea of the transplant, of a graft, is something that has always interested me. In my work I talk often about grafting. It is as if, for me, cinema is only interesting if it is grafted. I don't think that there is literature on one side and cinema on the other – something is grafted. It is cinema that is grafted.
>
> Claire Denis[74]

Film is not merely an example for or of a philosophical system. It is an interlocutor in its own right, and one that is able to touch on that which exceeds the limits of philosophical language. One of the main problems with the attack on so-called 'Theory' expounded by scholars such as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll is that it gives no allowance for the film itself as an expression of ideas. In their reading Theory is guilty of using individual films as mere examples of some convoluted universalising concept. As Carroll writes in his contribution,

> Like classic essentialist theory, Theory is an obstacle to authentic theorizing, because it is presented as a unified or totalizing system. Under its aegis, the film theorist sets out to subsume every aspect of cinematic phenomena under the putative laws and categories of his or her minimally customized version of the reigning orthodoxy. Theorizing becomes the routine application of some larger, unified theory to questions of cinema, which procedure unsurprisingly churns out roughly the same answers, or remarkably similar answers, in every case. The net result, in short, is theoretical impoverishment.[75]

Here we see that little room is left for the generation of ideas that may not be applicable to every film but may be raised by the film in question. In this schema, if the film communicates its own ideas, ones that resonate with extra-cinematic elements of thought, it is irrelevant to the study of cinema. Rather scientifically, the goal of film studies is to discover general patterns that define cinema at large. In this sense, what particular films or approaches to filmmaking have to offer is deemed irrelevant if it can't be generalised. In place of Theory, they suggest that

> What is coming after Theory is not another Theory but theor*ies* and the activity of *theorizing*. A theory of film defines a problem within the domain of cinema (defined nondogmatically) and sets out to solve it through logical reflection, empirical research, or a combination of both. *Theorizing* is a commitment to using the best canons of inference and evidence available to answer the question posed. The standards ought to be those of the most stringent philosophical reasoning, historical argument, and sociological, economic, and critical analysis we can find, in film studies or elsewhere (even in science).[76]

Bordwell offers examples of proper objects of study, from the evolution of continuity editing to female film audiences in early cinema. Again, no room is left for films as themselves transmitters of ideas both calculated and uncalculated or as having the capacity to speak back to or in relation to their moment of emergence. While the kinds of research advocated by Bordwell

and Carroll are undoubtedly important to particular areas of film studies, they foreclose important facets of the film experience. Rather than solving research problems, I am more interested in asking the right questions – and my argument is that in the case of ethics we should be wary of any claims to 'correct answers'. This is in no way to diminish historical, archival or interview-based research, which is crucial to the field. But these forms of research need not be mutually exclusive, just as film and theory are not mutually exclusive, where that latter can only be violently imposed onto the former. Many films themselves are engaged in this question asking. They are not objects from which to establish general patterns – there is no one-to-one correlation between a formal device and its meaning; rather, they are participants in their own right in the theoretical conversation. The assumption that filmmakers, scriptwriters and editors do not approach their material with something to say and that it is not the job of film studies to make visible the way that the medium communicates these concepts excludes some of the crucial questions we can ask of films.

Films do make arguments, but they do so in their own language. Gilles Deleuze's 'What is the creative act?' (1987) is helpful in thinking through this connection.[77] In this lecture, Deleuze asks what it is to have an idea in cinema. More broadly, he asks what it is that philosophers do when they make philosophy and what it is that filmmakers do when they make cinema. Importantly, he emphasises that philosophy is no less creative or inventive than is cinema or the other arts. When we have an idea, it is always an idea *in* something, whether that something is philosophy or mathematics, a novel or a film. For Deleuze, philosophy creates concepts, whereas cinema thinks in what he calls blocks of movement-time.

As the lecture proceeds, Deleuze shifts to the question of adaptation – he focuses on the question of Kurosawa's shared concerns with Dostoyevsky. While I am less concerned here with how Deleuze assesses the similarities between the protagonists of the Russian novelist and the Japanese auteur, what interests me is thinking the relation between literature and cinema as akin to the one between cinema and philosophy. In this framework, Denis and Nancy, for example, also have a shared concern. Unlike Kurosawa and Dostoyevsky, they are contemporaries of one another and interlocutors. They share ideas, but whereas Nancy's emerge in philosophical concepts, for Denis they are manifest in blocks of movement-time. This is perhaps best illustrated in my discussion of Denis's short film *Vers Nancy* (2002) that begins the second chapter, but is also very evident in her film *The Intruder*, which adopts Nancy's essay of the same name. This does *not* mean that their ideas are the same. As I aim to show, Denis often pushes us further in examining real bodily differences and their affective and material impact on us. Because she works with moving images rather than words on a page, she is able to stage a different sort

of encounter, although not necessarily one any more creative or altering than we may have with a philosophical text.

Although Levinas and Denis do not have any documented connection, they share concerns, just as I find sympathetic moments in the thinking of Levinas and Nancy. In all cases, the three thinkers (or idea-makers) connect and diverge in ways that are productive rather than simply inconsistent or incompatible. As such, in everything that follows, the question of the relationship between philosophy and film is one of overlapping or divergent concerns. Put differently, my focus is on the generative encounters amongst these ideas, be they Levinasian or Nancean concepts or Denisian blocks of movement-time. To borrow Denis's language from the epigraph, philosophy and film are here *grafted* onto each other, two living entities that, brought together, create the possibility of the new, that undermine clear borders, and that intrude into one another to produce something unanticipated. The notion of adoption or idea sharing as grafting also brings to the fore the focus on the bodily in Denis's work and that I highlight in Levinas and Nancy.

The methodological goal of creating a balance between the ideas the films express through blocks of movement-time and the philosophical concepts has required a selective process with regard to the philosophical texts used. Particularly in the case of a thinker as prolific as Nancy, detailed engagements with every potentially illuminating aspect of his philosophy are not practicable in a study of this kind. Therefore, this book is hardly exhaustive with respect to the possibilities contained within any one thinker's work. The attempt to balance the film analyses and philosophical exegeses has meant a significant amount of curatorial work in terms of what is focused on from each philosopher. For example, I chose not to include a rather long section that engaged in detail with Levinas's writing on art in favour of a concise summary. Additionally, I have omitted a longer engagement with Nancy's writing on *Trouble Every Day* in the fourth chapter, because it digressed from the substance of my own argument. The guiding principle in this has been Denis's films themselves, which have pointed to the (often unexpected) places in the philosophers' work that are most fruitful for thinking towards a feminist cinematic ethics.

While my writing at times shifts emphasis between, on the one hand, the philosophy and, on the other, the films, overall neither medium is more privileged than the other, nor do they exist in a neatly delineated binary. They offer ideas that converge and sometimes contrast but that are better for coming into contact with and being tested against one another. As I argue in the following chapter, film and philosophy touch each other at their limits, and together reach towards meanings that exceed either one when read in isolation. Again, the rough edges or places where any two of my interlocutors differ are spaces of opening, which undermine any claims to having defined or mastered the

notion of cinematic ethics in this project, itself a reflection of the ethical position I formulate.

A FEMINIST CINEMATIC ETHICS: OVERVIEW

In the following chapter I develop the concept of an ethics of sense. This works towards exposure and encounter rather than representation, cultivating a curiosity about the world that refuses mastery and opens rather than closes meaning. Focusing on *Nénette and Boni*, I look at how the film does not take up the social issues that it touches on in a moralising way. Its approach is non-normative, asking us to encounter the bodies on screen before we fix them into a controlling framework. Denis employs many strategies for exposing the limits of meaning and privileging sense in her work, emphasising movement, and including marginal or seemingly irrelevant scenes and people. These highlight the porousness and lack of closure in each film, further stressed by her intertextual use of actors. These techniques are all practices of interruption. In place of cinematic myth, Denis *interrupts*. This ethics of sense continually ruptures the viewer's illusion of control over the image or of a completed content by inserting a difference into the film that refuses to be pinned down. I connect the surprise of the other to feminist philosophers of natality and wonder – a curiosity towards the unknown of the other and the world as an ethical stance enables us to move beyond normative identity categories, including those based on sexuality and reproduction. In front of Denis's lens, natality is freed from biological essentialism. At the same time, natality reframes the dissolution of the subject as an affirmative and creative possibility, rather than a cause for crisis or despair. This wonder at the unknown of the other is also central to the second term introduced under the rubric of a feminist cinematic ethics, the aesthetic of alterity.

This alterity-based approach is the topic of Chapter 3, where I examine *I Can't Sleep* and focus on three aspects of Levinas's philosophy read through Denis's filmmaking: his concept of the *saying* before the *said*, his treatment of the erotic, and what I term a Levinasian poetics, which uses Levinas's own writing style as a representational model. In *I Can't Sleep*, the aesthetics of alterity are evident in Denis's use of ambiguity and opacity which refuse character psychologisation, the dynamism which she inserts into the plot through shifts amongst characters, the inclusion of inexplicable scenes with respect to narrative development, and a sense of perpetual becoming. The notion of alterity aesthetics carries forward from the second chapter the theme of representations that fail or that expose their own limits.

This cinematic ethics cannot be separated from the body, both as it signifies and as it refuses signification. This is the topic of the final chapter. Ethics

works through an affective engagement with the world. The pre-thematic felt encounter is uniquely cultivated in Denis's work. While the bodily openness and non-immunity I highlight carries both risk and pleasure, it is a condition that must be recognised so that we can begin to start acting from a place of mutual vulnerability rather than a notion of an autonomous self from which the other can be easily separated and protected. Through Nancy and Levinas we have access to additional tools for thinking creatively about the body as it relates to cinema and the encounters film offers. Denis's use of dance offers an opportunity for a highly affective Levinasian encounter with the other, which highlights process and singularity over comprehension and solidity.

Film can engage us in an ethics of spectatorship that fine-tunes our ethical sensibility with repercussions beyond the cinema doors. Cinema can alter our way of seeing and being in the world. Watching can be a kind of ethical training. Unfortunately, our codified ways of viewing tend to shut down an opportunity to encounter the unmasterable in the world and to see the other, for whom we are responsible, in all her singularity, surprise and wonder. I offer these thoughts on Denis's work as a way of thinking about not only what happens when we watch her films, but how different forms of exposure to the other, or new modes of encounter, can affectively reorient us towards different and more just futures.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Romney, 'Claire Denis interviewed by Jonathan Romney', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,338784,00.html> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
2. Jonathan Romney, 'Between Dream and Reality', *Sight and Sound* 15.9 (2005): 41–2; 41.
3. Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005); Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
4. Mayne, *Claire Denis*, p. 30.
5. This is recounted in Mayne, *Claire Denis*, pp. 30–1. The scene would have required a woman to shave her head and appear as a refugee from a nearby country who had fought in a recent civil war. According to Mayne, Denis was concerned about the consequences for the woman once the crew left Djibouti, since the shaved head would mark her as a refugee and possibly make her the target of discrimination.
6. Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, p. 200.
7. Ibid. p. 46.
8. By deontological approaches I refer to ethical systems based on norms in the form of rules or duties. For deontological theories see, for example, Cicero, *On Duties* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1996); Samuel Pufendorf, *Pufendorf: On the Duty of Man and Citizen according to Natural Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For examples of virtue-based systems see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Claremont: Coyote Canyon Press, 2010); J. A. K. Thomson, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics Translated* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955). For major examples of consequentialist or teleological approaches see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994); John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988).

9. Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2013).
10. Sarah Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (Transformations) (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 164.
11. Other workable examples may include the Dardenne brothers, Abbas Kiarostami and Yasujiro Ozu.
12. My focus is on narrative cinema. However, this is not to dismiss the potential for more experimental cinema to sensitise us to ethical modes of encounter. As I elaborate below, avant-garde strategies of alienation operate in a very different vein from the sensual modes Denis draws on. Nor am I interested in shocks or spectacle as a challenge to conventional ways of seeing, at least for the purposes of this project. Rather, any film, narrative or otherwise, that stages an encounter drawing on the principles I elaborate in this work could potentially speak to a feminist cinematic ethics.
13. This would apply to a deontological film or a film that emphasised our duty – take *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), for example, where the main character realises that his duty has been to stay in his home town and provide for his community. These types of films would be more moralising than ethical as I define it here.
14. He writes in *Otherwise than Being* that his framework would 'find for man another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression'. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 177.
15. Here I refer to bodies of thought on sexual difference, postcolonial studies, queer theory and critical disability studies, all of which concern themselves with representations and difference and are fields in which feminist thinkers have played a central role. See, for example, Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*; Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2011); Gisela Bock and Susan James (eds), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007); Barbara Smith, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism', in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 168–85; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), pp. 271–311; Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Street Press, 1992).
16. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

17. I do not mean to suggest that the refusal to psychologise is a necessarily feminist move. This facet of Denis's work functions as more of a challenge to dominant cinematic language.
18. For discussions of psychic intrusion through histories of colonisation see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008); and Kelly Oliver's discussion of Fanon in relation to major European thinkers who focus on alienation or fragmentation: Kelly Oliver, 'Alienation as the Perverse Privilege of the Modern Subject', in *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 3–26.
19. See, for example, Mark A. Reid, 'Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations', *Jump Cut* 40 (March 1996): 67–72.
20. The work of Gayatri Spivak is an important exception, among others.
21. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18. Of course Mulvey is referring to a particular kind of scopic pleasure found in classical narrative cinema that is psychically structured around the male spectator's need to mitigate the woman's difference on screen. While Mulvey may not be against pleasure in viewing *tout court*, I mean to point out that Denis's counter cinema offers feminist pleasures that cannot be accounted for within Oedipal psychoanalytic models.
22. See, for example, Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Adrian Martin, 'Ticket to Ride: Claire Denis and the Cinema of the Body', Screening the Past 20 (2006), <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/20/claire-denis.html> (last accessed 20 May 2015); Elena del Río, 'Body Transformations in the Films of Claire Denis: From Ritual to Play', *Studies in French Cinema* 3.3 (2003): 185–97; Sebastien Scholz and Hanna Surma, 'Exceeding the Limits of Representation: Screen and/as Skin in Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001)', *Studies in French Cinema* 8.1 (2008): 5–16.
23. See, for example, Lauren Berlant, 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*', *Public Culture* 19.2 (2007): 273–301; E. Ann Kaplan, 'European Art Cinema, Affect, and Postcolonialism: Herzog, Denis, and the Dardenne Brothers', in Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (eds), *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 285–302; Barbara M. Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema and Embodiment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Adrián Pérez-Malgosa, *Cinema and Inter-American Relations: Tracking Transnational Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Blue Ridge: John Hunt Publishing, 2010).
24. This is, in part, what Michel Chion refers to as music's 'added value' in his groundbreaking work on film music *Audiovision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
25. See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interviewed by Elizabeth Grosz, 'Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution', in Sarah Harasym (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–16.
26. Didier Castanet, 'Interview with Claire Denis', *Journal of European Studies* 34.1–2 (March–June 2004): 143–61. See also Catherine Portuges, '*Le Colonial Féminin*: Women Directors Interrogate French Cinema', in Dina Sherzer (ed.), *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone Worlds* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 80–102.
27. Mayne, *Claire Denis*, p. 21.
28. Ibid. p. 27.

29. Wendy Brown, 'Wounded Attachments', *Political Theory* 21.3 (August 1993): 390–410.
30. Geetha Ramanathan, *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), p. 60.
31. Judith Mayne, 'Foreign Bodies in the Films of Claire Denis', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51.43 (1 July 2005), <http://m.chronicle.com/article/Foreign-Bodies-in-the-Films-of/7160> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
32. Diane Perpich, '*Corpus Meum*: Disintegrating Bodies and the Ideal of Integrity', *Hypatia* 2.3 (Summer 2005): 74–91.
33. Anne O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
34. This is in contrast to ethics as a system of principles or the cultivation of virtue. These are both dominant trajectories in the history of philosophy of ethics, and both rely on the fiction of a stable subject who acts independently in the world.
35. See Tina Chanter (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Diane Perpich, 'Levinas, Feminism, and Identity Politics', in Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (eds), *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), pp. 21–40; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004); Stella Sandford, 'Levinas, Feminism, and the Feminine', in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 139–60; Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
36. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
37. Megan Craig's *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) provides an important exception to this. See also Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006) for an important and thorough discussion of his metaphors of maternity, and Catherine Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) for a discussion of the concept of the caress.
38. See Jacques Derrida's *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) for an account of touch or haptics as central threads connecting Nancy's body of work. Derrida argues that Nancy's analysis of touch is perhaps his most important contribution to the philosophy of our time.
39. 'Co-existential' is a Nancean term that emphasises his argument that being is always *with* ('co-').
40. Important exceptions are O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude*, and Perpich, '*Corpus Meum*'.
41. Perpich, '*Corpus Meum*', pp. 88–9.
42. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Abbas Kiarostami: The Evidence of Film* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert, 2001), p. 78.
43. See Nancy's essays on *Trouble Every Day*, *Beau travail* and *The Intruder*: 'Claire Denis: Icon of Ferocity', in James Phillips (ed.), *Cinematic Thinking: Philosophical Approaches to the New Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 160–8; 'A-religion', *Journal of European Studies* 34.1–2 (March–June 2004): 14–18; and 'L'Intrus selon Claire Denis', Remue.net (2005), archived at <http://www.missingimage.com/node/250633> (last accessed 20 May 2015). Denis's film *The Intruder* is based on Nancy's essay of the same name. Her short film *Vers Nancy* (2002) centres on the director, and see her contribution to Mathilde Monnier and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Allitérations: Conversations sur la danse* (Paris: Galilée, 2005).

44. See the special issue of *Film-Philosophy* 12.1 (2008) devoted to Denis, and Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Leeds: Maney, 2011).
45. See Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: Phenomenology and Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and, to some extent, Marks, *The Skin of the Film*.
46. Here I refer again to the two books on Denis by Beugnet and Mayne, both of which use ethics or the ethical to describe her filmmaking.
47. See Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2006); Sam Girgus, *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Alterity, and the Feminine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and *Clint Eastwood's America* (Cambridge, Oxford and Boston: Polity, 2013); Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); and the special issue of *Film-Philosophy* 11 (2007), which includes the only essay (to my knowledge) that discusses Levinas in relation to Denis, along with Catherine Breillat. See also Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
48. For texts addressing their differences, see Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 1999); Christopher Watkin, 'A Different Alterity: Jean-Luc Nancy's "Singular Plural"', *Paragraph* 30.2 (2007): 50–64.
49. Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, pp. 41–2.
50. For example, Jean-Louis Baudry's 'The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema' (1975) discusses spectatorship in terms of psychic desire and as a regression to childlike state; Bellour also offers a psychoanalytic perspective on spectatorship and like Metz situates spectatorship in a pre-Oedipal and Imaginary register. For key early essays by Baudry, Bellour and Metz see Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Feminist analyses that took a psychoanalytic approach, often despite significant differences and debates amongst them, include, for example, Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'; Kaja Silverman, 'Male Subjectivity and the Celestial Suture: *It's a Wonderful Life*', *Framework* 14 (1981): 16–21; Gaylan Studlar, 'Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9.4 (Fall 1984): 267–82; Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen* 23.3–4 (September–October 1982): 74–87; Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
51. For semiotic approaches see Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory:* Visible Man *and* The Spirit of Film (New York: Berghahn, 2011); Umberto Eco, 'Articulations of the Cinematic Code', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 590–607; Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (eds), *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism, and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
52. See, for example, Marks, *The Skin of the Film*; Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema*; Elena del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*.
53. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 21.
54. Ibid. p. 23.
55. Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), p. 62.

56. As opposed to *having* meaning, referentially and outside of itself, being *is* meaning. This is a Nancean formulation that I elaborate in Chapter 2.
57. As I discuss in the next chapter, one semantic valence of the word *sens* in French is 'meaning', so I use the two terms interchangeably when I am discussing existence as being meaning/sense or as the exposure of meaning/sense. This is again as opposed to existence (and the existence that Denis's films expose) having a referential meaning outside of itself that must be deciphered or interpreted. The other valences of *sens* indicate direction and sensation, emphasising movement, process and the sensory. This highlights the ongoing, dynamic and affective aspects of being *as* sense/meaning, over a fixed, cognitive and representable or articulatable meaning that being has.
58. More important than any particular signification in this model is the sense that underpins and exceeds every attempt at representing or communicating. For example, I could recite a poem or repeat a joke word for word, but each time the sense that is shared out is singular – a voice that will never sound the same, resonating across a unique configuration of space at an unrepeatable instant and shifting all the particles it touches in its wake. This meaning that is our existence, always shifting, and sharing out, altering and interrelated, is sense before and in excess of a signified.
59. See, for example, Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation*; Anna Powell, *Deleuze, Altered States and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema*; del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*; Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*.
60. Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect*, pp. 31–2; italics mine.
61. It should also be noted that the category of the human persists in much postcolonial theory. From Fanon to Said to Bhabha, an insistence on the notion of human experience or shared humanity seems to linger. Perhaps this is because the category of the human is much more difficult to relinquish and must be more carefully negotiated by those who have had to fight to be included amongst the human in the first place. Perhaps after Bhabha we can argue for the human as a kind of strategic category, a practice, rather than an essence. In this respect I see value in maintaining the term while keeping it open to redefinition. See, for example, Homi K. Bhabha, 'On Minorities: Cultural Rights', *Radical Philosophy* 100 (March–April 2000), <http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/wp-content/files_mf/rp100_commentary_onminorities_bhabha.pdf> (last accessed 20 May 2015); Jane Hiddleston, *Understanding Postcolonialism* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009).
62. Tamsin Lorraine, *Deleuze and Guattari's Immanent Ethics: Theory, Subjectivity, and Duration* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011).
63. Note that this is in fact a Deleuze-Guattarian focus in the secondary literature, as Deleuze's own philosophical writing is very interested in difference. That said, he tends to be taken up in film theory in terms of becomings and, interestingly, through the language of his work with Guattari, even more so than through his own writings on cinema.
64. Del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance*, p. 115.
65. Pérez-Malgosa, *Cinema and Inter-American Relations*, p. 14.
66. See Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' for an early account that places film in a privileged role in relation to mass distribution and art, as well as noting the unconscious ways in which it conditions our perception. In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 217–52.
67. See in particular Baudry, but also Bellour and Metz for influential accounts of spectatorship and subjectivity. All can be found in Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. The Frankfurt School also recognised the special position that cinema held in relation to constructing the subject.

68. Miriam Hansen, 'Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Permutations of the Public Sphere', *Screen* 34.3 (Autumn 1993): 197–210; 201.
69. See, for example, Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
70. Romney, 'Claire Denis interviewed by Jonathan Romney'.
71. For an account of the Hollywood style see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) and 'Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures', in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 17–34; Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) and 'Film's Institutional Mode of Representation and the Soviet Response', *October* 11 (Winter 1979): 77–96; Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Kristin Thompson, 'The Continuity System', in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson (eds), *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 194–213.
72. This is in contrast to the more polished successful examples of the classical style.
73. Note that these conventions are copied globally and thus the phrase 'Hollywood film language' and its derivatives should be understood to stand for the style and conventions that Hollywood film represents, rather than only films that literally come out of Hollywood.
74. Denis is speaking on Nancy's essay 'L'Intrus' and also on Derrida's book on Nancy, *Le Toucher*, in Jean-Philippe Renouard and Lise Wajeman, 'The Weight of the Here and Now: Conversation with Claire Denis, 2001 (interview)', *Journal of European Studies* 34.1–2 (March–June 2004): 19–34; 19.
75. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 41.
76. Ibid. p. xiv.
77. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hifamdISs> (last accessed 20 May 2015).

CHAPTER 2

Film Interrupted: Denis, Nancy and an Ethics of Sense

A student (Ana Samardzija) and an older man sit across from each other in a train carriage in Claire Denis's short film *Vers Nancy*. We catch them in mid-conversation, while outside the window the countryside zooms past, too quickly for the eye to get a good hold on (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). The student – whose name indicates Yugoslav heritage and who is therefore probably no stranger to the violence of borders – discusses her foreign status in France. The conversation carries over periodical intercuts to an empty corridor – a liminal space of passage that suggests the possibility of intrusion onto the conversation, and also serves to remind the viewer of the limits of what the image exposes. As the conversation continues, the elderly gentleman initially dominates. He is concerned with the idea of normalising immigrants, insisting rather that something within a foreigner must remain foreign – she must remain an intruder. The student asks who he is addressing – the host or the foreigner?

As they proceed to discuss the state of borders both European and, more specifically, French, the film cuts back to the hallway. A man (Alex Descas, a French-African actor and Denis regular) stands in the previously empty corridor and smokes a cigarette (Figure 2.3). His status is unclear. Is he one of the foreigners the film has been discussing, or is he one of the many formerly colonised subjects who are born and raised in France? Or is he foreign either way, his blackness rendering him forever *other* to an abstract Frenchness that is implicitly white?[1] His image *visually* raises the point that the older man has just articulated verbally – even if he is French, this unknown man remains other: 'the demand to welcome foreigners in a normalising way means we end up ignoring their foreignness. It's like pretending that a black person isn't black.'

When we return to the train carriage, we begin to see closer frames of the faces and hands of the two interlocutors as they talk and listen (Figures 2.4 and 2.5). While the man continues, the student becomes increasingly animated

Figure 2.1 The student discusses her foreign status in France.

Figure 2.2 The elderly gentleman initially dominates.

and less self-conscious. As the two characters feel out the parameters of their conversation and get a sense of their own positions with respect to the topic and to each other, we get a better visual sense of where they 'stand' (or sit, in this case) on the train (Figure 2.6). All the while the train keeps moving forward, belying a sense of true stability or hypostasis. We are intruders on their conversation just as the train intrudes on the landscape it traverses. The man claims that the intruder is always threatening. He comments on the alterity that we experience within ourselves,

Figure 2.3 His status is unclear.

Figure 2.4 Closer frames of the faces of the two interlocutors as they talk and listen.

> what occurs at the same time in a pathological manner is also the same as something . . . that can be perceived as a strangeness within myself. Not necessarily the presence of the other but its existence. That's not at all pathological. It's what you can't identify . . . and if conceiving means identifying it, then we cannot conceive it. That's the limit of identity, but identity can only be found . . . by accepting some elements of this intrusion. Because an identity that is complete and well-founded . . . and incapable of accepting intrusion . . . is as stupid, closed, sealed . . . like a stone.

Figure 2.5 The man claims that the intruder is always threatening.

Figure 2.6 'We're unsettled, but something occurs that allows us to change.'

The conversation turns to the theme of surprise as the student offers, 'For it [the intrusion] to be a surprise, I must not expect to be surprised . . . we're unsettled, but something occurs that allows us to change.' To which the teacher offers, 'It's a little like everyday life. I'm always struck by the fact that all the important events, the things that have proved determinant in my life occurred without me foreseeing them. I never foresaw anything, not even the job I do now . . . It's always from somewhere else.' The conversation has gained momentum and developed a verbal rhythm that the camera has echoed

visually. Just as we begin to sense an increasingly spontaneous and flowing discussion between student and teacher, they are interrupted as the man from the corridor enters the carriage and sits next to the student. A slight shuffling occurs as the space is recalibrated to the new distribution of bodies and the tensions amongst them. 'When do we get there?' asks the intruder. 'Ten minutes,' answers the older man. 'Already? Very quick and pleasant,' he says back. To which the man replies, 'Yes, a bit long though, no?' This last statement is a playful commentary on the film itself, which was made by Denis for a television series in which directors were asked to make ten-minute films that address the passage of time. The series (*Ten Minutes Older*) included directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Aki Kaurismäki, Spike Lee and Volker Schlöndorff. Denis's film, *Vers Nancy* (*Towards Nancy*), runs slightly over ten minutes – thus 'a bit long, no?'

Perhaps the two travellers are heading for (*vers*) the town of Nancy, but the title also applies to the older man of the pair – the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. The film moves towards (*vers*) him, but makes no attempt to summarise his body of work or his biography, or to stage an encounter of heightened emotional intensity. Rather it is an exposure, literally and metaphorically, opening onto his singularity at a specific, mundane and fleeting moment in time – the conversation keeps moving, as does the film, as does the train. But it is not only towards Nancy that the film moves, as if it were possible to touch on someone apart from who they are in relation to others – students or strangers on the train. Fundamentally the film reveals a constellation of singularities, which unfold through their interactions – a landscape, a locomotive, a student, a professor and a stranger. These singularities are in motion, their selfhood altering through time, rather than remaining static. What could be more banal than a slightly abstract conversation on a train, a man who smokes to pass the time, or a relatively unspectacular landscape? Yet Denis, in this film as in all of her work, invites a curiosity towards them – here, through her slow revelation of the space and characters and by withholding conventional indicators of who the characters are or what they are doing. The frame of the film places their relations in a heightened context, asking us to look more closely at what we may overlook in our everyday being-in-the-world.

Film can invite us to be curious about the world. This renewed curiosity cultivates an openness to the surprise of intrusion – and this thematic of intrusion is central to ethics as read through the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy and the filmmaking of Claire Denis. Denis's work shows that when film engages in opening up a world rather than seeking comprehension and closure, it conducts itself ethically and facilitates a kind of ethical contact in its viewer. This is what I call an ethics of sense and is the focus of what follows. *Vers Nancy* stages an encounter between two figures as they work together to make sense. In that manner the film is a metaphor for this book, which extends

a conversation between philosophy and film. *Vers Nancy* exposes the tensions between concepts as they develop in language, and the power of film to evoke what is difficult to articulate. As an encounter between spectator and image, the film effectively produces, in all its bodily and affective power, the reality of an intrusion – how an unknown other makes us *feel*.[2] When Descas steps into the carriage, we sense the complex nature of the intruder on a much more personal and affective level than the dialogue has lingered on. While Samardzija and Nancy have referenced larger geopolitical and cultural issues in France and Europe today, the issues of intrusion and difference permeate Nancy's thought from the smaller level of the body and identity, to the larger themes of community and myth. Denis's work often explores intrusions that resonate at a bodily and interpersonal level and touch on larger histories of colonial violence. This raises a central point of difference between Nancy and Denis. While Nancy wants to talk about real politics and a real historical moment, his writing must reckon with the language and the history of philosophy, such that his account tends to remain on the level of meta-analysis and abstract. By contrast, Denis is able to give similar problems a pulse, to make images resonate with the weight of history and geographical borders, and to invite the viewer to share in this material *sense*. In this way, film is able to articulate *different* differences, as they affect *different* bodies in *different* ways. This is perhaps well illustrated by the difference between Descas's body and Samardzija's. His blackness registers immediately as a greater barrier to inclusion, versus Samardzija's whiteness, which may mean that her alterity is more easily camouflaged. *Vers Nancy* raises the question of materially significant differences in the conversation itself. The Frenchman demands that something in the foreigner must remain so, but does so to a young woman who herself may be a refugee, and who has already emphasised her desire to be invisible in French society, to not be rejected or deported. While both Nancy and Samardzija are undoubtedly, if we follow Nancy's account, constituted in and through alterity, the everyday reality of these differences positions them variously according to gender, age, education and ethnicity, even if they sit across from each other, equals in the film's frame. The beauty of Denis's cinema lies in part in the fact that although she exposes the material reality of difference, we can never know in advance what that difference will *mean*, that is, identity categories never tell us in advance who someone is or what will be important, although they probably inflect their being-in-the-world.

The arrival of the stranger from the corridor is of course a disruption, yet it also offers all the possibilities contained in a new encounter. He is a surprise – a surprise being that which comes from without and undermines the agency and mastery of the subject. Surprise emphasises the limits of our autonomous self-determination in the world. In Nancean language, the other is a new point of access to the origin of the world – an origin that is never truly an origin,

never a foundation or essence, but is always multiple, relational and constantly renewed with each new birth, with each new encounter, each time and every day. Film can provide an opportunity to listen rather than understand, to wonder at the birth of the new, at the strangeness of the other, and to become aware of the plurality in which we are constituted and which singularises us in and across time. It can be an intrusion that surprises, disrupts and interrupts our habitual ways of seeing. To focus the discussion, I read Nancy alongside Denis's films *Vers Nancy* and *Nénette and Boni*. *Nénette and Boni* centres the theme of natality that I build on, through its plot of an unwanted pregnancy, and also challenges the notion that all aspects of a film should work towards building a coherent and referentially meaningful text. Its use of dreamy visual- and audioscapes, lack of explanatory dialogue, and inclusion of scenes that do not work to further the plot in any traditional sense make it ideal for exploring an ethics of sense in contrast to conventional film language. *Vers Nancy* displays nicely the complex sharing of concerns between the philosopher and the filmmaker, while also highlighting the ways in which Denis pushes Nancy further.

Intrusion is an apt metaphor for the ongoing relationship between Denis and Nancy, who have participated in a dialogue that has involved films (*Vers Nancy*), texts (Nancy has written essays on three of Denis's films, *Beau travail*, *The Intruder* and *Trouble Every Day*) and adaptation (Denis's film *The Intruder* is based on an essay by Nancy of the same name). They have also intersected in the field of dance, collaborating in writing and on film with the choreographer Mathilde Monnier.[3] Denis's film on the choreographer shares its titular preposition with the short Nancy film: it is entitled *Vers Mathilde* (2005), again reinforcing Denis's concern with movement and with approaching (as opposed to capturing) bodies/selves on film. This moving *towards* touches on a key element of the ethics discussed in this chapter – a filmic ethics of sense (*sens*). In French, sense (*sens*) indicates direction and manner, rendering meaning dynamic and relational rather than fixed or closed, possessable or masterable. It moves towards (*vers*) rather than referring indexically *to*.

Sense signifies in a way other than that of language – it evokes the role of the sensory in approaching the other and it is more aleatory than static. This notion of sense applies equally to Nancean ethics and to Denis's ethical filmmaking. Thinking intrusion as a practice of interruption, I continue their intellectual sharing by interrupting my analysis of Denis's work with Nancy's philosophy and vice versa. Denis's films are noted for their sensory qualities and their privileging of affective encounters over explanatory narrative. They gesture towards the other, rather than fixing or positioning her, and their signification touches on the limits of the articulable, thus stepping in where philosophy opens onto its limit. The concept of sense (*sens*) is central to Nancy's thought on the body, the 'subject' and the world precisely because it carries

these multiple valences of meaning. Nancy prefers the term 'sense' to that of 'meaning', as *sens* connotes that significance is an embodied process, rather than purely cognitive. In this way 'sense' connects meaning to the materiality of worldly existence. Sense cannot find its grounding in something outside our world. Rather than basing significance in something beyond the ontological, Nancy will argue that we beings *are* sense and the only possibility for sense.

To approach film through an ethics of sense I frame it as 'literature', after Nancy's writing on literature in relation to myth.[4] Myth, at the larger cultural level, represents the desire for a foundational discourse, turning the people into one unified Subject with all of the fascistic implications it suggests. Myth strives to give absolute and all-encompassing meaning. As B. C. Hutchens writes, 'Myth is the mimetic instrument *par excellence*; it is the primary means of identification whereby "guiding myths" achieve totalitarian power. Mythic power brings people together and projects an image by which personal and social identity is possible.'[5] Its interruption thus has political as well as ethical implications and its reach extends from society to the individual. In Nancy's work, myth is linked to the desire for a total and comprehensive understanding of the world. This would entail a notion of communion, of the community as sharing a singular essence, producing something in common, or having a unified origin and destiny. The quest for self-presence and knowledge is interrupted by singular plurality, or what Nancy terms 'literature' and which I am extending here to film. Nancy contrasts myth with literature in the following way:

> But literature's revelation, unlike myth's, does not reveal a completed reality, nor the reality of a completion. It does not reveal, in a general way, *some thing* – it reveals rather the unrevealable: namely, that it is itself, as a work that reveals and gives access to a vision and to the communion of a vision, essentially interrupted.[6]

The literary *is* the exposure to finitude, to the limits of comprehension and totalisation. Myth and literature are not mutually exclusive categories, where myth is that which first exists and is then interrupted by literature. Rather, the two are always present in any discourse: 'The text interrupts itself at the point where it shares itself out.'[7] One can imagine the telling of a communal narrative where the unique timbre and ephemerality of the teller's voice breaks through, giving a rhythm and inflection to the language that will never be heard again, announcing finitude and historicisation in the midst of a story that attempts an ahistorical and immutable account of the world. Where there is a story being told, no matter how mythic, there is always a unique voice that shares it out, belying the notion of an immutable and unified essence.

Moving away from the terminology of literature and its connotations of a

certain calibre of *written* text, we can substitute 'sense' for that which interrupts myth.[8] Sense (or 'the literary') exposes a singularity or a new meaning that myth cannot account for or anticipate. Nancy himself admits that 'literature' is an unsuitable word for that which interrupts myth. In fact, he says 'no name is suitable here', presumably because language would limit and contain the singularity and sharing that interruption indicates.[9] Nancy does not mention film explicitly in this text; however, he opens up the possibility for reading many forms and practices as having the function he ascribes to literature, which interrupts myth or prevents immanence by the exposure of a new singularity or another origin, continually reopening the world to a meaning that it *is* but that it cannot master. Film, then, like art, dance and the other instances of 'literature' mentioned by Nancy, is a fruitful domain within which to examine how Denis's counter cinema, both formally and narratively, presents a contrast to classical film language's tendency toward mythologisation. When film is 'literature' or when it participates in an ethics of sense, it is interruptive, it refuses normativity, it privileges listening over understanding, and, finally, it opens us up to the wonder of being exposed to and with one another.

Formally, Denis's films are interruptive or 'literature' in that they privilege fragmentariness in content and form, refusing wholeness and closure, having neither a definitive origin nor an endpoint, and continually expose their own limit/frame. It is a non-normative ethics in the sense that the film disallows any propositional morality or knowledge to arise from its plot. Instead, the ethics of Denis's cinema entail an exposure to the world that keeps meaning open, raising questions and cultivating an attentiveness towards others. This connects to the aspect of an ethics of sense that foregrounds wonder. I explore wonder in part by connecting it with birth – instead of death, a focus on natality reveals the generative potential in thinking of a world of with-ness, in which the unravelling of the subject is not a cause for despair but rather a source of joy and productive, creative potential. The notion of birth becomes pivotal in understanding the way Nancy conceives co-existence and world, and therefore ethics. Birth is our origin in a moment that we cannot know or master, and reveals our originary relationality (we have our start both in the body of another and in a web of relations that exceeds and precedes any proper origin). While Nancy's philosophy opens up the space for thinking about our being-here-with in terms of natal newness, *Nénette and Boni* simultaneously introduces and probes these ideas, posing difficult questions about maternity, gender and identity (beyond any romanticisation of childbirth/motherhood). Again, the film gives flesh to an abstract concept and in so doing challenges it to address the materiality of difference. Denis invites us to think about sexuality and reproduction beyond normative categories. In that sense the film makes curious what we may assume to be self-evident – for example, about teen mothers, broken homes and adolescent male sexual fantasies.

As we will see, this openness to the surprise of intrusion ties into the absence of any one foundation. Because each of us is an origin and one that is constantly renewed, and because this origin is one to which we have no access (how can we know or remember the experience of our own origin?), it is inappropriable. Although I do not aim to stake out a privileged place for film amongst the 'arts' in this chapter, film most certainly carries the potential to heighten our awareness of the wonder of the everyday, to hone in on each body, each singularity, and open us up to curiosity about the origin that each of us is – a unique point of access to the world. Conversely, film also has the potential to shut down wonder or to mythologise its content, by clearly demarcating good and evil and giving us the comforts of feeling that we have solved a problem or understood the world at the movie's end. I generalise to some extent about mainstream cinema in order to better highlight the contrast with Denis's filmmaking. *In general*, popular cinema aims towards maximum comprehensibility, catharsis and resolution.[10] This, along with its reliance on generic codes and overused representational conventions, tends to work against the ethics of sense I describe. A counter cinema such as Denis's offers an alternative that itself is a practice and elaboration of the ethics of sense. It is not therefore merely that Denis's films illustrate philosophy. I argue that film and philosophy touch each other at their limits, opening onto meanings that exceed either one in isolation when they are read together. All of these moments of interruption, wonder, birth and listening are intimately connected. They overlap and extend each other to foreground the importance of a particular way of relating to the world – an ethical conduct that is not about a positive platform but rather the refusal of all platforms and their tendency to fix, to exclude and to explain.

Unlike Levinas, who I turn to in the following chapter, Nancy is not primarily thought of as an ethicist. In fact, none of the major books on Nancy in English include 'ethics' as a subheading or chapter organiser – instead they focus on issues of Christianity, community, ontology, body and art, all of which are central themes in his philosophy.[11] Nonetheless, when he does talk specifically about ethics (and the two most notable essays in this regard are 'Originary Ethics' and 'The Insufficiency of Values and the Necessity of Sense'), it is in a way that overlaps significantly with his thought in these many other areas. His philosophy could be described as a fugue, with variations on the same themes echoing and 'chasing' each other throughout his voluminous oeuvre. In practice, this means that reading Nancy in any one area strengthens a sense of his perspective in the others. Or, to return to the ideas with which I started this chapter, his ideas move towards each other, regardless of what rubric a specific text may fall under. Furthermore, since for Nancy ethics *is* ontology and his thought is deeply invested in and concerned with how we think ontology, arguably his whole philosophy is an ethics.

Part of my contribution to discussions of Nancy's philosophy in this chapter will be to highlight the ways in which his ethics is relevant for thinking about film. Of course it is Denis's films that make this reading available, through their shared concerns with Nancy. Viewing Nancy's work through the lens of ethics enables a special and useful application to film, offering insight in particular as to why a filmmaker such as Denis resonates with her viewers and commentators as 'ethical'. Although some excellent scholarship has recently been published on Nancy and film, my focus on ethics not only shifts the terms of the analysis but also highlights other themes in his work that are useful for thinking about the cinema, such as natality, wonder, interruption and listening.[12] I am drawn to these particular areas through Denis's work itself. Furthermore, several of these themes allow me to connect cinema to the work of other contemporary philosophers dealing with Nancy outside of cinema, specifically Anne O'Byrne's work on natality and Mary-Jane Rubenstein's writing on wonder.

Nancy's 'originary ethics' requires a dis-position towards the world that is attentive to the sense that we *are*; that refuses the comforts of myth and identity in favour of creative newness, flux and exposure to the unmasterable world. It also necessitates a rethinking of being in terms of the *with*. We are always being towards (*vers*) both others and ourselves, dis-posed and ex-posed, lacking a stable position. In Denis's work, this interruptive ethics of sense is enacted through the use of movement, her selection of shots, the inclusion of marginal scenes and figures, her use of regular actors, and the emphasis on the sensory over the visual. *Vers Nancy* is a small case study of the kind of interruptive practice that Denis is interested in – a conversation whose interlocutors are not clearly positioned: their relation is partly implied by their patterns of speech and body language but they are never named. The man from the corridor has no clear role – his intrusion does nothing to move a plot forward or to increase the viewer's comprehension of what is happening on screen. In the earlier shots of him smoking, the film is cut such that we are not clear whether he hears the conversation or not. The goal of both image and sound is not to provide greater clarity. The strangers are on a train without clear destination. Beginning *in media res*, the film emphasises process, rather than endpoint. We could keep riding with the passengers, keep moving, and keep listening, but the camera forces us to get off. In that sense we are sternly reminded of the limits of what we can see or know (much as the corridor shots seem to function to remind us that life keeps happening outside of the frame). These strategies are also present in *Nénette and Boni*, which privileges an interruptive ethics of sense.

NÉNETTE, BONI AND AN ETHICS OF SENSE

Denis's fourth feature film *Nénette and Boni* moves further away from narrative than any of her previous work and towards a cinema that privileges the sensory over the cognitive. It tells the story of a teenage girl, Nénette (Alice Houri), who runs away from her boarding school to her brother Boni's (Grégoire Colin) home in Marseille.[13] Boni, himself only nineteen, has inherited their dead mother's apartment and lives there with a group of friends and his pet rabbit. The kitchen is messy with a barren fridge and the apartment feels transitory and uncared for. Boni sells pizza from a truck with his roommate and also dabbles in the black market. In one scene he is shown selling curtain rods from Taiwan under the table to a man who owns a small hardware store. Boni chooses a coffee maker as a bonus, a modern American-style drip machine with built-in clock, which he will keep next to his bed. This coffee maker suggests a certain Americanisation of French youth culture (the hardware shop owner recommends the traditional Italian stovetop, calling the coffee produced by the machine Boni wants 'American donkey piss'). It also ironically contrasts the reality of Boni's orphaned existence with the machine's connotations of an affluent domestic life of modernised commercial conveniences and comforts. That the machine sits by his bed rather than in the kitchen implies a certain out-of-orderness about his life, and points as well to the transient moment at which we encounter him.

Fantasies of domestic bliss are both projected onto and violated through the figure of the baker's wife or boulangère (Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi). Boni spends much of the film narrating his aggressive sexual fantasies towards this woman, sometimes with dream-like visual accompaniment spliced in. Nénette, for her part, seems indifferent to sex, despite the revelation that she is pregnant. At times, the film implies that the child's father may be Nénette's own. Boni is estranged from their father (Jacques Nolot), who is linked throughout the film to a criminal underworld and is eventually shot. The film elliptically tracks the siblings' relationship, culminating in the birth of the child 'under x' – Nénette has chosen to give her child up anonymously once it is born. Ultimately, Boni takes the child from the hospital at gunpoint, presumably to raise it himself. While the various plot elements such as teen pregnancy, murder, criminality and kidnapping may seem to suggest a highly dramatic film, the portrayal of events is muted and unmelodramatic. The film creates, through music, editing and camerawork, a flowing oneiric quality that floats between characters and scenes, privileging smells, colours, sounds and feelings over linear narrative and dialogue. Dialogue is sparse and becomes almost part of the soundtrack, and the mise-en-scène is dominated by close-ups shot with often shaky handheld cameras, and frequent slow pans over faces, bodies and spaces.

This drifting applies to the feel of the film as well as the ways in which both

siblings are adrift in the world and in which their relations with those around them alter them and undo any notion of stable identity.[14] The first image of Nénette shows her floating through the water, impassive and ephemeral. This is followed by a scene of Boni and his friend driving wildly through the streets of Marseille, eventually passing the boulangère and shouting vulgarities at her. We keep moving from beginning to end, exploring an origin at once multiple and impossible to grasp. It is multiple because one character is never *the* Origin – we are continually exposed to yet another face or sensation, cultivating a plurality that undoes any notion of a single foundation. We tend towards it, approach it, but never arrive. The origin of the child who is born into a web of relations that precede and exceed him is as intangible as Nénette and Boni's own mother whose absence permeates the apartment. In its sensual drift the film explores existence *as* meaning rather than as *having* meaning. The elliptical editing and multisensory non-causal movement between scenes encourage the spectator to experience the film outside of modes of cognition or understanding, exposing her to being rather than looking for a greater significance. It participates in an ethics of sense that keeps our co-existence an open question. Keeping things adrift is one way of framing an ethics that does not rely on foundational principles or maxims. Ethics must not become a fascism of sorts or a terrain marked with borders.[15] Rather than securing foundations it must work to keep things moving, to emphasise the *with* of existence rather than the 'I', or to be *sense* rather than have meaning. Both Nancy and Denis share this orientation onto the world, and I extend this tendency by moving Denis's filmic strategies towards (*vers*) Nancean ethics and vice versa.

Questions of sense, of humans as those beings whose being is a fundamental question for them, are the basis of Nancy's 'Originary Ethics'. It is in this text that Nancy most explicitly articulates his ethical philosophy. The essay builds on Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism', exploring the earlier philosopher's claim that fundamental ontology is inseparable from an ethics. As is the case with Nancy's singular plural ontology, which pushes Heidegger's description of being as always being-with further along the path it suggests but fails to fully bear out, this essay also edges forward the promising ethical implications of Heidegger's thought. Nancy argues that '"Originary ethics" is a more appropriate name for "fundamental ontology." Ethics *is* what is fundamental about fundamental ontology.'[16] Ethics is originary in the sense that it cannot be thought outside the coming into *Being*; 'There is not first a brute fact (the being of beings, the "there is"), *then* a desire for sense (for this being). If this *were* the case, sense, action, and ethics would have to come after and from somewhere other than the fact of being.'[17] Put differently, there is no essence that we are born with which *then* receives its meaning from a transcendent outside. Rather, our lack of essence and our fundamental 'co'-existence makes the ontological condition that we *share* and *are* (that we *are* because we *share*

it) part and parcel of the ethical project of making sense. The meaning of our being here is precisely undecided and undecidable. 'Making sense' is a matter of conducting oneself so as to maintain and heed that responsibility. But conduct as a kind of ethics must be understood in a much more passive form than it may seem to imply. Here it is a question of living with the question, refusing to stabilise its meaning or fix an answer, but maintaining that question in all of its messiness as it impacts the way we are in the world. In fact, Nancy is careful to distinguish conduct from production, making ethics unproductive or *désouvrée* (like his community).[18] Rather than constructing or codifying, ethics unworks. This idea of unworking is akin to the notion of interruption, discussed below in relation to film form and Denis's aesthetic practices.

For both Denis and Nancy, ethics and ontology are virtually inseparable in terms of how they are thought and practised.[19] Nancy writes, 'There is no difference between the ethical and the ontological: the "ethical" exposes what the "ontological" disposes.'[20] In her films, Denis exposes precisely this disposition that existence is, always relational and shifting. This is a practice that we view on screen but that is also induced in the spectator who experiences a relational exposure to the film. This is not a solitary speculative project but, rather, 'The opening of making-sense is utterly impossible in a solipsistic mode.'[21] Underlying this ethics is a notion of an originary difference that prevents immanence or the ontological from being a totality, or a closed and static thing. As Nancy says in *Vers Nancy*, 'Because an identity that is complete and well-founded . . . and incapable of accepting intrusion . . . is as stupid, closed, sealed . . . like a stone.' The stupidity of full immanence applies to the community and the world as much as to the individual. Significantly, in the short film this conclusion comes about as a result of Samardzija's intervention – listening to Nancy as he plods forward with his analysis, she interrupts with the suggestion 'a stone-like identity', which Nancy accepts as the fitting metaphor. They make sense *together*. Their speech is only meaningful because unlike a self-enclosed stone their existence is shared, and continues to share out through the interruption of others – landscapes, faces, stray cats and flowers.[22] The myth of a stone-like identity must be interrupted; difference must be integral to how we think being-with.

For both Denis and Nancy, difference is not only that which comes from the outside, but is there at the origin of the subject, making her own self-identity a myth. Nancy writes in *The Inoperative Community*,

> We are alike because each one of us is exposed to the outside that *we* are *for ourselves* . . . I do not rediscover *myself*, nor do I recognize *myself* in the other: I experience the other's alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that 'in me' sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits it.[23]

Otherness is already present at the origin of the subject, but not because of a relation that would be outside of or prior to the ontological. There is no essence to the subject that precedes and defines it. In his essay 'L'Intrus', Nancy develops these considerations starting from his own experience of undergoing a heart transplant and the subsequent need to suppress his auto-immune system, due to his body's rejection of the foreign heart. These events spur reflection on the ways in which our bodies are always already other to us, from the moment of our birth. It is not the intrusion of a foreign heart that begins the process of self-alteration, but rather the body has always been porous, at risk, and imbued with a strangeness such that it was never properly bounded to begin with. Similarly, I am in relation even before my birth and my involvement with others extends beyond my death. I am already other from the moment of coming into the world, and my involvement with others is such that it alters me in the process, revealing that I am singularly plural. Difference finds itself within being, rather than any beyond.

This notion of difference is one based on sharing and division. The French word for sharing (*partager*) connotes both dividing up and sharing out. To share (out) is always also to divide; to be with is to be divided. Only by being shared can being have meaning; otherwise it would be pure presence, a self-enclosed *thing* unable to be *a part* of a shared world ('like a stone'). If being is being-with it must involve division, spacing and giving outward. We can only share because there is space or division between and within us. Difference thought this way introduces a persistent fragmentation, which is always also a pluralisation, into the ontological. Because Nancy and, I would argue, Denis do not look to any transcendent realm or beyond to give meaning to the world, they must find a way to address the difference that is always at play within it. This play of differences is not reducible to a fixed relation between terms because the terms themselves are never fixed but rather constantly shared out, spacing and altering in their course.

Denis draws on cinematic means for displaying this difference that interrupts all identity. She introduces a fragmentation into the ontological through the way in which she shifts from character to character, scene to scene, keeping things adrift and in constant motion. Difference also permeates the ontological through her use of fantasy and dream sequences. Scenes that collapse dream and reality or fantasy and memory punctuate *Nénette and Boni*. This is typical of Denis's work and is notable in other films such as *The Intruder* and *Friday Night*; and *35 Shots of Rum* (2008), while a fairly 'realistic' film, includes an improbable dream-like sequence in which daughter and father ride on horseback (a reference to Goethe's *Erlkönig*). It is often unclear whose dreams we are seeing in Denis's films (a character's? the camera's?), or whether an image is a memory or fantasy. These impressions are not meant to explain causality or psychology but to float across the screen, filling it with scents, textures,

colours and affects. At the same time they splinter the world of the film, inserting an unmasterable difference into the diegesis. In one scene Boni wakes up to a trail of brioche leading his way down the hall. As Boni's world has often been intruded on by fantasy images (particularly related to the boulangère who sells said brioche), we assume this is going to lead to an erotic scenario. Boni picks up a brioche and gently caresses it, with a 'Bonjour', after which we see him bite into the pastry on his patio. We then cut to Boni, back inside and sitting next to his coffee maker, which gurgles and exhales sensually (this machine comprises a very haptic and erotic aspect of the soundtrack) behind a small mountain of brioche, one of which he squeezes rhythmically. It is possible that Nénette has purchased and arranged the baked goods, after reading Boni's diary in which he narrates his bakery-related fantasies; however, the film leaves this unclear. Boni's immediate acceptance of the existence of the buns is puzzling if they are not an element of his fantasy life. (It is impossible that the boulangère has entered his apartment since she doesn't even know his name, much less his address.) There is a surreal blurring of dream and reality here that the film's general tone encourages us to accept and float with. It works against direct narrative meaning as it privileges a sensory drift over viewer comprehension, again inserting otherness into the diegesis.

It is much easier for us to recognise Denis's characters' opacity both to us as spectators and to each other than it is to recognise their own opacity to themselves, or the difference that they experience at the heart of their own being and embodiment (and this difficulty to 'know' is precisely because of their opacity to us). Perhaps the clearest that Denis comes to illustrating this is in the film *The Intruder*, fittingly based on Nancy's essay 'L'Intrus'. The main character, Louis Trebor, possesses multiple passports, and crosses many borders in search of a heart and his son. The film also consistently collapses states of dream and waking. Trebor's insistence that he not be implanted with the heart of a woman gestures towards the instability of his sense of self and the murky boundaries of identity. Another example of the alterity within is illustrated through the character of Shane Brown in *Trouble Every Day*. Plagued by a murderous sexual disease that makes him both surprised by and afraid of himself, he recognises his own lack of mastery over the difference inside him. Finally, Boni is unable to anticipate his own reaction to the birth of his nephew. Nor can his imaginary performance of sexual dominance and entitlement prepare him for a real interaction with the baker's wife in the mall, which renders him mesmerised and speechless (a scene which I will return to further on). Difference from within is as much a surprise as that which we encounter 'outside' of ourselves.

This ontology of differences, of singular plurality, cannot be mastered by thought. It refuses any fixed or higher meaning. With Nancy, if we can speak of transcendence, it is not in opposition to or outside of immanence, but rather

that which prevents us from stabilising what is constantly shifting in the world. In Nancy's writing on ethics, the complex neither/nor of transcendence and immanence is attended to:

> There is, in principle, neither a simple transcendence nor a simple immanence. If it is entirely legitimate and not simply verbal acrobatics to say that the sense of being is the being of sense, this means that sense (the sense of human existence, but also, and along with it, the sense of the world) is in principle nothing other than action, or conduct. Conduct is thus the proper transcendence of the immanence that is.[24]

Transcendence as conduct is something at play within the realm of ontology rather than leading us to a realm beyond our being-here together. It is borne out in the process of life, through action rather than being a stable state or essence. This ethics is non-normative, in that it cannot be translated into propositional language or given a fixed referential meaning. Normative ethics tends to presuppose a self-identical rational subject that cultivates virtues or acts according to various maxims or principles. Norms also fix things into language, that is, the maxims and principles just referred to, creating a fixity which is precisely the danger that Nancy wants us to avoid. While on a practical and political level we may need certain norms and categories, the ontological level reminds us to keep these foundations mobile and contingent.[25]

Nancy discusses the possibility of originary ethics being based on the maxim or law to 'respect life' but reassures his reader that this freezing of the content of ethics into a phrase would in fact be a reopening, since we have no immutable idea of what life is or what it might mean to respect it. Life itself is a category that must remain open to further revisions and inclusions and to respect it implies a conduct that is also open to broadening and redefinition.[26] Nancy's rejection of any law- or principle-based ethics is evident when he writes that, 'In principle, the ethics thus announced refers to nothing other than existence. No "value," no "ideal" floating above concrete and everyday existence provides it in advance with a norm and a signification. But this everyday existence finds itself asked to make sense.'[27] Perhaps the refusal of normative ethics is illustrated most clearly in what *Nénette and Boni* does not do – namely it refuses to make itself a didactic social issue film. Although it deals with broken familial ties and a teen pregnancy, it never judges or moralises its characters. Its look is curious rather than categorical. As Nénette herself says to the nurse as she goes into labour, 'Don't moralise me!' This does not mean that it lacks a politics per se, but rather that it does not aim to give the viewer a set of maxims or truths that she can walk away from the film feeling self-content about having reaffirmed or gained. The film lacks any moral judgement about Nénette's pregnancy or her attitude towards it – she wants

to abort the child but is told that she is too far along. She attempts to abort the baby herself by bathing in a tub of mustard – an exercise in which Boni intervenes. She shows no positive emotion towards the child, remaining indifferent to it during ultrasounds, calling the technician a 'dumb bitch' and refusing to look at or touch the baby once it is born. Her labour is experienced as an unbearable suffering and Denis does not turn the child's birth into a moment of melodramatic maternal awakening in Nénette. In many ways she refuses our pity, as much as she obfuscates any understanding. The film encourages an openness to her singularity that must remain sensed rather than cognised. She *exists* before being subsumed under any meaning-giving label, be it that of teenager, girl or mother.

Boni similarly refuses condemnation or redemption. He is shown engaging in contraband sales, and having aggressive and non-consensual sexual fantasies about the boulangère and other women. (His language is peppered by such colourful imperatives as 'Come here you bitches. Come and eat daddy.') His dreams move into the realm of the real when he approaches the bakery counter and asks the boulangère for a 'long French stick'. Visibly uncomfortable with the interaction, she calls out for her husband to replenish the baked goods. One could easily assume that a role such as Boni with his misogynist rants and repressed emotional rage would be a fairly unsympathetic character in front of a female director's lens. Yet, Denis has expressed her obsession with Boni in interviews and her manner of filming him suggests that his character fascinated rather than repulsed her. He is given full human complexity and not simply dismissed as a category or type. This treatment works to demystify constructs of masculinity and refuses to only shed light on characters we assume self-evidently to be worthy of our gaze. For, ultimately, Boni too occupies a position on the margin from which he struggles to survive. In one interview Denis even compares her filmmaking process to Boni in a scene where he frenetically works the pizza dough amidst orgasmic shrieks, demanding, 'You like that don't you? Yeah, you sure do. It's so good. Yeah, it's good? Don't move. I'm kneading you hard.' The scene ends with Boni immersing his face in the dough, almost crying, suddenly vulnerable and soft.

Without analysing Denis's own relationship to her trade here, I am interested in the solidarity she feels with her characters. As she says in an interview, 'I think to make a film the minimum is to be *solidaire* . . . In solidarity with the people you film. I mean the character that you imagine and you create with the actors.'[28] The characters are not problems to be analysed or solved, nor are they easily categorisable into good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Thus *Nénette and Boni* refuses a normative ethics. Janet Bergstrom notes something related apropos the role of race in the film when she points out that the film uses characters of mixed race in a racially mixed setting, but, unlike many contemporary French social problem genre films, it never makes race a theme

or a problem.[29] Perhaps this is because Denis realises that race is a category based on (mis)recognition – we may think we *see* race, and undoubtedly it informs her characters' lives, but race does not define who they are. Nor does race demand a melodramatic treatment, simply because the cast is not white. Denis's work in general cannot be read in terms of ethics as normative principles that can be pulled from narrative content. Ethics occurs narratively and formally in terms of what the films *do not* say or try to make visible, in the attitude they show towards their characters and that they cultivate between spectator and film. They expose rather than represent the other – offering a glimpse rather than capturing an essence. Or, in other words, they make *sense*, rather than moralise.

This making-sense is a never finished work, a *désouvrement*, which defines us in our being-here-with-others. In 'The Insufficiency of "Values" and the Necessity of "Sense"' Nancy writes,

> To bring into view that which we cannot 'see' – that which conceals itself as the origin of the other, in the other – and to bring 'into view' the fact that we cannot 'see' it: that is what today makes an 'ethical' demand, without which any moral standpoint, any normative or prescriptive assurance, is only the application of a recipe, with eyes closed, sleepwalking . . .[30]

This description begs for a consideration in relation to the medium of film – what does it mean to bring into view the fact that we *cannot* see? This suggests the ethical necessity of a kind of representational failure, to make visible the impossibility of making visible – a discussion that will resurface in the next chapter's discussion of Levinas and Denis. The notions of representational failure and ethics as an unworking are closely linked with the concept of literature as that which interrupts myth. I elaborate on some of the specific ways in which this occurs in film in the next section. Refusing mastery and myth, Denis's films move towards sense and literature.

INTERRUPTION AS SENSE

Nénette and Boni participates in the ethics outlined through its revelation of life as ungraspable motion, as sense over myth, and cinema as a practice of interruption. These interruptive ethics are evident in the film's emphasis on movement, the selection of shots, the inclusion of marginal scenes and figures, the use of recurring actors, and in the prioritising of the sensory over the visual.

The application of myth to the cinema is hardly a stretch. The classical

style, which developed out of Hollywood and has shaped mainstream film today, was based on the perpetuation of American ideological myths and the illusion of the viewing subject's narrative mastery with respect to the film. In his book on Hollywood cinema, Robert B. Ray emphasises the classical paradigm as functioning to conceal the multitude of choices that in fact compose every finished film. Choice is made invisible largely through 'the systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie's narrative'.[31] Furthermore, 'The American Cinema's habitual subordination of style to story encouraged the audience to assume the existence of an implied contract: at any moment in a movie, the audience was to be given the optimum vantage point on what was occurring on screen. Anything important would not only be shown, but shown from the best angle.'[32] In this way, we can see how the subordination of all technical and stylistic elements to narrative also privileges sight as the sense of knowledge and comprehension.

Conversely, film can act as literature or privilege sense: it has the potential to disrupt its own mythologising tendencies when it does not subordinate difference and the sensory to narrative clarity. This interruption, which exposes singularities rather than represents identities, is key to what I am terming an ethics of sense as it relates to Denis's films. Film *conducts* itself ethically, to play with Nancy's language, when it interrupts itself, be it through characters' own difference to themselves (as discussed above), or through the inclusion of peripheral scenes and characters in unexpected ways, which open the film up rather than containing it.[33] Time-based arts, such as film, have a unique potential to enact an interruptive alterity, because our singular plurality is revealed in existence as a process, rather than a thing. In tandem with movement, time becomes a crucial element of being and ethics thought in terms of sense. As Nancy says in *Being Singular Plural*, 'We do not have access to a thing or a state, but only to a coming.'[34] Film as 'literature', with its temporal trajectory, is a coming. Films that contain many low-action long takes (the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Alexander Sokurov come to mind here) heighten the emphasis on duration that film offers, often encouraging the viewer to meditate on her own altering mental states during particularly contemplative shots. The train in *Vers Nancy* never arrives at a destination, nor does it stop to fix the characters in a state of permanence. Their relations shift and continue becoming from start to finish.[35] Likewise, in *Nénette and Boni* we begin the film in a room of strangers, who will remain unknown, and we end at an ambiguous moment. In the penultimate scene we see Boni holding the newborn child. He looks at it lovingly, but has no skills or means to feed or care for him, nor is his own legal future certain, having stolen the infant at gunpoint. The final shot shows Nénette, adrift again, picking through an ashtray to find a smokeable butt, her face and future opaque. The film lacks any clear narrative resolution and the final scenes could just as easily constitute the middle of the film as the

end. This emphasises the ongoing and unfinishable process of making sense. It makes the film literary rather than mythic. This facet of a non-normative ethics asks us to consider rather than understand.

The notion of movement without clear origin or *telos* applies to the subject herself, which extends to thinking about the film's approach to its characters and the relation it facilitates between spectator and film. In 'Who Comes After the Subject?' Nancy writes that rather than a return to the subject, what is needed is a 'move forward toward someone – *some one* – else in its place', that is, 'a punctuality, a singularity or a hereness (*haecceitas*) as place of emission, reception, or transition'.[36] This would not be a subject but a 'presence-to' or toward that which is not itself. This is echoed in Denis's own use of the preposition *vers* in two films that are portraits of sorts (*Vers Nancy* and *Vers Mathilde*). Both works approach a personage without employing any traditional biographical or documentary conditions (in the sense of back story, a sense of chronology, or an attempt to give an overview of major contributions). The films are more interested in the impression of the other, in exposing their sense as singularity rather than offering a total narrative of their lives. *Vers* reinforces the directional connotations of *sens*. Again, this movement across time may have a privileged space in the medium of film, which points us towards the other, touches on the other as origin, and in which that exposure between viewer and film and between characters on screen *is* sense and *is* the world that we are.

The movement away from myth and towards sense is further evident in the choice of shots and settings. *Nénette and Boni*, typical of Denis's work, avoids the conventional use of establishing shots, which traditionally help spectators to locate the characters in a specific place and time, maximising narrative clarity. Although the film is shot in Marseille, iconic city shots are absent from the film. As Denis herself says, 'Marseille is a city I really like to photograph, but because I was so into Boni there was no space for it in the film. I told Agnès [Godard, director of photography] that we were not going to illustrate Marseille at the expense of Nénette and Boni's story.'[37] Godard further adds that 'the main landscapes were the faces of the actors, and these were *infinite* landscapes'.[38] In fact the film favours close-ups, intimate explorations of bodies and skin, shot with a long lens and handheld camera. The choice of handheld camera also means that movement is present *within* most of the shots composing the film. As Martine Beugnet writes in her book on *Cinema and Sensation*, 'In contrast with the body caught in action in medium or long shot, filming in close-up makes it possible to evoke a body that is temporarily freed from its function as social, cultural and even gender signifier – a body that escapes the conventional order of male/female dualism.'[39] Privileging sensation over form, the close-up can also *interrupt* the myth of identity based on categories such as gender. This opens up an important intersection with

feminist concerns about representation and identity – what would it mean to rethink cinema in terms of an exposure that shows the limits of any identity-based categories for making sense of the other's singularity? While it is and has been no doubt crucial to insist on positive female, lesbian, differently abled, racialised and ageing (to name a few categories) representations of subjectivity, it is equally important to disrupt the notion that identity categories signify a fixed referent or that they define individuals in advance.[40] In practice these two impulses often work hand in hand, insisting on more complex representations of those bodies that are typically relegated to minor characters. At a formal level, the use of the close-up and the move towards less sharply defined forms are strategies that can work to interrupt the body's identitarian or referential status.

In Beugnet's notion of a cinema of sensation, in which she includes Denis's work, the body in close-up can neither be objectified nor act as a stable anchor of subjectivity (as it typically functions in dominant film language).[41] Rather, 'Metamorphosing or deformed beyond recognition, the body in close-up evokes a subjectivity in a state of flux – a subjectivity in the making or in the process of dissolution.'[42] Whereas Beugnet's reading draws on Deleuze, this processual, constantly altering and sharing-out 'subject' can also be read as demonstrating a sense that interrupts myth, a reading which is sympathetic if parallel to Beugnet's work. If anything, Beugnet's focus on decomposition, formlessness and the unnameable moves to a different affective register when we read the shifting, relational and never complete subject through Nancy. There is a sense of creative warmth in the Nancean idea that the co-imbrication of the human and technological, human and animal, human and mineral *is* the human condition. The human *is* that which never forms, never solidifies, keeps turning, meshing, touching and pulling off, being wounded and feeling ecstatic, unable to stand still and become a stable form. Through this lens the close-up (in Denis) works neither to decompose the character into a realm of pure sense, nor to individuate or give psychological legibility to the character. Rather, it is a mode of sensual, interruptive exposure to the other, which moves towards the other without fixing her in a stable location or frame.

The face as landscape is also interesting to consider in *Vers Nancy*, where faces and hands are given precedence over a clear time and space. We see mostly blurred landscape through the windows and are never given an external shot of the train riding through the countryside, or a legible road sign to orient us. While the train approaches an unknown destination, we approach the bodies on screen and gain access to them at this specific and fleeting moment as they are with each other. Along the same lines, the opening sequence in *Nénette and Boni* can be read as an (anti)establishing shot that privileges sense over fixed meaning (i.e. clear location in time and space). Counter to dominant filmmaking practice, the first images of the film are not successive views

of the city or even the outside of the building in which we find ourselves. Rather, we begin in a congested room, where a man sells bootleg telephone cards to a group of African immigrants. Women and men sit crowded on the floor as the salesman assures them of the legitimacy of the phonecards, despite their vocal scepticism. It could be argued that the scene illustrates the ethnic diversity of Marseille, as well as foregrounding its shadier criminal underside in the French imaginary and French cinema.[43] However, it never explains where we are, nor does it obviously introduce a major theme or any significant characters. It establishes very little. This scene is an example of another facet of Denis's interruptive cinema, her inclusion of marginal narratives or unconnected scenes.

Often these marginal scenes have the last word in Denis's films, refusing the viewer a sense of tidy plot completion by reminding her that any narrative finality must be interrupted by the ongoing movement of life as sense, without finality or *telos*.[44] The opening scene of *Nénette and Boni* exemplifies this practice of interruption or marginal narrative inclusion, and it continues to intrude at various points throughout the film. This story is so marginal that it can hardly be called a subplot. We never see these characters again, except for the salesman whom we later view (notably only after we have completely forgotten the seemingly random opening scene) asking a man at a payphone if he can photograph his phonecard, since his 'daughter collects them'. At a later point in the film the camera drifts away from the main scene to someone speaking in Vietnamese on a payphone. A meeting between Nénette and her prenatal counsellor is interrupted when the counsellor answers the phone. We listen to her complain of unaccounted for charges on her phone bill to Ho Chi Minh City. This literal interruption, along with the aforementioned visual and narrative interruptions, works to keep a sense of dynamism and difference at play in the film through cinematic means. This sub-narrative strain of broken communication – frustrated, interrupted or somehow clandestine – highlights the play of difference throughout the film as different bodies cross paths and touch each other without necessarily communicating in a way that implies understanding, fusion or communion. In fact, perhaps here it is useful to think of Bataille's use of the word 'communication' as a kind of contagion, infecting and altering rather than rationally exchanging.[45] This moves us yet further away from the notion of an autonomous subject and towards a messy togetherness that the film exposes as our ontological condition. The film accomplishes cinematically what Nancy describes in a text released the same year as the film, which relays the need not to interrogate the meaning of being, but instead to 'pay attention to the fact of [being's] exhibition'.[46] He says,

> If 'communication' is for us, today, such an affair – in every sense of the word . . . – if its theories are flourishing, if its technologies are being

> proliferated, if the 'mediatization' of the 'media' brings along with it an auto-communicational vertigo, if one plays around with the theme of the indistinctions between the 'message' and the 'medium' out of either a disenchanted or jubilant fascination, then it is because something is exposed or laid bare. In fact, [what is exposed] is the bare and 'content'-less web of 'communication.' One could say it is the bare web of the *com-* . . .; that it is *our* web or 'us' as web or network, an *us* that is reticulated and spread out, with its extension for an essence and its spacing for a structure.[47]

Rather than the meanings that communication communicates or *has*, Nancy draws our attention to the *with*-ness that is exposed through our increasingly proliferated technological modes of contact. It is there that we can see the meaning we *are*, as beings who are enmeshed with one another in ways that alter us continually. Communication is our mutual contagion before any content. The meaning is in the contact itself rather than interpreted from the content of what is communicated. As a form of media, cinema reveals another valence of this affective encountering of and in the world. Film can enact what philosophy gestures towards, as it pays attention to the exhibition of our singularly plural existence as it happens, each time. The scenes relating to the international phonecard scandal bring again a form of fragmentation or pluralisation into the ontological world of *Nénette and Boni*. Through this Denis exposes the limits of her story, unworking any mythic tendency. We do not come to a real resolution, we do not solve a moral problem, and the film presents us with a world that is constituted by a difference that it does not presume to contain.

Sometimes, these seemingly unimportant scenes also serve to allow an actor that Denis regularly uses to appear briefly in another of her films. One of the ways we can understand Denis's use of the same actors between films is in the sense of an interruption elaborated above. When Nénette first arrives in Marseille, she sits outside on a fountain next to an anonymous person, played by Richard Courcet, who stars in Denis's previous film *I Can't Sleep* and will reappear in later works, such as *Beau travail*. Nénette, in a personalising gesture, removes her hamburger patty from the bun to eat it. Courcet asks if he can have her bun and she obliges. This brief scene reveals an idiosyncrasy of Nénette's without explaining it or suggesting it implies any deeper truth about her personality. It also allows Denis to incorporate one of her regulars, who, if one has seen Denis's previous film, will be recognised, as he brings these intertextual associations along with him (and this holds also if one has seen later films with the same actor *before* an earlier picture). In a sense Courcet's presence again draws attention to the limits of the frame or the film's world. He is another (recognisable) face that interrupts the film's plenitude. Houri

and Colin (the actors who play the title characters) are themselves recurring actors, having played a brother and sister in their previous Denis production (the made-for-television *US Go Home*, 1994). Their characters are different here, as is their setting and family structure, but we are invited to view the film in relation to this earlier work. It continues an exploration into siblings and the dynamic between the two actors, and probes its own themes even further, from a slightly different angle. One way to read all of Denis's interfilmic character sharing is as a form of 'communication' – a feature of her oeuvre that is often noted but rarely analysed.[48]

In *Nénette and Boni* alone, we also see Jacques Nolot as the father, who plays a bit role in *I Can't Sleep*, and Alex Descas as the gynaecologist, who stars in *No Fear No Die* (1990), *I Can't Sleep*, *Trouble Every Day* and *35 Shots of Rum*. Houri will reappear briefly, without speaking, on the metro in *Trouble Every Day*, and Colin acts again in *Beau travail*, *The Intruder*, *Friday Night* (in a brief non-speaking cameo), *35 Shots of Rum* and *Bastards* (2013). Vincent Gallo, 'the baker', was also cast in *US Go Home* and stars in *Trouble Every Day*. This use of actors puts Denis's films in direct communication with one another – where again communication is a kind of contagion. Put differently, her films contaminate one another through their sharing of bodies. Rather than a clear referential meaning, the meaning alone seems to consist in the act of the character appearing. A spacing or sharing out is enacted amongst the films, where the world of each film is further stretched open around its already interrupted frame. Denis's repeated use of actors also renders each film, each time, a singular encounter – rewatching a film may expose another face or facet of a face, if other films with that actor have been viewed in the interim.

This intertextuality also applies to Denis's use of music. Six of her films are scored by the British group Tindersticks (or by single members of the group), of which *Nénette and Boni* was the first (in addition to *The Intruder*, *Friday Night*, *Trouble Every Day*, *White Material* (2009) and *Bastards*), and music tends to function as itself a character of sorts in her films. What is relevant here is to imagine how the particular feel of their music, which though different each time, just as an actor plays different roles, can still be read as a sonically recurring personality, something familiar but still undefined. It again asserts itself in a way that draws attention to the film as it exists in relation to Denis's entire oeuvre, an effect that, as with the inclusion of regular actors, tends to interrupt the illusion or plenitude of the film and gesture to the world outside of itself. As Jenny Munro notes, it also introduces an element of time, as we see actors ageing throughout their careers. This recurring cast (which also includes actors such as Béatrice Dalle, Michel Subor, Isaach de Bankolé and the late Yekaterina Golubeva) fragments the world of the film by bringing in extradiegetic connotations. In this way Denis forms a community of shifting presences, each film altering how we read these bodies, depending on the

order in which we screen them. The actors are each time different and their inclusion seems to be sufficient in and of itself to not require narrative or even visual motivation (as in the above scene with Richard Courcet). Their faces literally interrupt the world of the film, creating another opening outside of the diegesis in the potentially mythic film narrative.

This intertextual interruptive practice can be further supported by other moments in Denis's oeuvre. For example, her first film with Michel Subor, *Beau travail*, consciously quoted and even suggested a continuation of a much earlier character that Subor played in Jean-Luc Godard's *Petit Soldat* (1960). In the earlier movie Subor played a soldier name Bruno Forrestier. Some thirty-nine years later, Subor plays another Bruno Forrestier in Denis's film, now an officer in the Foreign Legion with a murky past. Here, Denis consciously invites us to read what is outside of the film into it, or to view the film in relation. She thus undermines our desire for narrative completion or to close the world of the film around the diegesis itself. Similarly, Subor's second picture with Denis, *The Intruder*, includes footage from an unfinished earlier film starring Subor entitled *Le Reflux* (Paul Gégauff, 1965). This grainier footage of a younger Subor sailing through the South Seas is inserted during a scene where the now much older Subor returns to Tahiti to seek out his son. Again, this film intrudes onto Denis's own, grafting itself onto the work, altering it and letting its meaning be altered by it, all the while exposing a limit to the frame.[49] While it may be argued that almost all films, then, 'interrupt' themselves as they use actors who have appeared in other movies, Denis's repeated use of the same group of actors (and technicians), as well as her conscious insertion of references to cinematic moments outside of the film, itself creates a unique dynamic. They open up the film, again privileging sense over narrative as it moves between and amongst her films and extends to points outside of her own body of work.

Finally, interruption as sense also functions in terms of sense as sensorium. The aforementioned close-ups and pans of bodies and surfaces work to evoke a tactile sensuality. Here I focus on sound and smell as they contribute to sense over meaning. This sensuality permeates *Nénette and Boni*'s drift, which moves across tactile images from fantasy to reality to pure abstraction. The score is characterised by a gentle and floating quality and almost always accompanies transitions between varied images (often seemingly unmotivated or not linked according to any causal logic). In one scene we see Boni's back in chiaroscuro as he writhes in bed narrating one of his boulangère fantasies aloud. Music comes on the soundtrack. As Boni's back falls into darkness (Figure 2.7) we move to a dream scene in which he walks along an overpass where the baker woman brushes her hair. Almost completely in shadow we are given fleeting glances of a hand in her top, the woman going to her knees and so on, as the score melts away and groaning-like noises come onto the soundtrack. The

scene also melts away, almost literally, becoming a psychedelic kaleidoscope of orange-gold oscillating patterns (Figure 2.8). This is overlaid with a highly haptic gurgling and hissing noise. We see Boni bathed in gold light (Figure 2.9), then cut to him sleeping in bed, in a less rich light (Figure 2.10), all the while the gurgling and hissing dominating the soundtrack. The camera slowly pans to the coffee maker next to Boni's bed (which we come to realise is the source of the sounds), as we see his hand slowly and erotically caressing the machine and pulling it slightly closer (Figure 2.11). My attempt to evoke this scene is hindered by the fact that language falls short of Denis's multisensory montage. This sequence is a sensual glide across physical surfaces, soundscapes, light, shadow, colour, form and formlessness. It is an 'unnecessary' scene, in that Boni's fantasy life has already been well established, along with the high value he assigns to the coffee maker. It is a purely sensual indulgence that works against dominant forms of narrative development and continuity in cinema. Bringing us affectively and haptically closer to Boni, if only to emphasise the distance between us, it suspends meaning in favour of an excess of sense.

Nénette and Boni was Denis's first musical collaboration with Tindersticks, who were present on set during filming, often playing through taping to contribute to the overall feel of the film. Denis listened to their music while constructing her screenplay.[50] In the editing room, she worked according to their score, even keeping scenes that she normally would have cut, because they fitted with the music.[51] She has said of this partnership, 'Stuart [Staples, of Tindersticks] and his music gave us more courage to be more elliptic,

Figure 2.7 Boni's back in chiaroscuro.

Figure 2.8 The scene melts away, becoming a psychedelic kaleidoscope of orange-gold oscillating patterns.

Figure 2.9 We see Boni bathed in gold light . . .

abstract . . . The music uninhibited me so I could fabricate the film.'[52] In an interview almost a decade later, she states, 'The only time when I recognize myself in my work, is when I have a very strong rapport with music. Music multiplies itself, it is an ally, a road companion. Sometimes I look to music for what my collaborators cannot give me, for what a project cannot give me on its own. It is like a secret companionship between myself and music.'[53] Denis's approach does not subordinate the sensory and rhythmic aspects of filmmak-

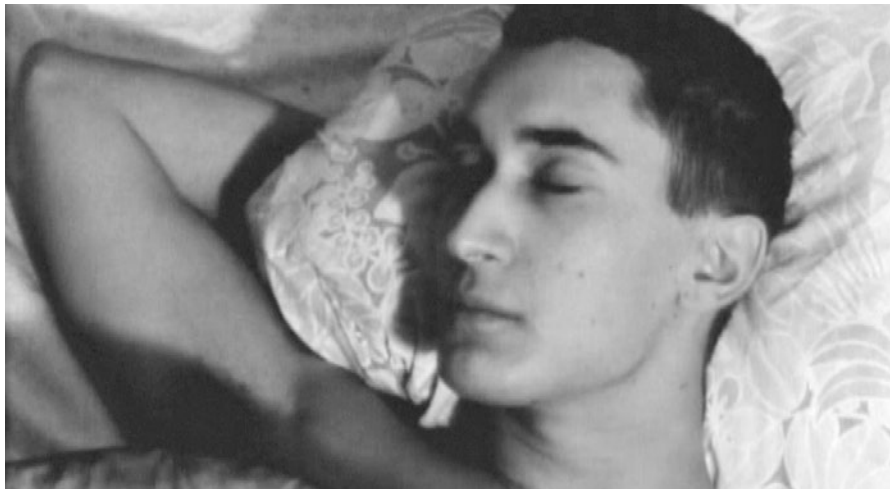

Figure 2.10 . . . then cut to him sleeping in bed, in a less rich light.

Figure 2.11 We see his hand slowly and erotically caressing the machine and pulling it slightly closer.

ing to narrative clarity, as characterises the classical cinema.[54] Commenting on the traditional film soundtrack, Denis says, 'What's called the film score, that intervention after-the-fact . . . is often a way to impose "character psychology" (which horrifies me), and it is completely contrary to my idea of the cinema.'[55] It is interesting in this regard that perhaps the most dramatic scene of the film, when Boni takes the baby at gunpoint, is shown completely without sound, as though we are watching through soundproof glass. Denis downplays the drama and shoots it more clinically than other more banal moments in the film.

The soundtrack, throughout the abduction, remains silent. In her touchstone work on music in film, Claudia Gorbman emphasises the danger of silence at key narrative moments, noting that when you remove music 'from a scene whose emotional content is not explicit . . . you risk confronting the audience with an image they might fail to interpret'.[56] As a counter cinema, *Nénette and Boni* draws on this as a strength, allowing the image to remain unanchored. This allows a less calculated affective engagement to take precedence over cognitive clarity, giving the viewer an emotional freedom to encounter the scene in less manipulative terms.

Denis's use of sound resonates with Nancy's distinction between listening as hearing (*écouter*) and listening as comprehending (*entendre*), the former of which places emphasis on the pre-cognitive affective connection with the audible. Listening as a sensible rather than an intelligible mode resonates with the notion of ethics as a call to keep meaning in question rather than locking it down, and with a privileging of exposure and receptivity over the illusion of the body as contained and autonomous. Nancy writes, 'To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, . . . not, however, as an acoustic phenomenon (or not merely as one) but as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose *sense* is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance.'[57] Sense thought in terms of listening highlights the vibratory power of sound and sound as a material force that resonates *through* bodies, further touching on the processual, directional component of sense. Here listening functions as a liminal concept. It resonates – a material presence vibrating through the air, a body against other bodies; being meaning, rather than possessing it.

In filmic terms, listening also opens up a discussion of the role of sound in the spectator's experience. An ethics of sense demands that we 'tune in' in every sense of the phrase to the sounds and images before us, exposing ourselves to them such that they 'play' us and perhaps offer an encounter that interrupts our illusion of autonomy, altering *our* singularity through the singularities shared on screen. Nancy posits the subject as a 'diapason-subject' – a one-of-a-kind tuning fork. 'Diapason' suggests the full range of potential of any being, and its singularity, while highlighting the body's receptivity and sensitivity to the world. We *are* in relation to a world with which we get in tune, as its vibrations traverse the body. Nancy states,

> To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a 'self' can take place. To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other.[58]

The subject can only be understood in terms of this making-space, this spacing or opening up of a subject-place that happens through time and keeps happening beat after beat, verse after verse, frame after frame. Boni *literally* makes room (clearing the mother's room) for the baby, physically manifesting the space that has opened within him through the arrival of Nénette and the anticipation of new life. We, as spectators, are open to the vibrations of image and sound, making room for new beings and impressions, preparing for an encounter that is spatial as well as temporal.

This works towards a post-phenomenological sensory form of spectatorship. By post-phenomenological I mean to signal a desire to move away from the notion of an autonomous subject who *sees* the world as properly outside of her and then incorporates what appears to her consciousness into a larger horizon of meaning. In listening it is not a matter of *appearing* as full-presence or manifestation. It does not require an intentional consciousness directed towards something, perceiving and assimilating it. Rather it is a receptivity to resonance, to the affective timbre of an animal calling, music playing, or a voice crying out:

> The subject of listening or the subject who is listening (but also the one who is 'subject to listening' in the sense that one can be 'subject to' unease, an ailment, or a crisis) is not a phenomenological subject. This means that he is not a philosophical subject, and, finally, he is perhaps no subject at all, except as the place of resonance, of its infinite tension and rebound, the amplitude of sonorous deployment and the slightness of its simultaneous redeployment – by which a voice is modulated in which the singular of a cry, a call, or a song vibrates by retreating from it.[59]

As spectators of multisensory media, we ourselves open as spaces of resonance, receptive to a story or an image that alters us. This reading is important because it foregrounds our vulnerability, our *with*-ness and our non-mastery of the world, all of which challenge the spectator accustomed to the classical American film idiom and, more broadly, lingering notions of a bounded and intentional subject.

One scene in *Nénette and Boni* is particularly striking in regard to listening and the sensory. Dialogue in the film is sparse, so the conversation in which Boni encounters the boulangère outside of her station behind the bakery counter and they have a coffee is notable.[60] We see her sampling perfume in the mall before we cut to a frontal shot of Boni, looking through a window. While the engrained viewer assumption is that we are seeing a reverse shot here (i.e. that Boni is watching the woman as she runs errands), we realise quickly that we are mistaken when she approaches him at the window and says hello. We are never shown what he has been viewing. Boni accepts her invitation for a

coffee and what follows is a fascinating study in encountering. The conversation occurs in three very long takes that together last around three and a half minutes. We start in close-up on Boni as the boulangère attempts to make conversation with the impenetrable boy. It is impossible to tell what he is thinking (Figure 2.12) – is he awestruck? Dumbfounded? Boni's reticence is further accented by its contrast with his long-winded fantasy scenarios, which are filled with colourful dialogue. The reality of the woman seems to render him speechless, his only two comments during the whole conversation being to state his name when asked and to reply that he doesn't know when the woman asks what her wrists smell like. She herself almost immediately comments that Boni is not a big talker, but quickly applies the comment to herself, explaining that that is what a customer told her earlier. Ironically, she then nervously carries the weight of the interaction with the almost completely silent Boni. After thirty seconds we cut to a medium shot of the woman, who lights a cigarette and introduces the topic of smell, explaining that she prefers not to wear perfume because she's read about a famous molecule that causes a chemical reaction between men and women. The camera rests on her for over two minutes as she continues, still receiving no audible response from Boni. At times she seems visibly uncomfortable and she erupts into pleasing and nervous bursts of laughter as she describes how a similar molecule works on female pigs (Figures 2.13–2.15). As we cut back to Boni (in close-up for another take lasting almost fifty seconds), she turns to the subject of the inequitable distribution of these chemicals amongst humanity and the viewer wonders whether Boni has any pheromones to offer. He remains impassive, except for the brief hint of a smile. We never see the conclusion of the conversation as the next cut transfers us somewhere else.

In this 'dialogue' we listen rather than understand, language giving way to the affects that happen between us – the *sense* of how we impact and touch one another. The woman's description of attraction and repulsion is echoed and exceeded by the image, sound and feeling of the interaction as we experience it. The conversation opens up more than it pins down, sharing out a moment of encounter whose affect is sensed by the viewer. It is not only sound that circulates but, as the boulangère herself has indicated, scents are material chemical particles that travel amongst us, disregarding any bodily boundaries in their passage. In an interview Denis comments,

> You know, I've always thought about smell. I've always thought that to be attracted to someone had to have something to do with smell. And there is even a scene in *Nénette et Boni* where Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi speaks at great length with Grégoire Colin, and she's speaking to us about smells. See, there are dialogues in *Nénette et Boni* after all! And that particular dialogue is very good. But smells, you can imagine them

Figure 2.12 It is impossible to tell what he is thinking.

Figure 2.13 She's read about a famous molecule that causes a chemical reaction between men and women.

> in the cinema. You can speak of smells in the cinema because you do have bodies present.[61]

This sensory materiality, as it relates to smell, is present at other points in the film – Nénette asks her brother if he ever does laundry because all of his clothes stink, she smells her mother's sweater as she rifles through her closet,

Figure 2.14 At times she seems visibly uncomfortable.

Figure 2.15 She erupts into nervous and pleasing laughter.

and we see Boni smell his own odour after waking up (Figures 2.16 and 2.17). This olfactory thread is part of Denis's scriptwriting practice:

> When Jean-Pol Fargeau and I write, we write sensations. We even describe odours – the smell of a forest in summer when you're naked in the heat with two dogs. In a script you need to understand the ellipses.

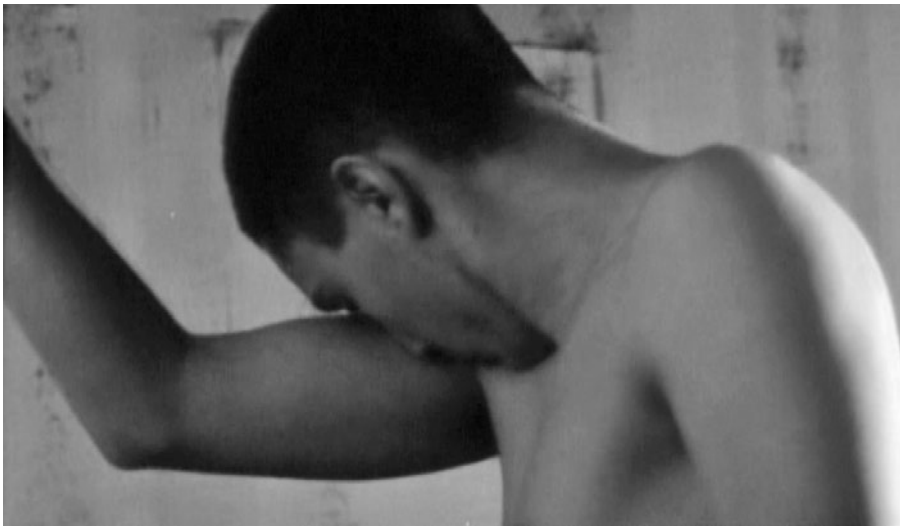

Figure 2.16 'You can speak of smells in the cinema because you do have bodies present.'

Figure 2.17 Nénette smells her mother's sweater as she rifles through her closet.

> Sometimes they come later, little by little, but often they impose themselves from the start.[62]

This quotation suggests that the ellipses, the lack of dialogue and narrative legibility so characteristic of her work, indicate those moments when sensation steps in to be meaning in the absence of semiological or cognitive modes of

comprehension. It is a form of interruption, where we are offered an encounter with smells, tensions and auditory vibrations.

Denis's films contribute to an ethics of sense when they cultivate a form of listening in their viewers, highlighting the tactility of sound (its power to evoke feelings even in the absence of images), its synaesthetic qualities, and also the power of music and voice to touch on what cannot be grasped, to expose and to gesture towards the liminal in human experience. This, in addition to other strategies such as the intertextual uses of actors, the privileging of close-ups, and the inclusion of peripheral scenes, all work to interrupt myth, to make her films literature and to suspend meaning in favour of an ethics of sense. At stake here is a challenge to our habitual ways of orienting ourselves onto the world – in place of the absolutism of myths of nation or subject, we learn to attune ourselves to the singularity or *sense* of the other and to the non-masterability of the world. This relinquishing of the control and power attendant on 'knowledge', in particular, challenges dominant subjectivities who have historically had the privilege of 'knowing' and naming the world. As a move *towards* that which cannot be, properly speaking, known, I now turn to a paradigmatic instance of liminality, focusing on birth as it relates to the ethics elaborated here.

NATALITY AND WONDER

The phonecard thread in *Nénette and Boni* references a larger framework of fragmented communication, which I suggested we might think in terms of communication as contagion (after Bataille). Nancy connects the notion of contagion to the birth into community when he writes, 'Instead of fulfilling itself in a work of death and in the immanence of a subject, community communicates itself through the repetition and the contagion of births: each birth exposes another singularity, a supplementary limit, and therefore another communication.'[63] As opposed to the coming into being of a sovereign subjectivity, birth is contagious, a new opening in the flux of the world. The origin is multiple, both in the sense that we are each of us an origin, a point of access to the world, and in the sense that our own origin is never autonomous or discrete. We very literally come out of a bodily space of sharing and are preceded by a web of connections, expectations, fears and joys. Although Nancy does draw on birth in a metaphorical and creative sense, for example, describing art as in each instance the birth of a world, natality as a literal process and stage is also crucial to his thinking of co-ontology.[64] Birth is a liminal concept, because our own origin *must* be, for us, immemorial. Birth is that which we can never 'know' or 'remember' although we have each experienced it. As an immemorial foundation, then, birth undoes the very notion of a stable or singular origin. We are already in-relation before we take our first breath – our earliest life originating in another body, such that

birth graphically illustrates our *bodily* with-ness, during both gestation and the process of being born. Boni, as much as the baby, highlights this immemoriality vis-à-vis his own deceased mother, whose absence permeates the apartment. His origins are something we as viewers do not have access to and nor does he; they withdraw from the viewer as much as from Boni himself. Denis has said that she wanted to use light sparingly in the interior shots of the apartment because she 'wanted the house to be like a womb, since there is the mystery of what's growing in Nénette's stomach'.[65] This womb-like environment also suggests Boni and Nénette's ongoing birth into a shared world, where that sharing is also always a division from the self, revealing the notion of an autonomous subjectivity to be another Western myth.

Nancy turns again to the womb and natality in his account of listening, as discussed already in relation to sense as interruption:

> Perhaps we should thus understand the child who is born with his first cry as himself being – his being or his subjectivity – the sudden expansion of an echo chamber, a vault where what tears him away and what summons him resound at once, setting in vibration a column of air, of flesh, which sounds at its apertures: body and soul of some *one* new and unique. Someone who comes to himself by hearing him*self* cry (answering the other? calling him?), or sing, always each time, beneath each word, crying or singing, *exclaiming* as he did by coming into the world.[66]

Here we see again the non-identity of the subject who 'comes to himself' and is himself the expansion of a space that both resonates outward and is traversed by vibrations that come from somewhere else, destabilising the distinction between inside and out. In describing the subject as this space of resonance, Nancy describes

> The womb[*matrice*]-like constitution of resonance, and the resonant constitution of the womb: What is the belly of a pregnant woman, if not the space or the antrum where a new instrument comes to resound, a new *organon*, which comes to fold in on itself, then to move, receiving from outside only sounds, which, when the day comes, it will begin to echo through its cry? But more generally, more womblike, it is always in the belly that we – man or woman – end up listening, or start listening. The ear opens onto the sonorous cave that we then become.[67]

We start off, then, by listening, sensing rather than understanding, being affected by the world before we act on it and organise it into any cognitive unity.

In Denis's work, subjects are revealed in their singular plurality (i.e. their constitutionally related existence), in part through relations that alter them

or that reveal a different facet of who they are. The baby's arrival is anticipated with anxiety and eventually love by Boni, with dread and resignation by Nénette, and his birth in its turn alters their lives (although counter to gendered stereotypes about motherhood and maternity, the birth is merely a relief to Nénette, who wants nothing to do with the child, but nonetheless she has been undoubtedly changed by having to undergo this experience). The child is an event whose origin withdraws from us; this is perhaps most literally illustrated by the silence around the identity of the baby's father. 'He doesn't exist,' says Nénette when pressed. While the film raises the themes of maternity and birth, it is undoubtedly through Boni that we *truly* witness the intrusion of the other, or the ways in which the other interrupts our illusion of autonomy. The film is very much about Boni's own alterity to himself, and documents the various intrusions that shape him as an ongoing process through the diegesis, from Nénette's arrival, to the conversation with the boulangère (whose reality interrupts his pure fantasy of her), to the baby itself. The struggle within Boni is evident when he asserts his autonomy to his newly arrived sister in telling her, 'I do what I fucking want. Pain in the ass.' This scene is closely followed by one of Boni searching the train station for the sibling he has just rejected. The struggle to accept this new piece of his life is reflected in the oscillations between affection and aggression that Boni shows towards Nénette. After insisting that she see a doctor and accompanying her there, Boni throws her out of the van and takes off. He cherishes the ultrasound image, but is nonetheless physically aggressive towards the pregnant Nénette. As the film progresses, we see Boni coming to terms with and welcoming the baby's arrival. He clears the mother's room for the child and caresses Nénette's belly, excited when he feels it move (Figure 2.18). Boni is becoming other through the anticipation of a new life, but again this is displaced from where we would conventionally expect an alteration to be visible, namely, in the expectant mother herself. Boni's nascent impulses of care unhook nurture from the maternal role. In fact, he reveals that the notion of the 'maternal' is a gendered construct for what is simply a feeling of nurture that any person may or may not evince toward another. The film thus documents Boni's ongoing rebirths. Although Boni is already nineteen, as Nancy writes, 'we never stop being born into community'.[68]

In her work, Anne O'Byrne focuses on birth as a central concept for understanding Nancy's exposition of world, self and sense. Nancy writes in *The Sense of the World* that the world possesses 'an innateness "whose structure is throughout the structure of birth and surprising arrival"'.[69] O'Byrne develops this strain of Nancy's thought, elaborating that 'Identity is not asserted, but comes to pass and keeps passing in a continual movement within which birth marks a shift rather than a break. It is not yet a shift from the immemorial to experience that will in principle be available to memory – this will come

Figure 2.18 Boni is becoming other through the anticipation of a new life.

later – but a shift to visibility and susceptibility, which is to say, to the state of being exposed.'[70] Just as Denis's films make visible bodies that we may not get a complete picture of, birth is an exposure rather than the establishment of an identity. Birth is always relational, as is being, which 'finds itself constantly interrupted, stalled, set off-kilter by new arrivals; a shudder runs through it just as the self is trembled-through [*durch-zittiert*] by the self of the other individual but also by its difference from itself'.[71] Rather than founding itself in a transcendent outside, birth itself is the opening of the world through the creation of the new, the ongoing flux of the world as sense.[72] This again highlights the processual and dynamic nature of co-existence. The temporal aspect of birth as an ongoing rather than finished event re-emphasises the idea that time-based media such as film have a special capacity to expose this origin (which is always multiple and never a foundation) of sense.

As a liminal and immemorial experience, natality may suggest a breakdown in representation. But O'Byrne suggests that the immemorial is that which we *tend toward* – it emerges 'obliquely': 'if not in philosophy then certainly in the maelstrom of lived experience and also, Nancy suggests, in painting'.[73] Building on this, we can extend Nancy's suggestion that painting can reach towards the immemorial to the medium of film.[74] The idea of tending towards (*vers*) a character, an impression, a place at a particular moment in time, or a sound echoes Denis's own preoccupations. A filmic ethics of sense, then, is particularly interested in the immemorial, the natal and the liminal; it *tends toward* rather than simply captures. It also opens us up to the curiosity of the other as access to an origin.

To think about birth as a starting place for understanding the structure of world, community and ontology is to radically shift the tendency of much Western philosophy to turn to death as an indicator of who we truly are or what our existence might mean.[75] What *Nénette and Boni* suggests is that we can separate birth from its own mythology, linked as it is to notions of maternal sacrifice. It also asks us to take birth as a starting place for thinking about 'children' of all ages, to open up our curiosity to the *each time* of the gesture of another, to the way that they are altered as they move through their daily activities and to the way this openness alters us as spectators. From a feminist perspective, this focus on natality allows us to learn from maternity and birth, which are either ignored or mythologised in our culture, but without essentialising what that experience means. This provides a way to emphasise an undervalued and often repressed process, that of the literal material reproduction of the species, but at the same time disrupts discourses that attach maternity to femininity or the maternal, or that render motherhood the sole defining state of any woman who has the option to and chooses to give birth (or who does not have the choice, for that matter). Just as sense interrupts myth, the film suspends mainstream representations that mythologise maternity. Because Denis works outside of generic conventions, she avoids altogether the dominant paradigms that Hollywood has used to pigeonhole mothers.[76] These myths, of the sacrificial mother, the phallic mother or the abject mother, are interrupted in the film by Nénette's singularity. She refuses to be redeemed or to be maternal towards the child, which she adamantly does not want.[77] The only time we are shown her bare stomach, it appears alien and detached from her body, an orb in space (Figure 2.19).

When Boni touches and listens to her stomach, her face shows her complete dissociation from what is happening (Figure 2.18). To complicate any simple reading of Nénette as a cold person, however, the film does not disallow her caring and nurturing impulses altogether. She cleans her brother's kitchen at one point (for which he very much resents her) and at another point she straddles a crying Boni in bed, feeding him food she has prepared as if he were a child and kissing him tenderly on the forehead. At the end of her book on the subject, E. Ann Kaplan speculates about the future of representations of motherhood. She writes,

> . . . as subjectivities, including female ones, are in general conceived of as dispersed, multiple, unstable, in process, so the concept 'mother' may, in turn, no longer signify such supreme importance. The de-essentializing of subjectivity and, in a related move, of *identity*, should free women and minorities of their simultaneous subordination and fetishization. For women, one of the subordinated *and* fetishized positions has been that of 'mother.' Once this position is opened up as only a part of any specific

Figure 2.19 The only time we are shown her bare stomach, it appears alien and detached from her body, an orb in space.

> woman's subjectivity, not the all-consuming entirety of it; once any specific woman is seen to be constituted 'mother' only when interacting with her child; once 'mother' is no longer a fixed, essentialized quality, then women may be freed from the kind of discursive constraints and burdens studied in this book.[78]

While perhaps we have yet to see this kind of shift in Hollywood representations of motherhood, by altering the codified language of narrative cinema Denis makes it possible to read Nénette outside of dominant discourses of maternity, even as she carries a child throughout the film. In her analysis of the film, Beugnet raises potential concerns that it effaces the feminine or replaces the mother with the father, via the figure of Boni. Instead she concludes, 'Formally as well as in narrative content, rather than exposing a shift in gender roles, and an appropriation of the feminine by the masculine, the film appears to map out the absence or irrelevance of such models.'[79] Beugnet's point reinforces Kaplan's argument that the de-essentialisation of female subjectivity multiplies the possible representations of maternity, claiming that the film disregards rather than problematically reinforces dominant discourses. This extends to Boni as much as Nénette, both of whom develop in relation to the child in ways that are in tension with hegemonic gender stereotypes. I would add that more generally Denis's work challenges the usefulness of any identity categories for understanding the world or the other (something I discuss in the next chapter in terms of an aesthetic of alterity). Rendering natality an

open-ended process of making sense, rather than an overdetermined signification of femininity, links back to the ethics of sense. Instead of a mythologised representation of maternity we are offered an exposure to the unknown – to new faces and new origins, to wonder and curiosity. As Nancy writes,

> 'Strangeness' refers to the fact that each singularity is another access to the world. At the point where we would expect 'something,' a substance or a procedure, a principle or an end, a signification, there is nothing but the manner, the turn of the other access, which conceals itself in the very gesture wherein it offers itself to us – and whose concealing *is* the turning itself. In the singularity that he exposes, each child that is born has already concealed the access that he is 'for himself' and in which he will conceal himself 'within himself,' just as he will one day hide under the final expression of a dead face. This is why we scrutinize these faces with such curiosity, in search of identification, looking to see whom the child looks like, and to see if death looks like itself. What we are looking for there, like in the photographs, is not an image; it is an access.[80]

To our earlier discussion of the close-up as that which has the potential to make strange and to 'evoke a body that is temporarily freed from its function as social, cultural and even gender signifier – a body that escapes the conventional order of male/female dualism'[81] we can now add the nearness of the other as a point of access to the origin of the world, regardless of whether they are in the womb or nearing death. Key to this is the cultivation of an attitude of curiosity and wonder in the viewer. Nancy further elaborates, 'As English [and French] allows us to say, other beings are *curious* (or *bizarre*) to me because they give me access to the origin; they allow me to touch it; they leave me before it, leave me before its turning, which is concealed each time.'[82] We glimpse this wonder at the origin in Boni's intimacy with the child and through our own curiosity about the rebirth of Boni himself.

As Laura McMahon points out, in Nancy's *The Evidence of Film* (his book on Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami) he describes film in language that suggests 'pregnancy'. McMahon argues that his description of film as '"something with shape and strength that precedes and promotes a ripened delivery into the world [. . .]"'[83] calls to mind 'Merleau-Ponty's "empirical pregnancy", suggesting, . . . "not experience itself, with its contours and meanings, but the possibility of such experience, astonished exposure at the limit of meaningfulness rather than the presentation of meanings"'.[84] Here natality again slips into metaphor, referring to an epistemological exposure to the wondrous (astonishing) and new – to a surprise that the world can and does exist as it is. This astonished exposure suggests an important ethical role for wonder and also reminds us of the necessity of making visible the impossibility of seeing. Mary-

Jane Rubenstein makes an argument for the epistemological and ethical value of wonder, describing wonder as 'thinking's unendured affect'. Relative to my work, Rubenstein draws on both Levinas and Nancy in making an argument for the risk of wonder, in which a commitment to uncertainty is part of what it means to truly think. She writes, 'Wonder as "philosophy's virtue" has something, rather, to do with keeping things difficult – with thinking at the limits of thinkability and making sense at the fault lines of sensibility.'[85] I would argue that this is where film can play an important role. The sensory and sensual ability of image and sound to operate at the limits of the cognised is precisely what makes them effective tools for cultivating a spectatorial position that listens and is open to being astonished without the relief of clear resolutions.

Returning to the language of unworking (*désouvrement*), which I earlier discussed as akin to interruption, Rubenstein connects ethics and ontology with a practice that touches on the limits of the intelligible:

> In the phenomenon of unworking, we thus see ontology give immediately onto ethics and vice versa; unworking is both 'our' existential (de) situation and our responsibility. Again, however, it must be emphasised that, like the much maligned, little understood 'unworking' of deconstruction, the task of exposing the failures and interruptions of sense *is first and foremost a way of making sense*, precisely by refusing to assimilate the unthinkable under ready-made categories of thought.[86]

The revelation of the limits to visual mastery, the demand for an affective engagement that offers a physical pre-cognitive relation to the image, the interest in reaching towards the ineffable and revealing in the process our unending birth-to-presence, all inflect the ethics of sense that Denis develops through her work. Rubenstein and O'Byrne, when read together, make an argument for including wonder at the origin – the opening in the world that the other is – into this constellation of ideas.

CONCLUSION

In *Vers Nancy*, Samardzija makes a statement that beautifully characterises an ethical spectator/film relationship when she says of the intruder, 'We're unsettled, but something occurs that allows us to change.' This seems to me a description of what film can do, from an ethical perspective. It unsettles us through the encounters it offers. It touches us in a pre-cognitive and affective way, and in the case of Denis's work the images are left to linger without their meaning being contained by definitive dialogue or psychologisation. Put differently, where myth settles, sense unsettles.

Denis's work evinces an ethics of sense, where this involves a practice of interruption or suspension of dominant representational conventions in favour of a meaning that drifts, unworking our expectations and unsettling us as spectators. Through thinking about liminal states such as natality and wonder, and the ways in which film can cultivate a practice of listening in the spectator, I have opened an ethical common ground between Denis and Nancy. As noted, ethics is a facet of Nancy's work that is not central in the secondary literature. Films such as *Nénette and Boni* show us, through their deep interest in beings, the necessity of an ethical curiosity or the ways in which our curiosity about being is an ethical position, one that the medium of film has the capacity to cultivate.

For much of the chapter, I have focused on the sympathies and similarities between Denis and Nancy, perhaps at the expense of seeking out major points of divergence. The way in which film, and Denis's practice in particular, emphasises the reality of different differences, material differences that impact the ways in which bodies are read and operate affectively in the world, is missing from Nancy's work. Despite perhaps wanting to do otherwise, Nancy, committed to a philosophical lexicon, tends to flatten out or relativise the degrees or varying intensities of difference with his more abstract ontological language. In a similar vein, where Nancy turns to birth to elucidate the process of the world, Denis links it concretely to sexed bodies, if only to reject any expectations we have of those bodies. We *see* how birth happens physically through certain bodies and how maternity shapes expectations and limits possibilities for those bodies as they act in the world. The unequal nature of difference is something that it is less easy for Nancy to convey, relying as he does on a less sensory medium and again working with the baggage of philosophical concepts. Here Denis's work lines up with a feminist perspective, in that it seeks to account for material differences while suspending a sense of identity as essential and immutable. Feminism is deeply invested in myth's disruption and has had much to gain from the dismantling of the subject of the Western philosophical tradition, although it has taken on its share of anxiety about what this means for claiming 'woman' as an identity. *Nénette and Boni* offers a representation of maternity that challenges essentialist notions of womanhood and offers a world unmoored by stereotypes of race and gender.

Despite these points of divergence, or at least Denis's better ability and willingness to pay attention to material difference, Denis's and Nancy's work can be read in complementary relation to each other, and not merely because of their documented intellectual and practical engagement. Nancy's own practices suggest, counter to typical philosophical commentary on art, an enactment of his philosophy (i.e. a praxis) where his ideas do not summarise or interpret a work, but rather think *with* the work, rather than about it. There is a thinking-in-common that they share – in theory and in practice – and that I

have tried to think with as well, taking Denis as my starting point for finding an ethics that works outside of normative principles and offers a cinema that is as pleasurable as it is different from the dominant prototype. In the following chapter, I follow a similar practice, this time focusing on Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher with whom Denis does not have any known relation. Centring the discussion on the film *I Can't Sleep*, I further examine the ethics of Denis's counter cinematic practices, this time through the lens of difference, or what I term an aesthetic of alterity.

NOTES

1. For discussion around French identity see Pierre Bourdieu et al., *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Michel Maffesoli, 'Socialité et polythéisme sociétal', *Échos* 78.9 (1996): 12–17; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Pierre-André Taguieff, 'Identité Nationale: un débat français', *Échos* 78.9 (1996): 82–92; Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
2. This encounter will be each time different for each spectator (who brings with her different histories and experiences) and each viewing. A particular mode of encounter is cultivated by the narrative and formal style of Denis's films, but each time affects are produced through the encounter with the film and these will always be singular to the encounter itself.
3. Denis's film on the choreographer *Vers Mathilde* includes Nancy giving a reading, and Denis has contributed to the text *Allitérations: Conversations sur la danse* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), co-authored by Monnier and Nancy.
4. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 43–70.
5. B. C. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 113.
6. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 63.
7. Ibid. p. 65.
8. See also Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 200; and Marie-Eve Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 198, on sense and the literary in Nancy.
9. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 63.
10. See Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Kristin Thompson, 'The Continuity System', in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson (eds), *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 194–213.
11. See, for example, Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy*, James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, and Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy*.
12. The major work here is Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch*

in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis (Leeds: Maney, 2011), which focuses primarily on touch, indeed a major concept in Nancy's work.

13. Denis had previously worked with Colin and Houri in the made-for-television *US Go Home* (1994), in which they also played siblings. She expressed her desire to further explore the sibling dynamic with them, resulting in *Nénette and Boni*.
14. I also discuss the drifting and movement that characterises her work in the following chapter on *I Can't Sleep*, but there I place it in dialogue with Levinas rather than Nancy.
15. This is of course a concern shared by Levinas, as well as by thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari in their reformulations of ethics.
16. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', in *A Finite Thinking*, trans. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 172–95; p. 189.
17. Ibid. p. 176.
18. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Inoperative Community', in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 1–42.
19. On Nancy see also Ian James, 'On Interrupted Myth', *Journal for Cultural Research* 9.4 (October 2005): 331–49.
20. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 99.
21. Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', p. 181.
22. To be fair, Nancy would include rocks in his taxonomy of relevant beings with which we share the world, but here the idea of something self-sufficient, bounded and impenetrable – that is, stone-like – is used metaphorically. I suppose that in this sense even stones are not stone-like.
23. Nancy, 'The Inoperative Community', p. 33.
24. Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', p. 181.
25. Here I am referencing the feminist dialogue around foundational categories recorded in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, in particular Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminisms and the Question of "Postmodernism"', in Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3–21, but this tension between the necessity and the danger of norms and categories is 'foundational' itself to feminist theory.
26. Again, Judith Butler's work is most resonant with this line of thought. See particularly the collection of essays in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
27. Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', p. 179.
28. Jonathan Romney, 'Claire Denis interviewed by Jonathan Romney', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2000, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,338784,00.html> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
29. Janet Bergstrom, 'Opacity in the Films of Claire Denis', in Tyler Edward Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele (eds), *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 69–102.
30. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Insufficiency of "Values" and the Necessity of "Sense"', *Journal for Cultural Research* 9.4 (2005): 437–41; 441.
31. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, p. 32.
32. Ibid. p. 33.
33. This should be differentiated from a Brechtian *Verfremdungsaffekt*, which aims to spur the viewer on to reflection on the larger social realities the play depicts. Denis does not alienate her audience from the image to facilitate an intellectual process.
34. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 14.

35. I elaborate on this sense of movement and shifting in Denis's work in the following chapters, discussing it in terms of Levinas's concept of the saying.
36. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Topos: Who Comes After the Subject?', introduction to special issue of *Topoi* 7.2 (1988): 87–92; 90.
37. Andrew O. Thompson, '*Nenette and Boni* Exposes Brother-Sister Bond', *American Cinematographer* 78 (September 1997): 16–20; 20.
38. Ibid. p. 20.
39. Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 96.
40. While Western cultures undoubtedly rely on these categories, challenging their givenness or explanatory value opens up a different kind of politics than that based on identity.
41. Beugnet is making this argument specifically about what she calls the cinema of sensation and not about classical Hollywood film.
42. Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation*, p. 108.
43. See Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, 'Marseille: Intersection, Fragment, Ruin', in *From Moscow to Madrid: Postmodern Cities, European Cinema* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2003), pp. 73–90, for a larger discussion of Marseille as a location in the film and as it relates to French cinema more generally.
44. I discuss more of these narrative interruptions in the following chapter in terms of Levinas's concept of the saying.
45. Nancy draws on Bataille in his work on community.
46. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 28.
47. Ibid. p. 28.
48. A notable exception is the recent article by Jenny Munro, 'Denis, Caven, Fassbinder: Reading Performance Intertextuality in *35 Rhums* (2008)', *Studies in French Cinema* 31.1 (2012): 61–74. That said, the author's focus is on Denis's use of the regular Fassbinder actor Ingrid Caven in *35 Shots of Rum*, as opposed to the intertextual use of actors *within* Denis's own oeuvre.
49. An auditory example of this is present in *I Can't Sleep*. Line Renaud (a popular French actress and singer) is cast as a hotel matron who also teaches self-defence to elderly women. As one of the characters drives into Paris at the film's beginning we hear an old recording of Renaud and Dean Martin singing their hit 'Relax-ay-voo'. This song again consciously gestures to Renaud as a person and entertainer outside of her role in the film.
50. Pauline Reay, *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p. 80.
51. Although he doesn't discuss *Nénette and Boni* specifically, Ian Murphy has recently argued that Denis's films privilege auditory and haptic modes of spectatorship and rhythmic form that create a structure more akin to music than to narrative cinema. See Ian Murphy, 'Feeling and Form in the Films of Claire Denis', *Jump Cut* 54 (Fall 2012), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc54.2012/IanMurphyDenis/> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
52. Reay, *Music in Film*, p. 80.
53. Didier Castanet, 'Interview with Claire Denis', *Journal of European Studies* 34.1–2 (March–June 2004): 143–61; 153. Denis's interest in music is also evinced by her early film documentary on the Cameroonian group Les Têtes Brulées (*Man No Run*, 1989) and by her music videos, most notably in the American context her work with Sonic Youth for the songs 'Incinerate' and 'Jams Run Free' (of which there are four versions).
54. See, for example, Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

55. Thierry Jousse, interviewer, part 2, *Autour de la musique: Entretien avec Claire Denis (2me emission). A voix nue: Grands entretiens d'hier et aujourd'hui*, Radio France, France Culture, Paris, 14 May 2002, 25 minutes.
56. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, p. 18.
57. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 7.
58. Ibid. p. 14.
59. Ibid. pp. 21–2.
60. For a detailed analysis of this scene see also Travis Mackenzie Hoover, '*Nenette and Boni*: Sidelong Glance', *Reverse Shot* 20.2 (2007), <http://reverseshot.org/archive/entry/413/nenette-et-boni> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
61. Aimé Ancian, 'Claire Denis: An Interview', trans. Inge Pruks, *Senses of Cinema* 23 (November–December 2002), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/spotlight-claire-denis/denis_interview/> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
62. Interview with Jonathan Romney, 'Between Dream and Reality', *Sight and Sound* 15.9 (2005): 41–2; 42.
63. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 66.
64. See Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, pp. 14–15 for a description of art as the birth of a world.
65. Thompson, '*Nenette and Boni* Exposes Brother-Sister Bond', p. 18.
66. Nancy, *Listening*, pp. 17–18.
67. Ibid. p. 37.
68. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 66.
69. Anne O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 121; quotes from Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 155.
70. O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude*, p. 113.
71. Ibid. p. 113.
72. Ibid. p. 113.
73. Ibid. p. 115.
74. And unlike painting, film's inherent durational aspect, its temporal move onward, makes it particularly suited to highlighting the dynamic and shifting nature of sense as it operates in my account.
75. Perhaps the best reference in this regard is Heidegger, in whose *Being and Time* death is what individuates the subject and is profoundly non-relational, that is to say it is what is *Dasein*'s 'ownmost'.
76. I take the following archetypes from two important studies examining maternity, motherhood and genre: Lucy Fischer, *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
77. If anything, Fischer's chapter on *Rosemary's Baby* has the most resonance with Nénette's experience of pregnancy, as a form of unwanted alien growing inside her and compromising her agency.
78. Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, p. 219.
79. Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 161.
80. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 14.
81. Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation*, p. 96.
82. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 20.

83. Quoted from Jean-Luc Nancy, *Abbas Kiarostami: The Evidence of Film* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert, 2001), p. 20; in McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, p. 29.
84. McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, p. 29. The inner quotation is a reference to Chris Watkins's writing on Merleau-Ponty.
85. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 125.
86. Ibid. pp. 118–19.

CHAPTER 3

Otherwise than Hollywood: Denis, Levinas and an Aesthetic of Alterity

> My way of making films is tied to desire . . . Not just the physical desire for another person but desire in general. All my films function as a movement toward an unknown other and toward the unknown in relations between people.
>
> Claire Denis[1]

Can we speak of an ethical responsibility towards the memory of a serial killer? What if the killer in question is gay, a black West Indian immigrant, and an HIV-positive drug user? All of these rubrics applied to Thierry Paulin, the so-called granny killer, who confessed to killing twenty-one elderly women in Paris between 1984 and 1987.[2] Controversially, Claire Denis chose to take up this story in her third feature film, *J'ai pas sommeil* (*I Can't Sleep*).[3] Rather than sensationalising her subject matter as a portrait of absolute evil or monstrosity, she explores the ambiguity of human violence through a multi-plot structure and an understated representation of the crimes. Denis has said in interviews that Paulin was described as a sweet and nice person by those who knew him and that she was drawn to the reality of his multiple roles as brother, son and many other things alongside his role as a violent killer.[4] I read her unique approach to her subject matter as ethical when viewed through a Levinasian lens, arguing that his philosophy offers fruitful possibilities for the articulation of a feminist filmmaking practice.

Denis's representational practice is one centred in alterity and ambiguity. The ambiguity present on multiple levels of *I Can't Sleep* is a strategy that evokes what Levinas would term the absolute alterity of the other. Unlike classical narrative cinema, the film refuses character psychologisation, leaving characters unknowable and opaque. I read *I Can't Sleep*'s performance of failure – in the sense of failing to capture the other – as part of this ethical approach.[5] I examine how Denis constructs her narrative to reveal a funda-

mental being-with that resonates with Levinas's concept of the subject as constituted relationally via a call to ethical responsibility to the other. After elaborating on the ethics of absolute alterity and relational subjectivity, I turn to the other spaces in Denis's work that open up a dialogue with Levinas's writing. These include what I term a 'Levinasian Poetics', or Levinas's own writing as a representational model; his concept of the 'saying' which emphasises process and becoming over result and being; and, finally, his notion of the erotic, which returns us to the value of an ambiguity that both brings the other closer, exposing her, while revealing her absolute and unknowable singularity. In the chapter's final section, I turn to the writing of Diane Perpich. Modifying Perpich's argument for a feminist alterity politics based on Levinas, I argue for *I Can't Sleep* as a model of a feminist aesthetic of alterity.

Rather than reading Denis's films through Levinas's philosophy, it is the films that guide us to the places in Levinas that have useful applications to the study of cinema. Denis's work refutes Levinas's often condemnatory position on art, revealing that film has the power to show us the face of the other and to help us in developing an attention to and respect for difference. Her filmmaking steps in at the limits of philosophical language, and is able to evoke and expose relations and knowledges that are difficult to translate into propositional content. In comparison with Nancy, who has written extensively on various arts, including film and painting, Levinas has relatively little to say about art and never takes up cinema as a sustained theme.[6] Despite this, film scholars have begun to use aspects of Levinas's thought to think about a variety of films from documentaries to classical Hollywood to silent features.[7] Scholarship on Levinas and cinema tends to avoid the fraught question of his position on vision and the work of art. His writing on these themes is ambiguous and at times openly hostile. He associates the artwork with an ethical *irresponsibility* and a turning away from the call of the other. I move away from his limited writings on art and aesthetics, which are not useful in helping us to pose important ethical questions about the highly visual world in which we exist and in which our ethical responsibilities are summoned and enacted. Guided by Denis, I look elsewhere in his thought to ask what his conceptualisation of *ethics* has to offer us in thinking about the opportunities for an engagement with alterity that are offered or denied the spectator. *I Can't Sleep* suggests that particular films may aid us in honing an ethical sensibility. Levinas's ethics teach us to resist the lure of full comprehension, to let things lie in the darker spaces, to value ungraspable movement, and to be open to the encounter with what we cannot know. Denis's films similarly invite us to encounter what is unknown in the other rather than assimilating her into a comprehensive framework.

While Denis is often read alongside the philosophy of her collaborator and commentator Jean-Luc Nancy, putting her into conversation with Levinas

opens up another facet of the ethical dimension of her work, while simultaneously making Levinas available to feminist film studies. Placed in proximity to each other, they intrude on one another in productive ways – Denis, at times, pushing Levinas's ideas further through the medium of film. Levinas, unlike Nancy, is concerned first and foremost with ethics. Like Nancy, Levinas defines ethics through a fundamentally relational and non-self-identical subjectivity that entails a sophisticated concept of difference.[8] The ethics under consideration are thus not to be located in the plot per se, nor in the kinds of moral choices that the characters make, but rather in how their alterity is represented to the spectator. While Nancy is an important figure for understanding the ethical in Denis's films, by turning to Levinas we can more fully elaborate this ethical dimension and continue to open up the discussion of feminist representational ethics such that it has implications beyond Denis's oeuvre.

The face-to-face encounter is the definitive image of Levinas's ethics. This encounter with the other is present on multiple levels in Denis's cinema – both amongst the characters on screen and in the relation between spectator and film. By its invitation to encounter the other, the film itself offers an opportunity to view ethically and to develop an ethical sensitivity that extends beyond the timeframe of the film. The film is thus ethical both in its treatment of its subject matter and in the experience it offers its spectator. The potential for this experience to alter the viewer herself reveals that we are fundamentally *with*; our subjectivities are the result of the ongoing process of encountering. *I Can't Sleep* introduces us to several others whose lives intersect in ways that extend beyond their – and our – frame of vision.

I Can't Sleep is said by Denis to be the final instalment of a trilogy that deals with colonialism and the postcolonial.[9] The spectre of colonialism is most visibly present in the characters of Théo and Camille, brothers from the West Indies with different relationships to France and to Martinique, their land of origin. Camille (Richard Courcet) is the character loosely based on Paulin – he lives by night, performing a toned-down drag in bars, and dancing in nightclubs. He is shown being fitted for leather gear and fetish photos are strewn about his room. He is both gentle and taciturn in his interactions with others and also violent and dominating towards his white French boyfriend – his partner in both love and murder/robbery. His brother Théo (Alex Descas) works *au noir* doing odd jobs to make ends meet, supporting his young son and saving up for his dream of returning to Martinique, which he sees as a natural paradise in contrast to the difficulties of life in Paris. He is in a stormy marriage with a fiery white French woman, Mona (Béatrice Dalle). He is a difficult, disgruntled and surly man, who several times over the course of the film denies his brother an intimacy that Camille desires.

Denis uses another marginalised character as a way into the complex web

of the city and the narrative. Daïga (the late Yekaterina Golubeva) is a young Lithuanian woman, whose entry into Paris is the spectator's entry into the film. Able to speak only a small amount of French, but motivated to emigrate by the promise of a role in the theatre from a French director (and, it seems, casual lover) and by a letter from an long-emigrated great-aunt (Mina), Daïga brings us into a world of Russian-speaking French immigrants, whose circuitous paths will pass by and sometimes intrude upon those of Camille. In many ways Daïga's complex depiction parallels that of Camille, avoiding an oversimplified separation of character types that Denis would associate with a typically 'Hollywood-esque' screenplay.

Denis claims she was very wary of making a 'politically correct' film. In one interview she discusses the Hollywood film *Philadelphia* as an example of what she *didn't* want to do, namely, to portray the marginalised as impossibly good or as absolute victims, which functions to erase their humanity just as much as does their representation as monstrous.[10] Denis avoids what we would expect from a conventional narrative film. This would typically include an attitude of fascination and repulsion at the unqualified evil (and therefore difference) of the killer; or, given the various components of Paulin's marginalised identity position, to make a melodramatic thriller that shows how society has created the killer through disregard, racism and homophobia.[11] Perhaps, at face value, the latter option appears the 'ethical' choice.

Instead, I argue that the ethics of the film lies in its complex treatment of all of its major characters and the establishment of narrative parallels that reveal the ambiguous connections between them, such that easy distinctions between good and evil become murky. Through this ambiguity, the characters are allowed to remain opaque and cannot be assimilated into any easy interpretative frameworks about the world. This difference, rather than any notion of the other as monstrous, allows otherness to remain absolute – or unknown – and not merely relational (i.e. not other than myself, or evil as opposed to good, both of which define the other in relation to a known term). The following section highlights how Levinas's notion of radical alterity and its fundamental reworking of relational notions of self and other shed light on the ethics of Denis's portrayal. Denis's approach makes it evident that radical alterity in filmmaking practice requires an other brought close enough that their contours are not so easily discernible.[12] Ethics requires a representational ambiguity.

DIFFERENCE AND THE SUBJECT: DENIS/LEVINAS

Denis's main characters tend not to say much. In fact, almost as if to poke fun at the lack of dialogue in her films, Denis will often have her more voluble

minor characters comment on the quietness of her protagonists.[13] In *I Can't Sleep*, both Théo and Camille are men of few words, and Daïga, even when conversing in her mother tongue, seems amused rather than engaged by verbal communication. In fact, at the time of the film's production, Golubeva did not speak any French. Denis's desire to cast her is symptomatic of the secondary role that dialogue plays in her films. She identifies dialogue as simply a component of her films' soundtracks.[14] Dialogue, normally a central component of character development in mainstream film, is eschewed in favour of character impenetrability.[15]

A telling scene is one in which Camille visits Théo. Théo's mother-in-law is visiting and Camille exchanges brief pleasantries with the family from the door. Théo asks Camille what he wants, but he says nothing. There is clearly tension between them and Camille seems to feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the others, while Théo makes no effort to move their interaction into another space. Camille leaves with his request unstated. After a brief interval, Théo decides to run after him. Finding him on the subway platform, as the doors close Théo hands his brother money, which Camille says was not what he came for. We see him drift away from his brother on the subway, as Théo demands, 'Wait! Where are you going?' to no response. Almost nothing has been said between the two. We don't know Camille's motivation for visiting his brother, nor why Théo decided to go after him. We can speculate, but their inner lives remain exterior to us. As Théo tells the incredulous officer who can't believe that Théo did not notice anything 'odd' about his brother, 'My brother's a stranger to me, just like you.'

A scene near the end of the film further emphasises Camille's 'strangeness'. Here, he confesses to the murders in police custody. The inspector reads through the list of names, dates and locations of each murder, to which Camille responds, without affect, 'Yes' (or, in one case, 'I don't know'). In a film that followed the dominant Hollywood style, one can imagine that the scene of arrest would typically be padded with a cathartic confession (preferably in close-up) or some other scene of clarification into the mystery of the crime. Yet the scene in *I Can't Sleep* adds nothing to our understanding of why Camille committed these acts of violence. He says merely (quoting the 'real' Paulin) 'The world's gone crazy' in response to the inspector's mystified gaze. There is no profound and insightful speech on his part linking the violence of his crimes to his experience of marginalisation or the violence of the colonial past. While the viewer could perhaps construe these acts as the perverse consequence of Camille's assimilation (his world, outside of his family, appears to be completely white), she is given no causal or clarifying explanation to make sense of his crimes.[16]

Denis contributes to this opacity through her choices in terms of the film's narrative structure. Two murders are shown, one directly after the other, but

they do not occur until around an hour and forty-one minutes into the film. In the meantime we have witnessed many other facets of Camille – his charm towards his landlady (he lives with his boyfriend, Raphaël, at the hotel where Daïga has been given a place to stay and a job as a chambermaid), his strained relationship with his brother, his violent behaviour towards his boyfriend, his close community of friends in the gay club scene, and a scene in which he flirtatiously assists the twin maids who make his bed. It is only after these other sides of Camille are depicted that he is revealed as the murderer-at-large.

Additionally, it is *after* the murders occur that we are shown some of the more touching scenes involving Camille. At his mother's birthday party, we see him dance playfully and tenderly with her, a smile on his face. There is even a brief and subtle suggestion – all communicated through body language – that Camille would like to dance with his brother and mother, the three embracing and enjoying the music. This is an invitation that Théo explicitly rejects, pulling away and leaving the dance floor, allowing Camille to cut in. Thus, even after the film has shown us that Camille is in fact the killer, our expectations are immediately complicated. The hands that have strangled and robbed are now affectionately holding another woman of the same age group as the victims, this time his mother. This ambiguity goes hand in hand with the impenetrability of his characterisation. I argue that absolute alterity, which means that the other is not reducible to a category or to being framed as 'like' or 'not-like' me, paradoxically requires a representational ambiguity. This ambiguity brings the other closer only to show the distance between her and my knowledge of her. This highlights the dimension of failure necessary in the attempt to represent the other. Rendering Camille's otherness as absolute means that he eludes any categorical schemas. This inability to know the other is central to Levinas's conception of the ethical relation.

The murders themselves only contribute to Camille's mystery and further emphasise the non-Hollywood approach that the film takes. The first murder is filmed in medium shot, with no editing.[17] There are no close-ups of the victim's tortured face or of either of the men's faces looking, for example, maniacally pleased or perversely violent, as one might expect in classical narrative cinema. In fact, there is almost no emotion in the scene; the overall tone is deadpan and banal. Afterwards, as Raphaël searches the apartment for money, we see Camille absent-mindedly fingering various trinkets in the woman's living room. His face, if any emotion is present at all, seems to express an unacknowledged and general sadness and ennui. The scene is neither sensationalised nor moving. Again, we are denied the thrill of exposure to an evil man or sadistic killer. We are given no sense of his interiority and no psychological explanation.[18] His otherness is in his lack of clear psychological markers, rather than his visible monstrosity. Put differently, otherness is not a psychological category or innate condition. Camille remains as opaque as his

brother or Daïga; we cannot easily assimilate him into our pre-existing notions of good and evil. Rather than moralising about the nature of evil, the film – and this is one of the ways in which Levinas is useful for articulating a filmic ethics – reveals that a notion of absolute difference results in a more ethical, and also more challenging, representation of violence.[19] This approach sheds light on what a Levinasian understanding of alterity looks like in the sphere of film.

Like Nancy's concept of the co-existential analytic, Levinas's turn to ethics is a response to Heidegger's claim that *Dasein* (our individual being, being-there) is *Mitsein* (being-with). Both thinkers see Heidegger's failure to truly shape his fundamental ontology around the 'with' as the impetus for a new approach to our fundamentally related existence.[20] As we have seen, for Nancy this becomes an elaboration of the notion of difference as singular plurality and sharing. Levinas will turn towards a transcendent outside to insert an ineradicable difference into his account of being. The ethical will come before, in every sense of the word, the ontological. This is the notion of ethics as 'first philosophy'.[21] The ethical relationship, in his account, intrudes into the ontological; it is what prevents the realm of being from closing in on itself. The difference of the other interrupts being, it undoes my self-sufficient subjectivity, and it returns infinitely, undermining any sense of immunity.

Levinas's critique responds to the exigency of forging a new way of thinking about our relationship to the other, a framework that would 'find for man another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression'.[22] Critiquing Heidegger in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes,

> To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom . . . In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics.[23]

By situating ethics in a space that is prior to being – or ontology – Levinas also reconfigures relationality such that it undermines what he would argue is the self-sufficient subject of phenomenology.

The primacy of the ethical before the ontological, or the ethical as calling us from outside of or on the hither side of being, requires a conception of difference as radical alterity. Levinas argues that the history of philosophy, with few exceptions, has been unable to truly think difference. Difference has always been understood in such a way that it is related back to the subject in

some form or other. Descartes, for example, put the thinking 'I' at the centre of the ability to know and experience the world, or that which is other to – and object for – the philosophising subject. Hegelian models of subjectivity share some of this Cartesian inheritance. The processes of recognition on which they rely always require relating otherness to the self and difference is sublimated through dialectical progression. The other is always illuminated for the subject by her own understanding of the world. What is other in philosophy is always referred back to the Same (or the perceiving consciousness of the subject of philosophy), and, after Heidegger, it is understood in light of being. Even nothingness or the negative always refers back to the realm of essence or is understood in relation to the latter. For example, to understand Thierry Paulin as a monster or utterly evil may appear to be putting into play a notion of radical difference. Yet this categorisation is precisely what makes him known and therefore only relatively other. He is *not me* (assuming that I don't self-identify as monstrous or evil). His otherness is thus labelled, contained and referred back to the Same. The film makes it evident that to do justice to the other a degree of representational ambiguity is necessary. For her to be absolutely other, she must elude my grasp and evade my labels. She must resist my attempts at interiorisation.

Denis's films are recurring encounters with the absolutely other, both amongst characters on screen and between viewer and viewed. Levinas's privileged examples of alterity are the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Indeed, the films discussed in this project could aptly be called a cinema of strangers. Yet Denis also opens up Levinas's notion of the other, revealing that we need to look in places where we least expect, to see the faces whose difference must remain singularly theirs. Although Camille occupies many categories of otherness – sexually and racially, for example – he is also a serial killer. This takes us far afield from the trinity of orphan, widow and stranger in need of hospitality. Similarly, despite Daïga's foreigner status, which could position her as an underdog that the viewer roots for as she finds her way in a new place, she is neither lovable nor particularly relatable. While it is easy to imagine kind elderly ladies, poor and charming orphans and deserving refugees when reading Levinas, *I Can't Sleep* shows us that ethics doesn't discriminate between faces. In this sense Denis pushes Levinas further, or reveals the ways in which his own attempts to put the other into language work against the force of his argument. To assume we can know who is other in advance, for example, the colonised or the poor, would be to approach the other in the realm of ontology insofar as it categorises according to ability, ethnicity, gender and so forth. Across a spectrum of others, the film makes visible a generalisable radical unknowability, gesturing towards a practice of feminist representational ethics. As I elaborate in the section on alterity aesthetics at this chapter's end, this practice offers an alternative to feminisms that rely on

identity- or recognition-based models of difference and subjectivity. Diane Perpich's use of Levinas to articulate a feminist alterity politics provides a building block for thinking about the implications of this analysis of Denis's work in terms of feminist representational strategies. Alterity creates a fissure in being that works against oppressive ways of approaching the other.

For Levinas the tyranny of being is connected to human conflict and war. Being is always invested in its own presence, fully immanent, synchronised, and concerned with protecting its own interest. To always grasp the other or assign her a meaning within the totality of some larger system is similarly a violence, in that it forces the other into one's own framework for understanding the world, rather than letting her be radically different.[24] The other is singular and I lack any frame of reference that would allow me to comprehend her based on my own experience. The other calls me to ethical responsibility towards her outside of any experience, 'experience' being always already in the realm of the ontological. The other approaches me as a face on the hither side of conscious experience, obsessing me, taking me as a hostage, demanding that I substitute my own life for hers in an encounter that is outside of the logic of history, that occurs in diachronic moments and that is irrecoverable by memory.[25]

This encounter occurs outside of time as we calculate it and quantify it, but also outside of time as we experience it. The other comes from elsewhere and else*when* and continues to intrude, rupturing time and drawing me outside of myself, making a return to the Same impossible. The call to responsibility for the other is ultimately traumatic; it makes the self restless within itself, rendering it homeless. It breaks up the totalising regime of essence and challenges the identity or ego of the subject. Instead of objects disclosing themselves to a transcendental consciousness, the self is exposed to the other, vulnerable in proximity. But rather than posing a threat to or signifying the end of the subjectivity of the subject, it is precisely in this ethical encounter that the subject becomes a subject as such. Levinas writes, 'It is as subject to an irreversible relation that the term of the relation becomes a subject.'[26] Here we have a relation that does not connect two pre-existing terms, but rather the relation itself constitutes the terms of that relation. We *are* relationally. Being is thus always being-*with*; radical alterity entails a radical reconfiguring of self/other relations. *I Can't Sleep* places Camille in a network of relations, an imperfect and fragile community, whose cause-and-effect relationships are rarely visible but nonetheless palpably shape the subjectivities on screen.

This encounter with alterity is what Levinas terms the face-to-face. It exists prior to any thematisation, outside of language and history, and is lost as soon as one tries to represent it or bring it into the realm of ontology. The unrepresentable of the relation is central to understanding Denis's use of ambiguity as a strategy for exposing representation's impossibility. Describing the priority of the face-to-face, Levinas writes,

> Reaching the other is not something justified of itself; it is not a matter of shaking me out of my boredom. It is, on the ontological level, the event of the most radical breakup of the very categories of the ego, for it is for me to be somewhere else than my self; it is to be pardoned, to not be a definitive existence.[27]

My subjectivity is the result of the relation with alterity, while the very same relation is what constantly undermines or calls into question my claims to coherent identity. It is this very impossibility of starting from the self that Levinas names ethics: 'We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.'[28] While the faces of Daïga and Camille expose their relationality within the diegesis of the film, they also intrude upon our spontaneity as spectators who are affectively drawn to witness their stories, although we are denied comprehensive mastery. Additionally, the relationality of the characters exceeds any labels we may give to them – Daïga and Camille do not necessarily connect as fellow immigrants, or through a normative mode of heterosexual desire; their connection is ambiguous, operating outside any clear account we might attempt.

However disparate, the characters of *I Can't Sleep* are vulnerable to and deeply *in relation to* one another. Their actions reverberate outwards, often giving meaning to apparently unrelated moments. In one scene Daïga walks alone at night and passes Mona, Théo's wife, who sits smoking at a café table. The instant is brief; shots of Daïga wandering without apparent purpose through the dark city streets are interrupted for a moment by the face of Mona, her visage a dark screen over her inner thoughts. The two will never meet – and Denis's films are always populated by these 'missed connections' – but nonetheless they are together. Despite the appearance of mutual isolation in this scene, the women are revealed as part of the same frame. Their actions are connected by their existence within the shared world of the film, although they themselves never directly experience that connection, almost as though their link exists outside that of experience. As spectators, we are trained to seek out the links between scenes and characters in a movie. *I Can't Sleep* offers the viewer a glimpse of the characters' interrelatedness, at the same time as it resists a clear explanation or causal logic to these relations.

This relationality is perhaps most explicitly articulated in a scene late in the film. Daïga and Camille have never spoken, but have intruded into each other's lives in other ways. She sees erotic photographs of him while cleaning his room and watches through a window as he and his partner share a naked embrace. Even without a traditional shot/reverse shot, it is also implied that Camille has noticed Daïga. For example, in one scene he is shown entering the hotel lobby. The image cuts to Daïga, drinking a beer and watching television in a room visible from the lobby. She turns around to see who has entered.

The scene cuts to Mona, buzzing herself into her sister's apartment. There is never a cut back to Camille, in which the audience would be given confirmation that he has in fact seen Daïga and through which we could register the emotion the scene elicits by his facial expression. The lack of a reverse shot leaves the narrative open. Perhaps they have made eye contact, or it could be that their lives parallel one another in ways that neither of them fully observes. The twinings and perambulations of their journeys finally climax when Daïga follows Camille to a café. She has seen his photo on a 'wanted' sign at the police station and we do not know if she has done anything with this information (although Camille is apprehended shortly after). She orders a coffee at the bar next to Camille and we sense an attraction between the two outsiders, although they haven't yet made eye contact. As he passes her the sugar their hands meet in a charged slow-motion touch (the only time that slow motion is used in the film, formally emphasising its significance). It is a touch that all the events of the film appear to have been building towards – a tactile recognition of the interrelatedness of their paths. Camille pays for her coffee and as he leaves they say goodbye without looking at one another. Their touch seems charged with the multiple relations that lie beyond the scene and outside of the characters' experiences; their lives are revealed as constituted through their relations despite the fact that their faces may not recognise one another. These echoes of a formative encounter, which in a Levinasian sense occurs outside of knowledge and conventional time-space continuums, are traces of the ethical relation. This resituating of ethics at the level of the *with* works against oppressive practices by thinking difference in a way that refuses self/other logics and embraces the unknown.

THE SAYING AND A LEVINASIAN POETICS

As already discussed, the concept of absolute alterity and an understanding of the subject as constituted by and undone through the face-to-face encounter have applications for filmic representation. Denis's films, in their focus on movement, their lack of explanatory dialogue, and their erotic ambiguity, offer us suggestive directives for where else to look in Levinas for elements of a feminist film ethics. Because Denis does not rely on language for meaning, her work steps in where philosophy hits its limits. When words become traps that fix beings into frozen states of semantic meaning, images and sounds can offer argument or explanation by other means. As alluded to above, the reframing of the ethical as prior to the ontological creates problems for representation. Beginning with the notion of the *saying*, these difficulties extend to the very exposition of philosophy itself. These challenges, however, reveal themselves as generative rather than limiting, particularly in relation to Denis's filmic practice.

Levinas often approaches his concepts through several different words or metaphors, each of which reveals another facet of the idea he is trying to convey without pinning it down into clear definitional language. The encounter with the other is figured variously as the face-to-face, a trace, substitution, like being pregnant, as a caress in the dark, and as a saying that always undoes the said. This concept of the face-to-face as *saying* privileges becoming over being and movement over stasis. It is revealing in terms of Levinas's privileging of the auditory in his descriptions of what it means to encounter the other. In fact, the terminology of the face-to-face is misleading, as it suggests a highly visual encounter that belies his profound mistrust of the visual and obfuscates the encounter's haptic nature, as I elaborate in this and the following chapter. Moving towards the language of saying provides another means of approaching what it might mean to talk about film from the perspective of a Levinasian ethics. The saying (*le dire*) denotes a dynamic and fleeting contact with the other that signifies the ethical relation. This is in contrast to the said (*le dit*), a more fixed representation that occurs in the realm of ontology. The face 'speaks' and this speech grounds all signification. It signifies prior to any semiotic system or coherent form of speech. It may groan, weep or whistle, but in each instance the face is *saying* before existing in the realm of the said. Levinas writes, 'saying, saying, saying itself, without thematizing it, but exposing it again. Saying is thus to make signs of this very signifyingness of the exposure.'[29] The language of exposure suggests vulnerability to intrusion by the other. It is not to be confused with literal speech. In 'Language and Proximity', Levinas is careful to distinguish this 'speech' from any articulate linguistic utterance, which would bring the saying into the realm of said:

> The hypothesis that the relationship with an interlocutor would still be a knowing reduces speech to the solitary or impersonal exercise of a thought, whereas already the kerygma which bears its ideality is, in addition, a *proximity* between me and the interlocutor, and not our participation in a transparent universality. Whatever be the message transmitted by speech, the speaking is contact.[30]

What is important in this saying, which may not bear any relation whatsoever to speech proper, is the relation of contact, openness and proximity to the other that it signifies. Contact, exposure and proximity all suggest a tactile and visceral sensation of and vehicle for my responsibility to the other. I will return to this bodily aspect of the saying in the next chapter. Here, I am interested in the saying as that which refuses to let meaning congeal, which encourages movement and interruption over fixity and continuity, in ethics and in film.[31] The dynamic and flowing character of Denis's work performs a kind of saying

that undoes the said. It works against our attempts to fix the characters into one frame or identity.

Denis's cinema is a cinema of movement, of drifters and dancers, who come and go, touch and withdraw. In *I Can't Sleep*, the film starts and ends with Daïga's entry into and exit from the city via the motorway. In both instances she is shown driving, a cigarette hanging from between her lips; she hasn't stood still long enough or said enough for us to have captured her in our gaze. Denis's lack of traditional establishing shots contributes to this effect – we can never firmly fix the characters in a stable location.[32] We are usually moving with them through the belly of the city, with few to no establishing shots to ground their action in clear time and space. For example, we deduce that we are in the 18th arrondissement of Paris because eventually we glimpse Sacre Coeur through the gaps between buildings, but we are never given a general montage of street signs or iconic landmarks to welcome us first to Paris and then to Montmartre. We are inside the spaces the characters inhabit and move with them, ceaselessly. Similarly, point-of-view shots from the driver's seat of a moving train punctuate *35 Shots of Rum*, *No Fear No Die* begins and ends with driving, the protagonist of *The Intruder* moves from the Jura to Switzerland, to Pusan and Tahiti, and shifts between reality and dreamscape, and *Friday Night* ends with Laure running through the streets unburdened and away from the scene of her one-night stand.

Perhaps the most powerful scene that illustrates the movement that characterises Denis's oeuvre is the final scene in *Beau travail*. Although the film's narrative is extremely elliptical, through a series of shots we are led to believe that Galoup, the French legionnaire who narrates the film, is committing suicide. We see him in his room, presumably back in France. Galoup has effectively sentenced Sentain, a younger officer who was the object of his jealousy and desire, to death and it seems that as a result he has also forfeited his own place in the legion's hierarchy and its controlled rhythms, which had sustained him. In the film's penultimate scene, he holds a gun to his undulating stomach and we see a close-up of his tattoo, which bears the legionnaire's motto, 'Serve the good cause and die', a vein throbbing in his muscular bicep. Yet instead of the frozen and static body of a dead legionnaire, in the final scene of the film we are transported to an anonymous discothèque. The wall is mirrored and Galoup stands alone, smoking a cigarette. The dance track 'Rhythm of the Night' comes on and Galoup dances in a bacchanalian burst of self-expression and apparent freedom.[33] Something from the most inaccessible depths of his character is revealed in this moment, while remaining inarticulable and unknowable. He exposes himself before the camera perhaps more so than in any moment that has preceded this scene. Yet in no way does this result in some kind of fixed understanding of who he is. In terms of both characterisation and narrative function, Galoup's ecstatic wordless declaration

of existence refuses any definitional closure. After a partial run of credits we return to the scene to see an even more rapturous dance in which Galoup is literally bouncing off the walls, rolling freely on the ground, and reminding us that his singularity will always be in excess of the film's structure. The credits cannot manage to contain him. Even when presumably dead, Denis's elusive characters deny us mastery. They keep moving, dancing and 'saying' instead of allowing themselves to be 'said'.[34]

The representation of the ethical thus becomes that which depends on 'the saying without the said' or a said that is constantly undone by the saying.[35] Like Nancy, who as discussed in the previous chapter argued for the interruption of myth (myths being narratives of totality, closure and a unified origin and destiny), the saying's undoing of the said similarly works against grand narratives. The saying functions structurally akin to the interruption of myth, emphasising process over completion. By contrast, myth aligns with the said, suggesting a fixed and totalising account of the world. From a feminist perspective, this seems particularly relevant in relation to the need for more fluid alternatives to representational politics – especially as feminism and queer theory seek common ground, challenges to the very locatability and representability of subjectivity remain necessary (as do alternative models, such as that offered by Denis). Unlike Nancy's, Levinas's interruption – saying – comes from a transcendent outside to the ontological, rather than occurring within it. It is the intrusion of the absolutely other, who cannot be known and to whom we are ethically responsible, that breaks up our pretensions to wholeness. The other's intrusion prevents us from getting too comfortable, too self-satisfied and self-sufficient, and from thinking that we know the story once and for all. The saying is a kind of literature (in Nancy's sense of the word) that prevents meaning from congealing and keeps us open to the surprise of an unexpected encounter.[36] To apply this imperative to film suggests that films should allow for interruptions that prevent narrative closure, that reach toward the impression or sensation of the other, rather than seeking to bring her into the full light of day.

I Can't Sleep starts on an interruption. Two men fly in a helicopter above Paris, laughing heartily and unable to stop. Their laughter is unexplained and we never see them again. Lest one think that this functions as a kind of establishing shot, instead of a clear view of Paris from the sky, we are faced with a misty veil between the chopper and what lies below, a network of motorways that gives us little sense of a stable location. In fact the camera cuts down to the motorway, comes up behind and then around beside the car of Daïga, who is driving into Paris for the first time (Figures 3.1–3.3). It is as though we are suddenly in a car ourselves, changing lanes and moving forward. From helicopter to car we get a sense of the motion of life, of characters arriving or passing through, of the inability of the world to stand still so we can grasp it.

Figure 3.1 The camera cuts down to the motorway . . .

Figure 3.2 . . . comes up behind . . .

This is hardly the zombified painting of which Levinas writes. Characters here come and go – they may pass by each other unknowingly, they may even eventually touch, but they are in no way present to each other in the sense of full disclosure.

This scene that starts the movie serves no obvious narrative function and is very typical of Denis's films. In interviews, Denis claims that many scenes in *I Can't Sleep* were cut because of length concerns – often those that would

Figure 3.3 . . . and then around beside Daïga's car.

have added to character development.[37] Instead, she chooses to preserve this brief but opaque moment in the final edit. We never see the helicopter men again. They are only two of the many strangers who appear and dissolve, interrupting any said by exposing us to yet another face. *I Can't Sleep* continually interrupts one narrative thread with another. The camera shuffles between characters, never lingering for too long on any one before a different story intrudes on the narrative. A scene in which Daïga and her landlord Ninon (Line Renaud) dance drunkenly to the song 'A Whiter Shade of Pale' is interrupted by Raphaël's bloody face as he leaves the hotel where we see Camille sitting impassively on the stairs. Our gaze then shifts to a (indefinitely later) post-coital moment between Camille and the doctor, a friend who – it is implied – may be in on the murders. No words are exchanged and we cut to a scene in front of the hotel, where the doctor bums a cigarette from Daïga, followed by a scene of Daïga selling her car. The narrative moves constantly from character to character; scenes seem to interrupt scenes, always guided by tenuous and fragile links.[38]

Denis loves to end on interruptions as much as to start on them – scenes that remain enigmatic and unexplained with respect to the entirety of the film. At the end of her first film, *Chocolat*, the protagonist – who like Denis was raised in Africa – sees three black African men loading cargo onto planes.[39] As the plane leaves Cameroon, the camera's gaze remains on these three anonymous men for several minutes, framing them in long shot as they smoke cigarettes, laugh and talk with one another in the rain. The protagonist flies out of our field of vision, but life continues away from her gaze, life that remains

Figure 3.4 The 'queen of the northern hemisphere', orgasmically riding her dog sled through the wintry forests of the Jura.

outside of the viewer's comprehension and is uncontainable within the diegesis of the film. *The Intruder* ends on one of many scenes that remain enigmatic, even after multiple viewings. The film's final moments show Béatrice Dalle, credited as the 'queen of the northern hemisphere', orgasmically riding her dog sled through the wintry forests of the Jura (Figure 3.4). The character's history is unknown throughout the film and she plays a very marginal role, yet her expression of *jouissance* is the film's final word. Denis always has a way of shifting our gaze to the periphery, to remind us of the limits of what we can see and understand or to interrupt any sense of a said with the saying, another body in movement, another untold story.

It would seem that from a Levinasian perspective, any attempt to represent the other would be in the realm of the said, and thus a betrayal of the ethical relation. I am suggesting that Denis shows us the possibility of a representation that maintains the saying over the said. This sayingness is a direct counter to the ideological fantasy offered by Hollywood cinema, of domination/knowledge through sight and the illusion of a total and complete world offered on screen to a relatively autonomous spectator subject.

The representational difficulties raised by Levinas also apply to his own philosophical writing. In *Otherwise than Being*, he makes his first attempt to write in such a way that the text enacts the failure of language to fully grasp or comprehend the ethical in a totality. He is constantly trying to unsay the said, to reveal the ethical that ruptures through the ontological, as the space of representation. Of his translation, translator Alphonso Lingis comments,

> The very sentences of this book – thematic, synchronic time, systematic language, constantly making the verb *to be* intervene in phrases that profess to express what is antecedent to the work of being – can only be a continual transposition, and dissimulation, of the prethematic alterity, the diachronic time of the contact with the other, the non-presence of one term to another, which these phrases mean to put forth. What they mean to translate into a text is always betrayed, in a translation always unfaithful to the pre-text.[40]

In the original French, Levinas attempts to write his text avoiding the copula altogether, the copula that falsely places our interrelatedness in the realm of being. The problems of translation and betrayal identified by Lingis apply to all of Levinas's work, which arguably *itself* betrays the ethical relation of which it speaks in its very attempt to bring it into the realm of the said, as a philosophical text.[41]

The attempt to remain within the saying is perhaps what gives Levinas's writing its literary quality. Megan Craig notes the very literary style with which Levinas explicates his own ideas, arguing that

> Levinas's style is integral to his ethics . . . To confront, rather than evade, the coincidence between trauma and ethics, between *how* Levinas writes and *what* he says, one might begin by focusing on Levinas's distinctive imagery, approaching his texts with an openness typically reserved for a poem or a story that contains enigmatic, recurring motifs which require careful and ongoing analysis.[42]

Craig suggests that the process of reading Levinas's texts, the work that they themselves demand of us as readers, is as much, if not more, a part of his ethics as is translating his writing into a more straightforward propositional content. His poetic and obscure writing style encourages an openness towards the unknown, a willingness to be surprised by what you do not know, and to let what faces you remain enigmatic, closer than before you started reading, but still infinitely otherworldly. I suggest that, similarly, other creative forms of expression, such as film, can aid us in cultivating an attitude of openness to alterity and of evoking wonder at the mystery of the others in our midst, a willingness to unlearn our entrenched ideas and to open up a space for 'knowing' the unknowability of the other. Craig's writing is incredibly helpful for thinking through what we might term a Levinasian poetics. She writes,

> Ethics requires an ongoing vigilance and attention to the specificity of particular faces. Reading Levinas's prose forces one to hold one's attention to particularity and acclimate to the absence of ultimate definitions.

> His texts are training grounds for hearing residual meanings and for reading in the absence of a definitive plot.[43]

Craig suggests here that we can mine Levinas's style itself for a model of what it might mean to encourage an ethical attitude in a viewer, reader or listener. She writes further, 'Levinas's writing is not simply centered on the serious ethics of response and responsibility. It is also enmeshed in the serious aesthetics of trying to show something unsayable.'[44] Elliptical plots, attention to faces, residual meanings and 'explanation without explanation', to quote Denis, are all crucial to her cinema and the demand it places on the viewer. Her films encourage an attention to detail – one never knows if a face will resurface or disappear completely, or if it will materialise in another film altogether. Her films require the kind of patience and openness that are also necessary for reading Levinas's philosophy, and in this way they point us towards his style itself as a model for film.

THE EROTICS OF AMBIGUITY

In his early writings, Levinas was particularly interested in sexual difference as the prime exemplar of radical alterity, opening up the ethical encounter to the metaphor of the erotic.[45] Many feminists have in fact found a productive point of intersection with Levinas in his early emphasis on sexual difference. While not wanting to completely distance myself from what may be useful in that notion, it is also problematic to *assume* difference based on an ontological category, such as sex, when the whole thrust of Levinasian ethics argues against such ontologically based understandings of otherness. On this point, Levinas's language is in tension with his own philosophy as he attempts to represent what is pre-thematic. Yet his discussion of the erotic as a space of relational ambiguity, when separated from a heterosexual matrix, is a useful place for thinking through the representational ethics I have been articulating. While Levinas maintained an ambivalence about the potential of the erotic as a means of access to, or way of thinking about, the ethical relation, his suggestion that the caress of two lovers might give us an intimation or a privileged example of the face-to-face is useful for thinking about how certain films can offer similar opportunities for something *like* the ethical, if not the ethical itself, to take place.[46] He writes in *Totality and Infinity* that

> The possibility of the Other appearing as an object of a need while retaining his alterity, or again, the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse – this position with regard to the interlocutor which at the same time reaches him and

> goes beyond him, this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is *the equivocal* par excellence.[47]

Like the erotic, a film that inclines towards the other in its narrative language would try to remain equivocal. It would 'explain without explaining', touch without grasping, be an exposure in darkness, and a revelation that simultaneously preserves the other's mystery. This exposure that is also a withdrawal is precisely what Denis's films bring into play and is also a common motif in Nancy's writing.[48] Films that maintain otherness, for example by refusing to psychologise their characters and not relying on causal logic for narrative continuity, provide training grounds of sorts that teach us to look for the difference, to take on not-knowing as an assumed viewing position, and to expect the encounter to affect us, precisely because we are faced with what we do not have power over. Levinas writes of the erotic,

> [Intersubjectivity] is brought about by eros, where in the proximity of another the distance is wholly maintained, a distance whose pathos is made up of this proximity and this duality of beings. What is presented as the failure of communication in love in fact constitutes the positive character of the relationship; this absence of the other is precisely his presence qua other.[49]

Here Levinas explicitly draws our attention to the positive value of failure, prefiguring Butler's advocacy of images that fail. This positive failure opens up a space for a rereading of *I Can't Sleep*. Take for example Martine Beugnet's comment on the film: 'The impossibility of communication lies at the very heart of the film. The characters speak little, and often don't understand each other's language. Dialogue proper (questions and answers, characters exchanging information) and shots/counter-shots are non-existent, and the incessant ringing of the telephone is never answered.'[50] Yet this failure of communication, when read alongside Levinas's description of the erotic, takes on more positive connotations. The film, which very much foregrounds the disappearance of traditional ties and connections in the modern cosmopolitan city, at the same time reveals the ephemeral and often overlooked links between us.

Camille's drag performance brings many of these themes into play. He performs to a song by Jean-Louis Murat, entitled 'Le lien défait' – the undone link or bond. Denis says of the song that it

> describes the theme of this film. The lyrics say, 'The link is cut, there's no more connection.' I thought that this was the film's central theme

> because a society and a city work best when the links are tight. For me, life is a story of connections – without them society will self-destruct.[51]

As we have seen, the film is populated with connections in unexpected moments and places. Rather than being simply a film about modern alienation and social malaise (which undoubtedly is part of the story), *I Can't Sleep* encourages us to keep a wakeful eye on the unexpected links that join people on the margins of the social mainstream (although these links are not necessarily between or based on subjectivities). The failure of communication can be read positively as that which prevents us from colonising the other through our gaze and from assuming knowledge of what is presented to us on screen. Failure is thus itself ambiguous – it is confusing, and even scary, while also exposing the unknown that propels us towards the other and incites our desire for her.

In the drag scene this ambiguity is explicitly evoked. Camille, whose name itself is androgynous (as the detective says, 'Camille? That's a girl's name'), neither dons a wig nor pads his chest. His body remains undoubtedly masculine in physique if feminine in adornment and carriage. He wears a tight strapless velvet gown with long gloves and a hair band. His hair is short, he is barefoot, he wears lipstick and nail polish, but his masculine chest and back are visible, his nipples revealed as the dress inches down during his performance. His presentation is subtle, devoid of dramatic gesture and movement. It is completely free of any camp overtones and the audience seems as much the object of the gaze as does Camille. Shots of the audience watching place them in a more fixed position than do the shots of Camille, who seems to control rather than simply absorb the gaze. But the ambiguity of Camille goes beyond his gender, and additionally beyond his *métissage*, to the parallels established with other characters.

Throughout the film parallels between Daïga and Camille are suggested that undermine any easy assessments of good and bad characters. Both are pursued at various points by the police – Daïga is harassed and threatened upon her arrival into Paris because she is a woman and a foreigner. The police keep her under surveillance as they will later Camille, their gaze sutured to ours via a long tracking shot that ends with his arrest. Daïga is, like Camille, an object of sexual desire. She is also prone to violence. In one scene, where her impenetrable detachment is momentarily shattered, she violently rear-ends the car of the French theatre director whose amorous promises of an acting career brought her to France only to be left unfulfilled. In this scene her powerlessness erupts in a spontaneous act of rage. Following the car wreck, it is suggested that Daïga has stolen the vehicle she drove from Lithuania. At the film's end we see her driving another car out of the city, raising the spectre of theft once again. Like Camille, Daïga has no qualms about taking from others.

In fact, in what is the most explicit parallel between the two characters, Daïga is shown stealing Camille's money from his hotel room after he has been taken into custody. She stuffs her pants and shirt full of the money stolen from the dead victims, dirtying her hands with Camille's violent crimes and directly benefiting from them. While this may suggest a lack of morality, I argue instead that this ambiguity is part of the ethics of Denis's cinema. Everyone is given a full and complex humanity and good and evil are less relevant as terms for easy categorisation. In the tabloids, Paulin was referred to as the 'monster of Montmartre'. Denis chooses a more difficult path in this film – Camille is neither pure monster nor a pure victim of, for example, homophobia or racism. Ambiguity ensures that we do not 'other' in such a way that it is 'not us' on the screen, but rather that we see the links that connect our various forms of violence and disregard. Rather than the easy comforts of disidentification, the viewer must wrestle with the messy complexity that she encounters on screen. Denis argues for the ambiguity of shadow when she says that

> Cinema has this incredible way of making us feel what psychology can't explain . . . You can read 15 books about serial killers, but that has nothing to do with the way you may look at people in the subway, or your own brother, or your mother, that mysterious element that makes you sense that what unites us, as human beings, is our opacity for each other. Cinema is made with light and shadow, but the beauty of light is that it delimits shadow. And that element of shadow is the part of cinema I'd like to continue exploring.[52]

This ambiguity proves to work in tandem with a Levinasian notion of absolute alterity – categories fail and the difficult reality of the other remains. Cultivating an acceptance of difficulty, ambiguity and messiness has much larger cultural implications in a historical moment when we too often desire clarity and easy explanations, often as antidotes to the rapid changes, culturally, technologically and otherwise, that are part of the contemporary climate. Films like Denis's offer us a different modality through which to approach the world, one that sees generative potential in the murkiness that lingers when we do justice to the singularity of the other.

The links of ambiguity are also present in other aspects of the film. Théo, rather than being a simple foil to Camille (the 'good' son/brother), is surly and difficult.[53] He hears the woman in the apartment next door crying in what sounds like pain and the suggestion of domestic abuse is present throughout the film. Théo goes next door to intervene and at another point enters the apartment and sees handcuffs on the bed. It is unclear if the violence is part of his neighbours' erotic role-playing or if the woman is in a dangerous situation. Denis never gives us an answer. Yet neither can we read Théo as the functional

and gentle neighbour next door. Théo and his wife Mona are constantly fighting, even coming to blows at one point in the film. She leaves several times, refusing to indulge his plan to move to Martinique, and absconds with their child while Théo is playing in a concert. Just as Camille and Raphaël are in a violent relationship, there is a violence that permeates the links between Théo and his wife. The film disrupts every attempt at a simplistic interpretation – even the 'good brother' who is concerned about domestic violence occupies a place on the continuum of domestic dysfunction.

Another ambiguous continuum is created around the theme of women and ageing. Camille's victims are elderly women and the film makes clear that they are vulnerable because society has abandoned them. The film's first victim is dead for seven days before she is discovered, highlighting the isolation of the elderly. The cleaning lady who discovers her body laments, 'No one cares about these old people.' When Ninon tells her mother to go to bed, her mother speaks the film's titular line. This very minor exchange similarly suggests that society wants its elderly out of sight and out of mind. While Ninon and Daïga drink and dance, her mother is expected to be ready to retire, to stay out of the life that keeps on going around her, even if she wants to keep her eyes open. The victim who survives and is able to describe the perpetrators does so because a delivery boy arrived immediately after she did. This moment of contact was crucial to her survival. Another victim happily welcomes Raphaël into her apartment, offering him coffee, clearly starved for conversation and asking for assistance with a small chore in her apartment because she has no one else. In this way, Denis peppers her film with references to the neglect and loneliness of the elderly. The film becomes as much about the way in which society deserts its elderly as it is about the sensationalist act of killing them. If anything, these women are the film's broken link. Society is outraged about their deaths, but it itself abandons them as they age and lose their presumed aesthetic and reproductive value (as Ninon says, '[Men] still move me you know. It's the way they look at me that's changed'). Denis here asks us to encounter *ourselves* in the film – not only is a neat categorisation of Camille as a monster rendered difficult, but our own complicity with systems of ageism as they intersect with gender is brought face-to-face with the viewer. Here again, Denis pushes beyond Levinas to reveal the ethical implications of ambiguity. There is no reductive portrayal of elderly women as *tout court* sweet and loving victims (although those who fall into the hands of Camille are undoubtedly victims). Daïga's great-aunt Mina is a miser and a (loveable) busybody, who immediately tries to dump the responsibility of Daïga onto other members of the Lithuanian diaspora, despite her ample resources and private apartment. Mina too is allowed both light and shadow.

FEMINISM AND ALTERITY AESTHETICS

Nikolaj Lübecker has argued that *I Can't Sleep* represents a challenge to the Hegelian tradition in French thought that sees subjectivity as the product of the struggle for recognition, particularly in the film's de-dramatisation of violence and the absence of typical intersubjective relations.[54] While Lübecker is mainly concerned with the link between truth and violence that this valorises, his reading of the film as challenging a recognition-based model of subjectivity lays a foundation for my argument here. By turning to Levinas we see what *I Can't Sleep* posits in lieu of a Hegelian recognition-based model. An aesthetic of alterity means that opacity takes precedence over recognition.

Arguing similarly against a recognition- or identity-based approach, Diane Perpich outlines a feminist politics based in Levinas's account of the other. This would be a feminist *alterity* politics. Both identity politics and a politics of recognition rely on a notion of the subject that posits her in relation to an unmarked subject or, in the Levinasian lexicon, 'the Same'. Identity politics typically defines significant categories of identity relative to the dominant subject group (usually, heterosexual middle-class white males). Similarly a politics of recognition demands recognition as *like* the other, again, typically a dominant subject group conferring recognition on marginalised or under-represented peoples. This latter approach may in fact encourage a downplaying of difference, as difference could be seen as a basis for conflict rather than connection. Both of these strategies fall into the logic of relativising difference, ultimately diminishing the singularity of the other, be it through defining oneself as different in comparison to the other or by demanding recognition as *like* the other. Instead thinking of difference, after Levinas, as absolute alterity may be a more fruitful option for feminist politics. Although my interest here is in representation and ethics, rather than politics, Perpich offers some compelling reasons why feminism should take Levinas seriously.[55] She writes, 'Levinas is surely closest to feminism when he is exposing the ways in which conceptions of the unencumbered, autonomous subject fail to do justice to the ethical significance of human interdependence and to the moral necessity (rather than the mere desirability) of social cooperation in political as well as economic and social contexts.'[56] A deconstructed and relational subject, whose singularity is uncategorisable (after Levinas), counters a politics based on equality or shared universal subjecthood (as in de Beauvoir, for example), which may not be the most productive goal for feminism.

Perpich is also critical of a politics based on recognition or identity because they rely on systems of representation, which are always open to co-optation. Once in the realm of the said or the ontological, we have little control over the representations we put forth into culture. It is the unrepresentability of the face that in fact allows singularity to emerge. Perpich argues that a feminist

politics of alterity conceives of group recognition in terms of the singularity of each member. She writes, 'Levinas's refusal to represent the other . . . far from causing or necessitating a chauvinistic indifference to particular differences . . . supports a conception of ethics and politics that demands institutional recognition of (or, as appropriate, elimination of) group differences *in the name of* the singularity of each human being.'[57] To modify Perpich, as I have shown above, Denis's filmic argument suggests that there *can* be a representational practice of alterity – one not based on identity or recognition – that respects the very impossibility of capturing the other.

Applying Perpich's claims to the realm of film suggests that singularity must prevail over identity. Denis's films show us that this means that identity categories such as race or gender will never provide a sure footing through which to situate her characters. This is of course counter to the dominant narrative film tradition, which tends to rely on stereotypes or use markers of identity as a shorthand through which we can easily understand character and dialogue. By contrast, Camille's maleness and blackness offer no automatic explanatory framework for his behaviour, nor do they serve to guide viewer expectations. Similarly, Daïga's gender and her vulnerability as linguistic and cultural outsider provide no clues as to how she will behave. She never smiles ingratiatingly or coquettishly, is generally unapologetic for her communicative deficiencies, and doesn't seem particularly grateful for the hospitality of others. She drinks tenants' open bottles of wine while cleaning their rooms and smokes incessantly, never asking her host's permission. The film *35 Shots of Rum* provides a similar example of Denis's refusal to turn identity categories into easy modes of (stereotypical) characterisation. In this more recent film, almost all of the central characters are black, but the story does not turn their racial 'difference' into its focus.[58] The film reveals moments of their lives and relationships, granting them the right to an ordinary existence, just as the overwhelming majority of films about whites do not highlight their whiteness thematically. They are singular and each must be approached without preconceptions about what their race, gender or age means according to dominant cultural constructions. Although Denis's films undoubtedly are concerned with issues of sexual difference and the legacy of colonialism, they expose singularities rather than seek out common identities.

In making her argument for a feminist Levinas, Perpich draws on Hannah Arendt's concepts of *who*ness and *what*ness. Any list of representable *what*ness – or the features or characteristics that describe a person – cannot get at their singular *who*ness. Perpich argues, 'Singularity – *who* one is – is always excessive with respect to *any* characterization of what one is or of the groups with which one identifies or is identified.'[59] Further,

> But nor can my singularity be understood without recourse to socially, politically, and culturally salient facets of my experience. Singularity is

> not meant to convey some abstract otherness or merely formal alterity, it is the concreteness of my life, my lived bodily experience.[60]

By way of example, I am not only or just a woman; that fact does not conclusively define or account for who I am. However, (in Perpich's argument) you could not characterise me without including my femaleness or you would miss key aspects of what it means to be me. Similarly, Daïga's femaleness is undeniably part of what she is (her beauty is often remarked upon in the film and cited as a reason she will do all right in Paris), but it never encapsulates or explains *who* she is. As I argue throughout this book, there is always a tension between the historically located categories through which our bodies are read or understood and their inability to account for who one is. Not only are these forms of identity insufficient, but they can also place very real limits on future possibilities. In her careful registering and dismantling of our identity-based assumptions, Denis points the way towards an aesthetic of alterity, as Perpich suggests an alterity politics for feminism.

As Perpich herself points out, Levinas's philosophy in many ways prohibits the representation of the other. This may make an argument for a feminist representational strategy based on absolute alterity seem conceptually problematic. How can the other who cannot be known, whose reality lies outside my frame of vision, be ethically represented? This unrepresentability of the face motivates Judith Butler's discussion of Levinas in *Precarious Life*. Butler argues, 'For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.'[61] Rather than eschewing representation altogether, we should be aware of the necessary failure of our representations to capture the other in her singularity and consciously construct representations that do not seek to hide their own limits.[62] While Denis does not employ more avant-garde strategies of alienation, for example revealing failure by radically divorcing soundtrack from image or creating a self-reflexive voice-over, she shows the limits of representation by her 'failure' to psychologise her characters, her elliptical narrative structures, and her refusal to neatly and tidily define her characters according to available stereotypes and conventions. She shows us the generosity of images that 'fail'.

CONCLUSION

In a way that counters dominant Hollywood tendencies, Denis refuses any categorisation of her characters into good and evil. In this space of ambiguity, we are encouraged to be attentive to difference and to let the unknown remain

so. Denis reveals that ambiguity is the representational correlate of an ethics of absolute alterity. I have argued that Levinasian ethics help us to better understand the complex way in which her films are experienced as ethical. This adds to the more apparent application of Nancy's thinking to her work. But her films also show us the places in Levinas's writing where we can begin to approach a feminist cinematic ethics more broadly. These include a Levinasian poetics – drawn from Levinas's difficult writing style itself; his concept of the saying – as that which undoes the said; and, finally, the ambiguity of the erotic – as that which both exposes and obscures. A willingness to engage with complexity and relinquish mastery, a cinema of interruptions and movement, singularity before identity, and the aforementioned practice of ambiguity are all filmic correlates of these concepts. Levinas, when put into conversation with Denis (and guided by Perpich and Butler), opens up new possibilities for thinking through an ethical feminist representational practice – or, for short, an aesthetic of alterity. An emphasis on radical alterity as what relates us and renders us subjects is enacted in films such as *I Can't Sleep*. The ethics are neither in the plot nor in the choices the characters make, but rather in how their alterity is offered to the spectator. This exposure creates an encounter that alters the viewer, should she accept the film's invitation. Through our desire for their unknown (to return to the epigraph), we are revealed as in relation with them.

This encounter with the other may be present both on screen and in the relation between spectator and film. While the act of viewing is not ethical in an orthodox Levinasian sense, it stands in proximity to the ethical proper, encouraging us to look differently at the others in our midst. If the truth of the ethical cannot be disclosed properly speaking or represented in the sense of giving reason or proof, then the cinema can function as a possible space in which the encounter with alterity could be (re)enacted or intimated. Denis's films stage multiple encounters with alterity, which, like the erotic, bring the other closer to me, while her interiority remains mysterious and unknowable at the film's end. The way in which the viewer both can and cannot express what she has *seen* when she leaves the cinema, the very bodily – while simultaneously intangible – ordeal through which the viewer goes as she sits in her seat, bears traces of the ethical encounter.

The affective and visceral component of the face-to-face is another aspect of Levinasian ethics that is of interest from a feminist perspective. The following chapter turns to the body and bodily existence in Levinas and Nancy, putting their thought into contact with the bodies that move through Denis's work.

NOTES

1. Leslie Camhi, 'A French Director with a Taste for the Gritty and Unglamorous', *New York Times*, 5 October 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/05/movies/a-french-director-with-a-taste-for-the-gritty-and-unglamorous.html> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
2. Paulin died of AIDS in prison before he was convicted.
3. Her impetus was in part Jean Baudrillard's writing on the coverage of the crimes, in which he linked the killer's disappearance from the media upon discovery of his identity with the interstitial identity categories that he occupied. For a problematisation of Baudrillard's argument through detailed archival press research see Deborah S. Reisinger, 'Murder and Banality in the Contemporary Fait Divers', *South Central Review* 17.4 (Winter 2000): 84–99. The Baudrillard interview can be found in 'Cool Killers', *Autrement* 104 (February 1989): 143–5.
4. See, for example, Camhi, 'A French Director with a Taste for the Gritty and Unglamorous', and Tod Lippy, 'Writing and Directing *I Can't Sleep*: A Talk with Claire Denis', *Scenario: The Magazine of Screenwriting Art* 32.2–3 (Summer 1997): 84–7/185–7.
5. By capturing the other, I mean seeming to fully account for or make knowable the other through psychologisation or extensive dialogue; or, put differently, the feeling that the viewer knows the character enough to judge or understand her actions.
6. He treats the artwork most explicitly in some of his earlier writings. The 1948 essay 'Reality and its Shadow' and a small portion of *Existence and Existents* (1947) are devoted to discussing the artwork. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp. 1–14, and *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001). See Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) for a nuanced discussion of his position on the work of art in both texts.
7. Most notable in this vein are Sam Girgus, *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Alterity, and the Feminine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and *Clint Eastwood's America* (Cambridge, Oxford and Boston: Polity, 2013); Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2006); Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); and an issue of the journal *Film-Philosophy* devoted to Levinas, 11.2 (2007).
8. Of course there are also major differences in how the two articulate subjectivity and difference, particularly with respect to the role that transcendence plays in their thought.
9. Including *Chocolat* (1988) and *No Fear No Die* (1990). Additionally, Denis tends to be taken up through this postcolonial lens in the scholarly literature. See, in relation to *I Can't Sleep*, Martine Beugnet's reading of the film in terms of the postcolonial in *Claire Denis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005) and Katherine Assals, 'The Silent, Black Centre in the Early Features of Claire Denis', *Cineaction* 71 (Winter 2007): 2–8.
10. *Cahiers du cinéma* interview; cited in Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 82.
11. For a discussion of the film's treatment of the serial killer in relation to more classical styles of narration, and in particular Hannibal Lecter, see Todd McGowan, 'Resisting the Lure of Ultimate Enjoyment: Claire Denis' *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994)', *Kinoeye* 3.7 (9 June 2003), <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/07/mcgowan07.php> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
12. Another way of stating this would be to contrast it with the use of the alienation effect. Denis doesn't deny us the ability to know the other by distancing us from them in an

intellectual way. Rather, she brings her characters closer to us. We 'touch' them in a sense, but they remain stubbornly ungraspable despite this. Our exposure to them does not result in knowledge of who they are, but we are affectively altered by them because we are brought closer to them and not alienated from them.

13. For example, the baker's wife comments to Boni that he isn't very talkative in *Nénette and Boni*, and Ingrid Caven's character comments on the conversationally limited nature of Descas and his daughter in *35 Shots of Rum*.
14. Sébastien Lifshitz, *Claire Denis*, *la vagabonde*. Fémis, 1995. 45 minutes.
15. See also Janet Bergstrom's essay on opacity in Denis's films: Janet Bergstrom, 'Opacity in the Films of Claire Denis', in Tyler Edward Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele (eds), *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 69–102.
16. For a reading of the film in terms of the perils of conformity see Martine Beugnet, 'Negotiating Conformity: Tales of Ordinary Evil', in Elizabeth Ezra and Sue Harris (eds), *France in Focus: Film and National Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 195–206.
17. Technically, since the woman survives this is not a 'murder' scene.
18. I discuss the representation of the victims further on in the chapter. Paulin himself never gave any explanation for his crimes. For more information on the case and its coverage in the French media, see the excellent article by Reisinger, 'Murder and Banality in the Contemporary Fait Divers'.
19. It may also be useful here to substitute the word 'singularity' for 'absolute difference', as they both gesture towards the ungraspability of the other. If this seems like an attempt on my part to force a connection between Levinas and Nancy, in fact Diane Perpich makes this linguistic modification herself in her book on Levinas, reading the Levinasian notion of alterity as another word for singularity. See Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
20. Levinas is writing much more closely to events of World War II, himself surviving the war in a POW camp and beginning his writing on ethics while imprisoned. Prior to the war, Levinas had been responsible for an early French translation of Husserl, and had also written on Heidegger. The latter's controversial connection to National Socialism and the disputed links between some of his concepts and the Nazi ideology must also be read as a backdrop to Levinas's critique and shift to thinking the other outside of phenomenology.
21. By first philosophy I mean that ethics has a metaphysical priority over ontology, that the ethical comes before and constantly disrupts the ontological. Ethics is the diachronic call to responsibility by virtue of which I become a subject. I further explicate these ideas in what follows.
22. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 177.
23. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 45.
24. Translators of Levinas have capitalised 'other' to distinguish the other of ethics (*Autrui*) from the term *autre*. I leave the other in lower case to maintain consistency with the other thinkers I draw on in my study, as part of my project is to draw attention to points of overlap in the philosophers' work that I take up here.
25. Temporality is a key part of Levinas's description of the encounter with the other. Ethics is always diachronic, happening outside of quantitative or linear time. At different moments in his writing the other is linked both to an anticipated future that gives meaning to individual existence and to an immemorial past, through the language of the trace.
26. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 85.

27. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 85–6.
28. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 43.
29. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 143.
30. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Language and Proximity', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp. 109–26; p. 115.
31. The emphasis on saying carries with it a valorisation of the auditory, which is often paired up in Levinas with the denigration of vision. Apropos speech Levinas writes, 'To put speech at the origin of truth is to abandon the thesis that disclosure, which implies the solitude of vision, is the first work of truth' (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 99). Furthermore, 'Speech cuts across vision. In knowledge or vision the object seen can indeed determine an act, but it is an act that in some way appropriates the "seen" to itself, integrates it into a world by endowing it with a signification, and, in the last analysis, constitutes it' (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 195). Here Levinas draws attention to the mastery and possession that often goes along with a valorisation of seeing as knowing. Ethics challenges the link between sight and truth as it emphasises the auditory – the saying over the said. As we have seen, although Denis is a highly cinematic filmmaker, who aligns herself with image over dialogue, seeing is not knowing, nor does it provide access to a coherent and containable truth in her work. As I elaborate in the following chapter, despite her eschewal of dialogue, Denis places a great degree of importance on soundtrack – music and otherwise – in creating a sensuous *audio*-visual encounter.
32. This is the case with much of Denis's work, as I also discuss in relation to *Nénette and Boni* in Chapter 2. For more on strategies of dislocation in the film see Corrine Oster, 'Decoding Unreadable Spaces: Claire Denis' *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994)', *Kinoeye* 3.7 (9 June 2003), <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/07/oster07.php> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
33. For other readings of this scene see Susan Hayward, 'Claire Denis' Films and the Post-colonial Body – with special reference to *Beau travail* (1999)', *Studies in French Cinema* 1.3 (2001): 159–65; Elena del Río, 'Body Transformations in the Films of Claire Denis: From Ritual to Play', *Studies in French Cinema* 3.3 (2003): 185–97.
34. I return to the role of dance in relation to affect in the next chapter.
35. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 143.
36. For a Deleuze-inflected reading of myth in *Beau travail* see Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Beugnet reads the film in terms of becoming/lines of flight as a resistance to myth's fixity (here the myth of the French Foreign Legion). This suggests more connections between Levinas, Nancy and Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom argue against the fixity of myth and for an interruptive and dynamic practice. On myth in the film see also Martine Beugnet and Jane Sillars, '*Beau travail*: Time, Space and Myths of Identity', *Studies in French Cinema* 1.3 (2001): 166–73.
37. For the most detailed discussion of the scriptwriting process and the filming and editing as they relate to it see Lippy, 'Writing and Directing *I Can't Sleep*'.
38. This style is often compared to Robert Altman's use of multiple parallel or interlocking narrative strains in films like *Short Cuts* (1993).
39. The objects are African art, presumably bought by visiting Europeans to bring back to France.
40. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. xliii.
41. Again, Levinas tries to address this by moving towards more difficult and poetic language in his later work. In the French he attempts to elide the copula, removing 'being' from his account of the ethical. In many ways the representational failures of his project, as I argue with respect to Denis's films, are their successes as attempts at ethics.

42. Megan Craig, *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 8.
43. Ibid. p. 135.
44. Ibid. p. 135. This sentiment is echoed in Dominic Michael Rainsford's essay on Levinas and the Russian director Tarkovsky, when he argues that 'Levinas conveys philosophical arguments artistically, in the sense that he goes on reformulating his major concepts, over and over again, finding new words every time, in a process that seems unending: an evasion (as much as this is possible) of fixity and thematisation and (as he puts it above) "the inevitable paralysis of manifestation"'; Dominic Michael Rainsford, 'Tarkovsky and Levinas: Cuts, Mirrors, Triangulations', *Film-Philosophy* 7.2 (2007): 122–43; 125.
45. See Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) for a critique of Levinas's failure to fully see through the implications of sexual difference as radical alterity. Irigaray critiques Levinas for turning the feminine into a stop on the male ethical subject's journey towards enlightenment and for fixing the meaning of fecundity in the encounter to the generation of a male child.
46. See also Lisa Downing's related but different take on Levinas and erotics in the films of Denis and Catherine Breillat. Downing argues for a 'looking with love' that is connected to the caress of the other. Lisa Downing, 'Re-viewing the Sexual Relation: Levinas and Film', *Film-Philosophy* 7.2 (2007): 49–65.
47. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 255.
48. See the following chapter for a larger discussion of this motif in Nancy, and also Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Leeds: Maney, 2011).
49. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 98.
50. Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, p. 91.
51. Mark A. Reid, 'Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations', *Jump Cut* 40 (March 1996): 67–72.
52. Camhi, 'A French Director with a Taste for the Gritty and Unglamorous'.
53. Alex Descas argued for his character to be played this way, apparently himself seeing the value of an ambiguous representation.
54. Nikolaj Lübecker, 'The De-dramatization of Violence in Claire Denis's *I Can't Sleep*', *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 30.2 (2007): 17–32.
55. Of course, the ethical and political are not so easily distinguished.
56. Diane Perpich, 'Levinas, Feminism, and Identity Politics', in Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (eds), *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), pp. 21–40; p. 38.
57. Ibid. p. 43.
58. As do arguably most films by white directors about black people.
59. Perpich, 'Levinas, Feminism, and Identity Politics', p. 33.
60. Ibid. p. 33.
61. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 144.
62. In a similar vein, see Libby Saxon's writing on the ban on representing images in Levinas and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, 'Fragile Faces: Levinas and Lanzmann', *Film-Philosophy* 7.2 (2007): 1–14.

CHAPTER 4

Troubling the Body: *Trouble Every Day*, Dance and the Non-Mythic Body

The previous chapters have worked towards developing a cinematic ethics of sense and aesthetic of alterity, through Nancy and Levinas respectively. In this chapter, I focus on the body as it relates to the ethical and argue that Denis, Nancy and Levinas make important contributions to rethinking the body in terms that challenge dominant Western narratives. I also examine the ways in which Denis's films reveal the notion of an autonomous bodily identity to be a Western construction that has relied on the colonisation or dehumanisation of certain bodies to maintain its privileged status.[1]

To do this I choose a difficult film: *Trouble Every Day* is a sophisticated engagement with the horror genre that addresses themes of bodily violence, vulnerability and non-immunity. Yet, because of its difficulty, the film is worth a sustained look. I have argued that Denis's cinema reveals the insufficiency of dominant film language when it comes to fostering ethical modes of encounter. Here I turn specifically to genre, to examine how *Trouble Every Day* probes the limitations of generic modes in cultivating new practices of looking. Genre films tend to rely on conventions for making meaning that often foreclose the kinds of open ethical encounters that I have foregrounded throughout this project. By touching on but also moving away from the dominant tropes and formal and narrative conventions of the horror film, *Trouble* asks us to look differently, while drawing attention to our customary patterns of viewing. The film deals with a disease that compels those afflicted to deface and dismember their sexual partners. Rather than condoning or refusing to moralise regarding sexual violence, I read the film as highlighting a condition of bodily vulnerability that the Western subject has historically disavowed. In *Trouble*, Denis highlights our current moment as one of crisis for the Western subject – perhaps one that she is especially attuned to given her own biography.[2] This film in particular presents a challenge to the myth of the self-contained monadic modern body and therefore asks us to start from a place where we

recognise our shared dependency.[3] However, as I argue in the final section of this chapter, where I turn to the motif of dance in Denis's work, the flip side of this exposure to violence and outrage is the joy and beauty of our shared embodiment. The account of embodiment that I develop here shares concerns with postcolonial theory, disability studies and queer theory. Levinas, Nancy and Denis provide resources for thinking the ethical as embodied in a way that does not privilege gender, ability or other categories of identity.

Denis's career evinces a sustained engagement with filming the body. This is perhaps most evident in her striking use of movement and dance, but is also apparent in her sensuous camerawork and soundscapes, which call affectively and sensorially on the body of the spectator. In the scholarly literature, Denis is often discussed in terms of her haptic or sensual engagement with the body, be it through Deleuzian, phenomenological or other frameworks.[4] Well-noted features of her style include her capturing of bodies in motion, the unique approach to filming the body that she has developed (along with director of photography Agnès Godard), and the ways in which she uses sounds and images to evoke a variety of sensory experiences.

Ethics, as I formulate it in this project, entails remaining attentive and unresolved with respect to the meaning of our co-existence with all of the messiness that it entails. The body as the space of existence and thus of *with*ness remains central to this ethic. The bodily relationship between film and viewer can evoke an ethical sensibility by reminding us of our mutual exposure. It does so through offering an encounter with the image that acts on us in a visceral way, which denies us a sense of autonomy and mastery over the image. Watching a film is an encounter in which we are exposed to the images before us, which alter us as the characters we see alter each other. Nancy reads the relation between viewer and image as one of exposure, rather than representation, where exposure is a kind of interruptive or non-appropriative contact between spectator and image. We are in touch with the film, as a body that *compears*, or co-appears, with us as viewers.[5] This exposure is exaggerated in horror, where the viewer is open to extreme feelings of disgust, fear and shock. But in every case viewing film is a potential encounter with the unknown and a susceptibility to information, sound and image. Denis's cinema in particular harnesses this facet of the cinematic experience to cultivate a mode of encounter that is bodily and ethical, or bodily *because* it is ethical.

Trouble Every Day asks us to think the body outside of representational approaches, such as those offered by semiotics or psychoanalysis – not to search for meaning outside of the body as it *is*. This does not mean that Denis negates the historical specificity of embodiment, but rather she reveals how the body works in excess of any referential system of meaning. It refuses knowledge at the same time as it asserts its materially and historically located existence. In contrast to many genre films that draw out audience emotions through

well-known conventions, Denis's alternative practice refuses her spectators the comforts of encountering the bodies on screen through pre-determined generic and cinematic codes. This means that as viewers we are open to a higher level of both risk and wonder, as each film is a singular and unforeseen encounter.

The effect of this vulnerability in viewing is to challenge the illusion of the spectator as unified subject, controlling or at least ultimately achieving cognitive mastery over the action she witnesses on screen. This relates to a major theme in this chapter, which is Denis's critique of the myth of bodily immunity as a privileged and perhaps dying myth of Western modernity. I read the dismantling of identity as ethical according to the sense in which it relates to myth's interruption, as advocated in Nancy's writing. When we suspend the grand narratives that myth offers us, we reveal our finitude and non-identity, and our existence as shared beyond the borders of group identities.[6] The impetus to resist fixed meaning, totality and closure in favour of openness, flux and fragmentation is evident in Denis's work both at the level of the film's narrative structure and at the level of the filming of the body itself. I play with this idea of interrupting myth by examining the body itself as a site of heavy cultural and philosophical mythologisation. Denis, Levinas and Nancy all provide deconstructive tools in this regard. Here again, Denis pushes us further than the philosophers in revealing the particularly Western privilege that is entailed in the myth of the body as a site of self-propriety and immunity. She does this in part by filming the body in fragments and, in *Trouble* specifically, by pushing to its limit the condition of human susceptibility that the film takes as its theme. The body troubles identity – it reveals that the self is never continuous and is a space of opening outward onto the world rather than inner containment and mastery. On screen, the body's proximity can interrupt the potentially totalising narrative tendency of a film. Its expressive capacity always exceeds the fixity of identity-based labels that would tell us what to make of this or that body in advance, for example 'female' or 'male', 'young' or 'disabled'. When cinema foregrounds rather than disavows our fragmented and susceptible bodily condition it works against myth, and troubles the certainties of identity in the name of which so many ethical *and* political injustices are committed.

IMMUNITY AND EXPOSURE: GENRE, NARRATIVE AND SPECTATOR

In one of the final shots of *Trouble Every Day* we see an almost completely white image of a translucent shower curtain hanging in a bathroom. The vibrant red of one trickle of blood provides the only contrast to the pale background as

it runs down the curtain. The blood running across the pure white image makes visible the intrusion of the body into and on film. The red line runs through an otherwise pure landscape – symbolising the inability of the central character, Shane Brown (Vincent Gallo), to fully cleanse the space, his marriage and himself of the murderous desires that afflict him. It acts as a trace of what cannot be eradicated of Brown's gruesome crime. He and June Brown (Tricia Vessey) are in Paris for their honeymoon. Unbeknownst to June, her new husband suffers from a mysterious disease, contracted in Guyana through experimental research with plant life. This illness turns sexual desire into destruction – arousal produces uncontrollable urges to bite and tear flesh and to sexualise blood as a fluid of play. Washing off the evidence of his recent kill, Shane leaves a trace of his act in the blood running down the shower curtain. The blood contradicts the illusion of immunity – of the space to contamination, of the characters to each other, and of the body to disease and desire.

Shane has also come to Paris in search of answers – the film chronicles his search for Dr Léo Sémeneau (Alex Descas), the head researcher in Guyana and a colleague of Shane's from his previous life in Paris. Sémeneau's wife has contracted the same disease (Coré, played by Béatrice Dalle). It is unclear how the disease was transmitted – it is said that Shane disobeyed Léo's injunction against testing on humans. Reduced to inmate status in her own home, Coré seems to be at a much more advanced stage of illness. Léo locks her in the bedroom when he leaves for the day. Two neighbourhood boys are drawn to the seductive and mysterious woman trapped in the home: one of them will become her final victim. The film follows Coré during several of her 'escapes' as she hunts for prey on the outskirts of town, turning excitable truckers into mutilated corpses. Sémeneau, with Sisyphusian endurance, repeatedly tracks his wife down and brings her home, burying her victims and lovingly washing the gore from her face and shoulders (Figure 4.1). Notably, the only central character that is *not* white, Sémeneau has been exiled from the medical research community because of his controversial studies, which have introduced a foreign element that erodes the boundaries between animal and human, body and mind, desire and destruction. That is to say, the disease challenges the notion of the Western subject as bounded, rational and 'civilised'. This is despite the film's suggestion that the greed for knowledge of the white American doctor is the *true* source of human contamination.

Trouble Every Day is Denis's sole engagement with horror. It 'troubles' the generic limits of horror, specifically as it relates to thinking about embodiment and subjectivity. As one of the three 'body genres' that Linda Williams identifies in her seminal essay, horror offers a useful framework for exploring Denis's continued preoccupations with the body, particularly in relation to the spectator-film relation.[7] The horror film displays bodies in fear (particularly female bodies) and calls on the body of the spectator to share in the anxiety,

Figure 4.1 Sémeneau lovingly washing the gore from Coré's body.

tension and terror presented on screen.[8] *Trouble Every Day* pushes the definition of a body genre to its limit, removing the psychological dimensions of horror to examine the pleasure and pain of non-identity that is embodiment. The film experiments with the threat of bodily invasion (or *intrusion*) so characteristic of the genre, which has focused on deep-seated fears associated with the loss of self or the breakdown of identity. Several people are reported to have fainted at the film's premiere at Cannes.[9] This anecdote illustrates the bodily ways in which film can affect its spectators, and these visceral reactions are perhaps most extremely evoked by horror. Many other audience members booed or walked out of the same screening.[10] The film was criticised as being too much and not enough at the same time; its gory excesses did not include the heightened tension and moments of shock that characterise much horror.[11] Devoid of the typical horror soundtrack that encourages extreme emotional responses, the film uses sensual slow music by Tindersticks throughout, refusing sensationalism but evoking sensation. Some scholars, such as Tim Palmer, have taken up the film in terms of its representation of abject sexuality, placing it alongside other contemporary French films such as those of Bruno Dumont or Gaspar Noé to argue for a trend in tackling darker aspects of embodiment.[12] With respect to Denis's work specifically, the film represents a limit case in her sustained exploration of the body, as many including Nancy have suggested.

By exploring the bounds of horror's bodily preoccupations, Denis comments on the limitations of genre which, like elements of the classic Hollywood style, tend to both shape and meet audience expectations, rather than ask the audience to look more closely or to see *otherwise* than the ways in which they

have been trained by conventional film language.[13] By using a loose generic framework, Denis is able to draw attention to our habitual ways of making meaning, while challenging their efficacy, much as she locates subjects within particular identities and histories only to expose their limitations in understanding the singularity of each. While certain films may cause us to suffer sympathetically and cathartically, often according to well-worn generic conventions, a counter cinema such as Denis's offers an opportunity for a less controlled encounter with the bodies exposed on screen. This is precisely because our generic expectations cannot provide a mental buffer of sorts, mitigating in advance our vulnerability to an encounter with what is unknown.

Contrary to many contemporary horror films (for example, *Scream*, 1996; *Cabin in the Woods*, 2011), *Trouble Every Day* never ironises its subject matter or pastiches the genre. It draws on various subgenres of horror including Gothic tropes such as the madwoman in the attic (Coré), Dracula and Frankenstein, with its focus on mad scientists and experiments with human life, and also more gory subgenres like the slasher film. It presents a complex mix of typically Denisian slow pacing and minimalist imagery with incredibly difficult scenes of gruesome sex, in which bodies are torn apart, chewed up and penetrated through newly created orifices. The film's scenes of bodily destruction align it with a slasher/splatter film tradition, although here the slash is a bite and the splatter more a trickle or a smear, almost as if Denis had taken the genre's scenes of slaughter, slowing down their frantic editing and asking the spectator to really *look* at the body in its ecstasy and agony. The body is here not only that which is torn apart and tortured, but also the instrument of torture itself: rather than a knife, chainsaw or any other implement it is the hands and mouth that perform the bloody deed. It evokes the vampire's deadly kiss, but also gestures towards the cannibals and beasts that populate the genre. The body of the perpetrator is heavily implicated in the killing, itself infected with foreignness, as the mouth moves from an instrument of pleasure to an instrument of pain. This is a notable divergence from the typical slasher film killer, where the violence of killing usually acts as a substitute for an active sex drive.[14] Here sex and violence are manifestly linked. In all of these ways, Denis pushes the genre to the limits of its engagement with the bodily. Because she does not sensationalise bodies, she is able to explore the body in ways that typically lie beyond the reach of horror.

Meditating solely on the body, the film refuses any element of character psychology/*psycho*pathology, looking only to the physical as the source of malady and also keeping with Denis's non-psychological approach to her subjects. Psychoanalytic frameworks have been particularly enduring within scholarly writing on the horror genre. For example, key texts on horror such as Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* and Carol Clover's *Men, Women,*

and Chainsaws focus on feminine abjection or the psychic drives and anxieties that are manifested on screen. These readings often address a larger cultural unconscious as it expresses its deepest (psychoanalytically interpreted) fears through the symptom of the horror film. Whereas Denis's 'predators' refuse psychologisation, by contrast in what is perhaps the ur-slasher film, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the murderer effectively demands a psychoanalytic reading of his actions – a man who has introjected his overbearing mother.[15] As Carol Clover points out in her groundbreaking work on horror, the location of evil in a childhood incident or trauma is a convention of the genre, present in many less-regarded films than *Psycho*.[16] The Hitchcock film is obviously referenced in the shower curtain image described above (albeit in the most paired-down and minimalist fashion). Notably, the shower scene in *Trouble* is centred not on a female victim but rather on the murderer cleansing his body of the woman's blood, again gently nudging the history the film participates in and implicating the body of the killer to a much greater extent than is typical. Hitchcock is also cited in the character of June Brown – who despite her non-blonde status visually quotes the archetypal Hitchcock woman, with her pixie haircut and well-tailored suits. Yet Denis turns away from any psychosexual or Oedipal explanation towards the threat of bodily contagion, dialling down the heavy suspense of Hitchcock to a slow-burning malaise. As Lisa Downing comments, '*Trouble Every Day* undercuts the necessity for such theories as Freudian psychoanalysis, by deconstructing the supposed underlying meanings of the generic conventions, which are relocated at the surface of the filmic narrative' – in other words, the film foregrounds the sexuality of its monsters.[17] In *Trouble* the characters' illness is resolutely not tied to some developmental trauma, innate sociopathy or insanity. The violence is one that literally infects the body. Coré is so reduced to her body that there is no possibility of psychoanalysis. Diminished to pre-linguistic desires and despairs, she groans and grunts, but almost never speaks. When she finally does, she simply says she wants to die.[18] Even the perpetrators are victims in the sense that they have been contaminated and suffer from their urges, and the *actual* victims give themselves over to their killers in a fury of desire that only belatedly turns to horror and non-consent. Just as Denis's film sidesteps the psychoanalytic conventions of the genre, I offer a non-psychoanalytic reading of the body and spectatorship to suggest alternatives to more entrenched approaches to thinking through the viewer/film relation. The film touches on the limits of the genre, while opening beyond its conventional borders, echoing the narrative's play with exposure and containment at the level of genre itself.

The film plays with themes of immunity and contagion as they relate to body and environment. The critique of the sovereign and bounded body present in the film is also found in Nancy and Levinas. But Denis relates

this post-phenomenological body to a history of colonialism, and racial and class privilege not present in the accounts of the two philosophers. The post-phenomenological account of the body developed here overlaps with critical disability studies and queer theory because these modes of thought have also attempted to rethink discourses of bodily integrity. In *A Body Worth Defending*, Ed Cohen examines the emergence of biomedical discourses of immunity in the late nineteenth century, which came to replace models focused on the body's contiguity with the environment. He asks how concepts taken from legal and political/military language came to dominate the contemporary biomedical field, constructing the body as a sovereign territory to be defended from outside forces. Importantly, in relation to *Trouble Every Day*'s colonial echoes, there are notable links between discourses of immunity or biological defence and the colonial project past and future. By locating the story in Paris, the film suggests the threat of the colonial other insidiously returning to the centre. As Susan Sontag notes in 'AIDS and Its Metaphors',

> Part of the centuries-old conception of Europe as a privileged cultural entity is that it is a place which is colonized by lethal diseases coming from elsewhere. Europe is assumed to be by rights free of disease. (And Europeans have been astoundingly callous about the far more devastating extent to which they – as invaders, as colonists – have introduced their lethal diseases to the exotic, 'primitive' world: think of the ravages of smallpox, influenza and cholera on the aboriginal populations of the Americas and Australia.)[19]

Yet rather than reaffirming the need to shore up boundaries both national and bodily, the film works towards revealing that these borders were always already illusory.

The body in *Trouble Every Day* traverses many sanitised spaces from laboratories to aeroplanes to hotel washrooms. The upmarket hotel in which the Browns stay is ceaselessly cleaned by a legion of maids, one of whom will become Shane's victim. In his searches, Shane visits labs whose cleanliness, blinding whiteness and bright lights suggest the desire for knowledge, reason and the full revelation of the body's secrets. Ironically, the disease itself refuses visibility. This is brought into relief in a scene where Shane parodies a monster-figure for June at Notre Dame (Figure 4.2).

Shane's play at a recognisable monstrosity hides the imperceptible sickness he carries within. The laboratories evoke the dream of the body as a containable object, fully penetrable by the scientific gaze. Here, brains are objects to cut into pieces and classify, organic life is catalogued and refrigerated, and mysterious fluids are agitated by the rhythmic click of automated mixers. The darker side of Sémeneau's experimental research and the deadly flows of

Figure 4.2 Shane parodies a monster-figure for June at Notre Dame.

desire it unleashes are cleansed from these clinical spaces. In her reading of the film through Foucauldian ethics, Downing rightly points out that science has produced the illness in question. However, Western science has also been unwilling to name or even examine the sickness, complicating the claim that the disease is discursively brought into being. By focusing on the discursive production of subjects, we may overlook the ways in which Denis uses the materiality of the body to undermine medical and scientific discourses, discourses that within the colonial context produce the Western body as rational and bounded and Western science as a narrative of progress. Because of the establishment's refusal to acknowledge its own vulnerability, Léo's home itself has become a lab of sorts – exiled from mainstream medical research, he now keeps his samples and medicines in the basement. A living 'specimen' for a disease without name, Coré is carefully locked in her room every morning, her sick body quarantined in the upper floor of the house. This containment is visually emphasised by an image of Coré peering through the bars of her cell-like room. Yet these efforts at containment are unsuccessful: Coré escapes regularly from her cell to find more victims. Her condition eludes medical classification, refusing containment in the realm of knowledge as well. In the case of the lab, the aeroplane and the hotel, these spaces of immunity are also spaces of economic and racial privilege which here become sites of crisis for the Western subject. Despite the attempts at securing, cleaning and standardising these spaces, they are penetrated by alterity.

An early scene in *Trouble Every Day* takes place in the anonymity of an aeroplane as Shane and June fly to Paris. The grid of Denver's lights appears below

them, orderly and rational ('It's so geometrical, it's like a computer chip,' remarks June). The plane suggests a modern, safe and clean environment, reinforced by June's soft white sweater with matching skirt, her tiny pearl earrings, the pristine glasses of champagne the couple hold, and the civilised tenderness of their interaction. The sound and framing work together to give a sense of the plane as a contained environment, but yet a space within which bodies are exposed to each other, sharing the recycled air and trapped in the area of the cabin. The first shot from outside the plane shows June and Shane peering out through the aeroplane window. The sounds of the aeroplane flying through the air and the two faces peeking through the small window suggest that the aeroplane is both protected from the outside and spatially contained – the quintessential controlled environment. This sense of containment is reinforced through slightly high angle shots within the cabin that emphasise the cramped spaces and the constant humming sound that accompanies flight. An image of sleeping passengers all in a row – businessmen in suits, some of whom wear eye-masks – further highlights the bodily proximity of the space. Shane studies the smooth, pale forearm of his wife and begins to kiss/bite it as he makes his way towards the elbow. Later, suffering from his unseen affliction, Shane retreats to the tiny aeroplane washroom to shake off his impulses. Visions intrude into the confined space as he sees his young wife, naked and peaceful, covered in a generous smearing of blood. This image remains striking given June's childlike innocence throughout the film. Dressed in modest and tailored clothing, often in lighter colours with gloves to protect her hands, her skin is smooth and pale. Yet her husband's fantasies intrude upon her purity, covering her snow-white body with (possibly infected) blood. Here in the confined and regulated space of the aeroplane, desire and otherness intrude into an otherwise mundane scene, dramatically exposing the fallacy of immunity.

The attempts at sanitisation and containment extend from environmental to bodily spaces in the film. One of the more personalising gestures made by the chambermaid early in the film is to massage and wash her feet in the basement sink after a day's work. We also see several scenes of the maid and other staff preparing their bodies to work upstairs, changing and pulling up their hair – transitioning from individuals to standardised staff members in the building's basement. The trickle of blood on the shower curtain belongs to a scene in which Shane showers to cleanse himself of the traces of his recent victim. Earlier in the film, a scene of Shane masturbating in the hotel bed is immediately followed by one of June running a bath, their juxtaposition highlighting the tensions in the film between purity and danger, immunity and infection. June, sweet and innocent, is shown in a slow pan as she soaks in the tub, after her husband, a victim of his sadistic sexual desires, writhes in pleasure and agony outside the door. He comes quietly into the bathroom and looks hungrily at his wife below him. Startling June, he asks, 'Are you

frightened?' We also see several scenes of Léo washing the human flesh and blood off Coré after her attacks, further highlighting the futility of sanitising the body from what is foreign within. The non-immunity extends beyond the two diseased characters to permeate most of the relations in the film. Victims are lured by desire to their perpetrators; a lab technician feels drawn to Shane's plight, and June is propelled by the mystery of her husband. By emphasising the undeniable desire that flows between bodies, the film stresses the fact that susceptibility to one another is our general condition. It draws attention to moments of cleaning both body and environment, reinforcing the quest for immunity while simultaneously raising the spectre of invasion.

This exploration of bodily risk and openness shares many of the major concerns of Nancy's bodily ontology. Nancy's account of the body is perhaps best articulated in his work *Corpus*, but his shorter essay 'L'Intrus' highlights the themes of non-immunity and bodily risk. In 'L'Intrus' Nancy takes up his experiences of a heart transplant and of his battle with cancer to meditate on the ways in which the body is never a proper space of identity. Instead, the body is always imbued, inside and out, with what is foreign. Receiving the heart of another intensively illustrates the openness and dependence of the body on what is outside of it. Autoimmune failures gesture towards the body's own inability to recognise a properly bounded self. The body's condition is one of ongoing intrusion – with both the promise and the risk that that entails. This porous condition is a consequence of the fact that we are always *with* – we are born into a world where our bodies are already intimately connected to and open onto others. One could say the body is *altered* by alterity, where alteration is an ongoing process rather than a state. From womb to world the body takes in air, bacteria, new organs, plants, animals, minerals and bodily fluids from what is outside of itself. The body is an opening and extension, rather than a boundary and enclosure. Connecting this to ethics requires an awareness of the body as an ongoing process of sharing out amongst bodies – alive, inanimate, on film or in writing. An ethical encounter is one in which we are aware of our own non-coherence and reminded of our non-mastery with respect to what we see before us.

The lack of mastery suggested by Nancy's use of the concept of exposure is meant to indicate an opening that does not return to the self. Levinas similarly uses the language of exposure to highlight the bodily non-immunity of the ethical relation, or, put differently, the way in which the relation of ethical responsibility always already undoes the propriety of the body. The relation to the other is vulnerability and exposure to the other.[20] In fact, Levinas often employs metaphors of maternity to suggest that ethical responsibility involves bearing the other within (in quite a bodily sense).[21] Counter to a phenomenological model, then, the body is radically not my own. It is from the outset a

space infected by alterity. This bodily dimension takes on a valence of persecution, pain and suffering in Levinas's writing. Responsibility to the other is a kind of suffering *because* of the other. Greek mythology tells the story of the toxic blood of the centaur Nessus, rubbed into a tunic and given to Heracles unknowingly by his wife Deianeira. Deianeira thinks the blood is a potion that will renew Heracles' love for her, but instead it causes his skin to burn incessantly. The compromised hero begs for his body to be burned on a pyre to stop the unbearable pain. Levinas draws on this story to describe ethical responsibility: 'The irremissible guilt with regard to the neighbor is like a Nessus tunic my skin would be.'[22] This unceasing inflamed torture of the skin is Levinas's metaphor for the trauma and painful tactility of ethical subjectivity. Here exposure sheds its potentially erotic valence to become pure pain.

Yet pain and pleasure are two intensities that reflect the reality of bodily exposure. The characterisation of responsibility in terms of suffering is a very *real* indicator of the power and impact that others have on our daily lives, mentally, bodily and emotionally. As Judith Butler writes, we are 'undone' by others, and this can be an extremely painful reality.[23] Our mutual exposure is a consequence of our co-existence. Levinas neglects the origin of the Nessus tunic in the myth, as a gift given in desperate passion by a lover who fears losing her beloved and is clueless that her actions will cause him pain. Translating into film, Denis reminds us that the erotic and painful dimensions of exposure are not so easily separated. This is because we affectively experience both desire and repulsion at various sensory levels throughout the film.

Trouble Every Day succeeds in playing along the continuum between the pleasurable and the painful dimensions of bodily togetherness. It reveals the body as a space of penetration, of attraction and sensation, and of receptivity to illness and to violence as much as to excitement and affection. The film's opening credits are interlaced with images of an anonymous couple who kiss passionately, their faces obscured by darkness. The image seduces its viewers with these unknown characters who disappear after the credits, a lost thread never to be taken up again. This scene foregrounds the seduction of images and the desire for understanding and identification so intrinsic to film spectatorship (we want to know who they are and how they fit into the narrative). Its erotic pull makes the viewer complicit, through desire, with the scenes of violence that she may later suffer through, extending the pleasure and pain of exposure to the viewer/film relation. The hungry kisses of the unknown pair and our desire to comprehend the image tie into the themes of lust and devouring that the film takes to their extremes. Rather than stabilising the spectator through mechanisms of identification, as does classical cinema, the film highlights the viewer's vulnerability to the film as itself a risky encounter. The scene also illustrates the film's own 'exposure', where again exposure is thought of as an interruptive contact: the image touches on a fleeting moment

only to withdraw from it, creating an opening within the film that does not go back to the film's larger world.

The themes of immunity and risk gesture beyond the immediate narrative of the film – the disease bears the trace of the French colonial past in its Guyanese origins, typical of Denis's concern with France's postcolonial history. Judith Mayne notes the connections between the film's plot and discourses about AIDS, and argues,

> I believe that *Trouble Every Day* subtly but forcefully undermines many of the myths about AIDS. The deadly desire has virtually nothing to do with homosexuality in the film. And the curiosity and greed of the white, heterosexual man (Shane) is at the origin of the affliction.[24]

These references reiterate that the film's interest in bodily vulnerability carries with it historical dimensions, along with a critique of race- and sexuality-based epidemiological discourses. Rather than otherness originating from a source that the Western body *already* recognises as other, that is to say from the non-white body, the disease in *Trouble* challenges the assumption of who the other is. Both Shane and Coré are attractive middle-class white people, and Shane, at least, possesses a significant amount of mobility. It is in fact their seeming 'likeness' that makes their prey so easily deceived. Denis troubles the Western body through her choice of perpetrators and victims, revealing newly vulnerable Western subjects in her alienated anonymous landscapes.

BODY MYTHS

In revealing the non-immunity of the subject, *Trouble* works to undermine (Western) myths about the body more generally by foregrounding the body in parts and filming it as an indistinct proximal surface rather than a unified and distant object. Throughout her work, Denis develops a new visual language for representing the body.[25] As discussed in previous chapters, Denis's interruption of cinematic mythology parallels Nancy's advocacy of myth's interruption – or the privileging of openness and fragmentation over the fixity of a singular meaning or explanatory framework. Working against the ideological construction of the subject or a people, interruption offers in place of myth an awareness of singularity, relationality, ephemerality and finitude.[26] Writing on Nancy, Marie-Eve Morin comments, 'myth has the form of subjectivity (defined by Hegel as that which can include within itself its own contradictions, that is, as "remainderless totality.").'[27] The dismantling of this mythic subjectivity necessitates a related troubling of dominant approaches to filming the body.

Denis offers an alternative to the dominant film language that perpetuates certain myths about the body and its relation to subjectivity. Typically, in classical narrative film the spatial relationships on screen are configured according to a particular construction of the spectator's body. As Noël Burch argues, 'The dominance of the Western mode of filmic representation was determined neither by ideological factors alone nor by sheer economic opportunism. Rather, it corresponds broadly to the mode of constitution of the Subject in our culture, and it developed into an ideological vehicle of unprecedented power.'[28] The spectator's body, then, supposedly echoed in institutionalised film language, is in fact an ideological rather than a natural body. It is the mythic-subject body, spatially unified, and both separated from and in possession of what it sees. By contrast, Nancy's description of the body in *Corpus* argues for a non-mythic body:

> The body-place isn't full or empty, since it doesn't have an outside or an inside, any more than it has parts, a totality, functions, or finality. It's acephalic and aphallic in every sense, as it were. Yet it is a skin, variously folded, refolded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated, exogastrulated, orificed, evasive, invaded, stretched, relaxed, excited, distressed, tied, untied. In these and thousands of other ways, the body *makes room* for existence (no 'a priori forms of intuition' here, no 'table of categories': the transcendental resides in an indefinite modification and spacious modulation of skin).[29]

Here we see both a rejection of idealist accounts of mind/body ('no "a priori forms of intuition" here' etc.) and also the refusal to think the body teleologically or in terms of a normative completeness. *Trouble Every Day* foregrounds this refusal of meaning in favour of sensation and affect – or, in other words, it highlights 'the indefinite modification of skin' and the openness of the body over its bounded permanence. Just as the body on screen is susceptible to and infected by alterity, so *Trouble* offers a relation of exposure between the bodies of film and viewer. The film is a body opening onto the viewer and, although not all films operationalise this potential, it can participate in cultivating an ethical sensibility by reminding us of our mutual bodily vulnerability and of the limits of control.[30]

This notion of bodily vulnerability is highlighted in Levinas's affective account of ethical subjectivity. Levinas works against the myth of the skin as boundary between self and other, emphasising the embodiedness of ethics, while disinvesting the skin of any connotations of propriety or own-ness. He writes that the ethical subject must be 'capable . . . of giving his skin'.[31] The closeness of skin works against totality or myth:

> [Proximity] is *more determinate* than the relations that are ordered into a totality. Signifyingness, the one-for-the-other, exposedness of self to another, it is immediacy in caresses and in the contact of saying. It is the immediacy of a skin and a face, a skin which is always a modification of a face, a face that is weighted down with a skin.[32]

The use of his concept of 'saying', which I elucidated in the previous chapter, is that which refuses the 'said', or a fixed representation, in favour of movement and non-finality. Here the saying is linked to proximity. Applied to cinema, proximity as skin/materiality of the filmed image (also *pellicule* in French), like the saying, interrupts narrative progression in favour of an exposure to the non-identitarian body. Denis privileges the proximity of the body over traditional forms of filmic storytelling. Her camera tends to explore the body as a tactile landscape rather than seek a clear visual picture that would locate a figure in a stable ground. Thinking about the ways in which the immediacy of a body breaks up totality within the world of film brings to mind Laura Mulvey's well-noted observation that the spectacle of the female body tends to work in tension with a film's narrative development.[33] Mulvey is of course offering a psychoanalytic reading of classical Hollywood cinema. Because Denis offers a counter cinema, the psychoanalytic reading becomes less operative.[34] In fact, her filming of the *male* body is perhaps most exemplary in its challenge to classical cinema, and thus demands frameworks of analysis other than those offered by psychoanalysis or semiotics. Yet Mulvey's point that the body breaks up the linear narrative impulse is still very relevant to my analysis of the function of the body in Denis's oeuvre, which tends to focus on the corporeal in ways that most definitively privilege exposure over narrative development. The tension between linear progression and spectacle in film is perhaps most pronounced in the musical genre, and while not musicals in any traditional sense of the word, Denis's films are marked by the spectacle of bodies dancing. Dancing bodies present alterities and let the bodily encounter between viewer and characters take priority over narrative progression and meaning. Although *Trouble Every Day* (perhaps appropriately) does not itself contain any dance scenes, its focus on the body shares in the larger Denisian impulse to eschew classical narrative in favour of an affectively charged encounter with the body on film.

Thinking through this aesthetic of exposure as an encounter with alterity opens up a way to address the bodily impact that films can have on us. For Levinas, the skin can never contain subjectivity. Because I *am* as the result of the pre-ontological ethical encounter with the other, my body in some sense contains the other. The face-to-face 'signifies in the form of one-penetrated-by-the-other'.[35] The other is in me, is in my skin. This is why Levinas's account of ethical subjectivity makes repeated reference to the skin as not quite

fitting, or as being too tight for the subject. The skin must make room for both myself *and* the other-in-me. He writes in *Otherwise than Being*, 'In responsibility as one assigned or elected from the outside . . . the subject is accused in its skin, too tight for its skin.'[36] The skin of both film and the spectator bear the trace of encounter.[37] Film offers opportunities for encountering that may alter us and which may scare or haunt us, causing chills that run along and even below the skin's surface. June's otherwise unblemished skin bears two marks in *Trouble Every Day*: first, a bite mark on the shoulder, and second, a cut on her lip. The first is given to her in pleasure and the second is the result of a struggle. Both are the traces of a relation and highlight the body's fragile exposure. For Levinas, our skin becomes a space of shared ethical relation, one that, like the traces on June's lip and shoulder, bears the risk and pleasure of our co-existence.

While both Nancy and Levinas speak abstractly of the body as 'indefinite modification and spacious modulation of skin' or as shared with the other for whom I am responsible, Denis reminds us that the skin is also always raced – that is, it is shaped by a relational world in which skin is read, experienced and felt in the context of complex histories of geopolitical encounters. This harks back to the discussion of the short film *Vers Nancy* in Chapter 2. In that film, which takes up many of the themes of Nancy's philosophy, it is the medium of film that is best equipped to generate an affective or pre-cognitive understanding of the ways in which the skin, young or old, black or white, is not in practice an uninscribed surface through which to theorise ethical subjectification. When Descas enters the train carriage, his black skin registers a difference that affectively underscores the conversation about foreignness between Nancy and Samardzija, herself a foreigner. His intrusion generates unspoken questions about citizenship, colonialism, assimilation and race that concretise the abstraction of the dialogue into the encounters of real bodies. Bringing an understanding of the historicity of the skin to the text enriches our readings of both Levinas and Nancy and insists on the materiality of the body of which they write.

The body in *Trouble* interrupts the Western 'mythology' around embodiment, specifically the myth of the body as a sovereign territory protected and contained by the skin. Denis inscribes these problematics both on the film as a kind of skin (challenging the false barrier between image and audience) and on the skin of her character.[38] The skin may seem the most obvious boundary of embodied selfhood, but it is a porous container. For Denis, Levinas and Nancy the skin refuses to be the demarcation of a discrete identity. The marks that June bears on her skin become a kind of non-linguistic bodily writing. This notion of the skin as bearing a pre-cognitive significance is captured in Nancy's concept of '*expeausition*', his highlighting of skin (*peau*) and exposure in the concept of *exposition*.[39] *Expeausition* deconstructs the notion of a split or hierarchy between mind and body.[40] Rather than exposition referring to

Figure 4.3 Coré paints the wall with the blood of her victim.

a 'comprehensive description and explanation' of an idea or theory, *ex-peausition* collapses the distinction between the sensible and intelligible, rethinking exposition as simply the opening of a skin onto the world, without a return to self.[41] The word itself suggests a movement outside – *ex*-position. This is not exposition in the sense of filling in the details or making legible. To *have* a meaning is to be open to co-optation by myth; rather, the body *is* meaning for Nancy. Similarly, the body in *Trouble Every Day* troubles any attempt at a reading based in semiotics or symbolic structures. This is perhaps most graphically illustrated in the scene where Coré paints the wall with the blood of her victim – an abstract image that insists on the materiality of the body as it both carries particular histories of colonial and other forms of violence and also exceeds discursive containment (Figure 4.3).

To further strip the body of myth, *Trouble Every Day* rejects any larger narratives that would give the body a meaning or purpose outside of itself. Religious discourses that valorise a less carnal body are absent from the film; Notre Dame merely provides a photogenic backdrop for the American honeymooners. Scientists endlessly study the brain, but are silent in the face of Coré and Shane's illness. Though the two perpetrators ravage and probe deep into the body of their victims and search their blood for satisfaction, the body refuses to be possessed or to yield up any deeper truth. In this respect, the body in *Trouble Every Day* rejects language or any deeper signification. In doing so it reveals that the body itself contains no inherent reason or madness, good or evil, and that these attributes are produced through historically located encounters rather than being the essential properties of particular bodies.

Denis highlights the body as a material force – its sensation, attraction and revulsion towards and with other bodies. In one scene Shane enters his hotel room after the chambermaid has left. She has lingered in his suite after cleaning, lying on the made-up bed and smoking a cigarette before she leaves. Shane approaches the depression her body has left on the mattress and smells the area where her sex would have lingered. This scene prefigures Shane's later oral dismemberment of the woman's clitoris and labia in the basement. The only truth of the body here is its material vulnerability, its susceptibility to other bodies. In place of a referential meaning we have the circulation of bodies as they draw each other across distances, resisting language but proliferating sensation, smell, taste and distinctive motion.

Just as the disease afflicting Coré and Shane seems to undo any simple distinction between mind and body (it is a physical condition that infects the brain and affects one's desires), so Nancy's concept of sense (*sens*) collapses any meaningful distinction between the sensible and intelligible. As discussed in the second chapter, *sens* connotes direction, suggesting a movement or process. It also indicates the bodily sensorium – touching, smelling, hearing, tasting and so on – but not a sensorium that would be integrated into a unified (mythic) body. In his book on Nancy, Ian James elaborates, 'Prior to any traditional distinction between mind and body, ideality and materiality, and prior to cognition per se, there is the passage of sense as a bodily event, as an opening up of meaningful spaces and a meaningful world in which such distinctions as mind/body, ideality/materiality can be made or be thinkable as such.'[42] In all of its valences, the body as sense suggests the *process* of meaning – meaning as that which is never fixed, never possessed, but that is constantly kept open to the questioning that is so key to an ethics. *Trouble Every Day*, in its rejection of discourses of science and religion as they would give a meaning to the body outside of the body as it is, open and vulnerable, giving and taking, shares in this impulse to expose the body outside of representational or explanatory systems. This shift away from a representational body, or the body as having meaning, and towards the body as sense, or as being meaning, would necessitate a new way of approaching the body in front of the camera's lens. This is one perspective through which we can contextualise the innovative ways in which Denis films the body.

We have seen how *Trouble Every Day* 'troubles' the body, both the bodies on screen and that of the viewer herself. The film refuses the body's discursive containment, undoes the notion of the skin as a container for subjectivity, and rejects a hierarchical and unified notion of the body. Because Denis does not take bodily identity as self-evident, the camera moves away from shooting the body as a totality or an object of visual mastery. *Trouble Every Day* exposes the body in fragments, yet in a way that highlights the tactility and singularity of the body rather than offering it as a fetishised object. Perhaps the most

Figure 4.4 The maid's neck.

Figure 4.5 The camera obsessively captures glimpses of parts, often backs and hands, ears and feet (*The Intruder*).

memorable instances of this are the repeated shots of the maid's neck, which we follow down the hall of the hotel throughout the film (Figure 4.4). This focus on fragments is characteristic of Denis and Godard's work together, which obsessively captures glimpses of parts, often backs and hands, ears and feet, in an almost impressionistic mode (for example, an ear in *The Intruder*, Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.6 A brief glimpse of Louis's naked backside, atypically framed, as he walks through the forest.

These fragments are often framed in unconventional ways, using choker close-ups and employing shakier handheld camerawork that offers a fleeting impression. Godard employs the camera as a body in movement with other bodies, better capturing the tactile and sensory experience of sharing space with another body. For instance, an early sequence in the film *The Intruder* shows the lead character, Louis, at peace in the natural environment that surrounds his home in the Jura Mountains. We are given a brief glimpse of his naked backside, atypically framed, as he walks through the forest (Figure 4.6). He is depicted as at one with his surroundings, roaming nude, lounging with his dogs under trees, and swimming in the lake. Something happens to his heart as he is swimming – once ashore we see a close-up of his hand grasping the earth (Figure 4.7). Several frames later we see another shot of his hand covering the traitorous organ (Figure 4.8). This series of shots demonstrates the suggestive power of the part without using dialogue or more codified visual language (for example, the facial close-up as an indicator of character psychology). They create a sensory connection that privileges the affective content of the scene over the narrative (although, yes, we can infer that a heart attack has occurred and that Louis is very comfortable in his environment, both elements of narrative and characterisation). These fragmented glimpses ask us to encounter the body outside of any preconceived systems of meaning that would tell us in advance what to make of this or that body (for example, based on gender or age).[43] They make the body strange and extraordinary, as if to expose its singularity in *this* combination of glances, in *this* particular light,

Figure 4.7 Something happens to his heart as he is swimming – once ashore we see a close-up of his hand grasping the earth.

Figure 4.8 Several frames later we see another shot of his hand covering the traitorous organ.

doing *this* specific activity. The body in fragments foregrounds an ephemeral yet sensual encounter with singularity.

Nancy suggests this collection of parts in his discussion of the body as *partes extra partes*. Nancy theorises the body as a corpus rather than *corps*, a collection of parts rather than a unified organism. It is without head or tail (acephalic and

aphallic), its sexed-ness exceeds binary sex and it lacks an organising principle, *telos* or intelligible purpose. In many ways, Nancy offers an account of the body sympathetic to a queer theoretical perspective – sexuality and sex are plural not only between bodies but also *within* bodies; becoming and fragmentation replace a notion of fixed and unified identity. This queer ontological perspective is also evident in his essay 'The "There Is" of the Sexual Relation'.[44] In this text, Nancy further emphasises the ways in which *sense* privileges acts over sexed and sexual identities and highlights the proliferation of desires that exists before and beyond any notion of sexual difference. Likewise, queer theory has challenged identitarian notions of sex or sexuality in favour of contingently produced and negotiated desires and acts. Nancy writes,

> Sex is not just its own difference but also, each time, the properly infinite process of its own differentiation. I am each time a certain degree of composition and differentiation between *man* and *woman*, *homosexual man* and *heterosexual man*, *homosexual woman* and *heterosexual woman* and according to the various combinations that open up to each other as well as close themselves off from each other, that touch and penetrate each other.[45]

As has been demonstrated in previous chapters, Denis's films themselves are *corpi* – working against closure and fixity at the level of narrative and character – but here we see how this refusal of totality (or myth) reaches down to the level of the depiction of the body itself.[46] In contrast to psychoanalytic or semiotic frameworks, approaching the body through Nancy allows us to see how the body can act in excess of signifiers such as sexual difference and beyond the level of narrative. The body's performative potential as it appears on screen is not fully encapsulated by our categorisations and representational systems. Just as the ethics elaborated in this project refuse closure, so the body as the space from which ethics *is* refuses a static unity and thus troubles rather than reifies notions of identity.

Additionally, in contrast to a psychoanalytic model, rather than the part standing in fetishistically for something else, the body in fragments simply is the condition of the body. This is key to Denis's fragmentary glimpses, which offer an alternative filmic representation to classical narrative cinema. These fragments are what make each body *this* specific body, or, put differently, what make each body singular in and across time. This fragmented account of the body has no negative connotations for Nancy – just as intrusion carries both risk and potentiality, the fragmented body is simply our condition, one to be celebrated as it gestures towards our singularity and adaptability, our relationality and connectedness. When we shift our understanding of the ethical to a respect for singularity, a refusal to fix the other into any one framework,

and an attentiveness to our ever-shifting relationality, we open ourselves up to thinking beyond the categories that discriminate or label based on race, gender or other visual markers of identity, such as ability. This makes it difficult to determine in advance what any one person can or will do, or what kind of relations might occur between specific bodies. This capacity to think beyond the confines of identity categories and to cultivate a respect for difference puts this approach in agreement with a feminist perspective. Denis challenges us not only to think the body differently, but to see it differently, disturbing dominant and codified ways of looking. The body's singularity as it is exposed *each time*, in each unique part, privileges a non-identitarian being, altered in her encounter with her environment and with other bodies.

This post-phenomenological reading of the body dovetails with major currents in critical disability studies, which has long challenged dominant constructions of the body as whole, sovereign and bounded. Before moving on to examine another facet of how Denis films the body I'd like to take a moment to think about the ways in which adding voices from disability studies enriches our discussion of cinematic ethics. This is a potential not fully explored in Denis's work thus far but is suggested by her approach to her subject matter. Although disability and film scholarship tends to look at disability as it appears thematically in films, here I am suggesting that rather than the content of the film per se, the way in which we are encouraged to encounter and relate to bodies on screen, narratively and formally, is sympathetic to a perspective that makes room for differently abled bodies. Just as her work does not have to treat women or 'women's issues' explicitly to evoke a feminist gaze, so questions of ability are opened up by the way in which we are asked to approach others on screen. The filmic ethics here suggests that *no* body can be encapsulated by our expectations – bodily identity is not stable, nor are bodies read the same way in every context. Nancy and Denis contribute to challenging notions of abledness that are used to marginalise certain bodies by foregrounding the body as a varying collection of parts.[47] Denis to date has not specifically dealt thematically with physical or intellectual 'disabilities' in her films; however, useful parallels are available in her concern with diasporic bodies and ageing bodies (notably in *I Can't Sleep*). Daïga's character in *I Can't Sleep* explores the situational disability of being unable to converse fluently in the dominant language, but, as discussed in the previous chapter, she does not present herself as needy, apologetic or even deserving of sympathy on that account. This demonstrates the insufficiency of categories with respect to human singularity and the ways in which limitations are contextual rather than essential.

Disability theorists have highlighted the ways in which the projection of contagion and vulnerability onto the 'disabled other' is a disavowal of the unmarked subject's own dependence and openness to alteration by the other. Although not diseased per se, the disabled body is often treated as if it were

contagious.[48] In this respect, the film evokes issues related to 'disphobia' just as Mayne suggests it elliptically refers to discourses around AIDS. The supposedly neutral body against which bodies labelled 'disabled' are held up and found lacking tends to be white and male, linking women, non-white and differently abled bodies in terms of their bodily difference or 'otherness'. Challenging binary notions such as that between same/other and abled/disabled, disability activists and scholars have advocated strategies such as using the term 'temporarily able-bodied' to name those bodies typically seen as able and to emphasise that disability is not necessarily a permanent state but something we move into and out of to different degrees throughout our lives. The overlap between disability studies' attempt to think the body as something in process rather than static and queer paradigms that seek to reclaim the body from normative notions of wholeness and identity has been noted by many disability theorists.[49] Nancy and Denis are useful contributors to this open 'body' of ideas – clearing paths that challenge the monadic modern body and may be useful to critical disability studies and queer theory.

The modern account of the body is underpinned by many discourses from biomedical and military to philosophical concepts of personhood, leading up through phenomenology. As Ed Cohen notes, '[M]odern bioscience's investment in the self-interiorizing and defensive organism betrays its unacknowledged debt to modern philosophies of personhood.'[50] In this light we can see how the Nancean body – open, dependent, technological and other to itself – follows necessarily from the ways in which Nancy reconsiders the subject after phenomenology. By altering our philosophical concepts and moving towards a more porous and connective model of 'personhood', a less bounded and defensive account of the material body comes into relief. As Margrit Shildrick writes apropos our conceptions of the body, 'although the *transcendent* split between mind and body may be problematised by our phenomenological experience of being-in-the-world, we do still see our bodies almost as though they were suits of armour protecting a core self.'[51] Nancy makes a critical intervention within the philosophical tradition here, challenging the notion of a stable and true inner self in favour of surfaces touching one another, parts combining with other parts – both technological and otherwise – and altering bodies in their course. The rethinking of the body is a move away from identity as the foundation of being and towards a processual and dynamic notion of the body plural. If disability is culturally related to brokenness, dependence, necessary co-existence and techo/biological intermeshing, then in a Nancean framework there is no difference between this 'other' body and the reality of each body – each bodily configuration enacts each time singularity rather than stabilising a universalising category. Denis's method of shooting the body in parts suggests that the body shares itself out more when the look relinquishes its power of understanding through assuming a meaningful whole.

Trouble Every Day highlights our general dis-ease with respect to our lack of bodily sovereignty by foregrounding our susceptibility throughout the film. It therefore challenges the notion of personhood constructed by the kinds of biomedical discourses Cohen discusses. Shildrick similarly writes, 'At the beginning of a new millennium in which evermore detailed biomedical accounts of the body are passing into lay usage and in which we are invited to marvel at the capacities of biomedical technologies to remake the body, reminders of uncontrolled corporeal vulnerability are highly unwelcome.'[52] *Trouble* works to challenge the ways in which 'normative categories of ontology and epistemology' are secured by 'the notion of the diseased, the unclean or the contaminated'.[53] It also highlights the ways in which corporeal difference equals institutional invisibility. Moving away from sovereignty, instead it suggests we rethink our co-existence in terms of connection, a generalisable susceptibility and a non-normative core/corps. By refusing the sense of the body as identity, Denis is able to film bodies in an exploratory way, one that moves away from the body as a coherent totality and therefore does not start with maleness or femaleness, or other binary categories, as its point of departure.

In one of the more gruesome scenes in the film, Coré has sex with and mutilates/kills a neighbour boy who, infatuated with her, has broken into her home. The camera pans very slowly across human skin, but it is impossible to tell whose skin it is or what we are looking at (Figure 4.9). Tufts of hair that could be a woman's pubic area, a belly button or an armpit fill the screen. Flesh is exposed such that it is made strange to the eye – a landscape or a palpitating organism that is encountered without a sense of visual mastery or possession.[54]

Figure 4.9 The camera pans very slowly across human skin, but it is impossible to tell whose skin it is or what we are looking at.

Figure 4.10 Shane and June make love in their hotel room but we are given only mobile and fleeting glances . . .

The viewer is exposed to an image that does not allow an easy perspective.[55] This means that she must remain open to the image as it is slowly revealed in all its viscerality. While operating alongside horror's fascination with the body in ecstasy and agony, in pieces and torn apart, Denis employs her unique visual style. Because the gaze here is resolutely non-appropriative, she profoundly alters the conventions of horror, rendering her spectators as vulnerable to intrusion as the characters. Additionally, the film avoids a sado-pornographic depiction because it refuses to represent the body as an object of visual mastery (voyeuristically) or fetishism.

This mode of filming is also evident in the film's other sex scenes. Shane and June make love in their hotel room (Figures 4.10 and 4.11), but we are given only mobile and fleeting glances that close in on skin and hands as they explore and penetrate, rendering the gaze unsure of its own footing. *Friday Night* offers another example of this fragmentary and decentred style of shooting love scenes. When the two central characters – Vincent and Laure – finally have sex, we are not shown a medium shot of their bodies entwined and undressing each other, or a close-up of their faces kissing passionately. Rather we are exposed to *this* hand, as it touches the textured bedspread of the hotel, *these* hands clutching gently for the first time behind *this* nape of a neck, then *this* hand exploring *this* foot in close-up, rendering the image difficult to discern and inaugurating a series of more-difficult-to-master shots of *these singular* bodies touching and entwining (Figures 4.12 and 4.13). Instead of making love a feeling possessed by a 'subject', this mode of filming shows how

Figure 4.11 . . . that close in on skin and hands as they explore and penetrate, rendering the gaze unsure of its own footing.

Figure 4.12 We are exposed to *this* hand exploring *this* foot in close-up, rendering the image difficult to discern . . .

desire flows and is produced through the encounter of bodies. It gives love a performative dimension rather than assuming it as a thing that we can always recognise and know. This approach opens up the body to an exploratory gaze that captures the sensuous singularity of *these* bodies at *this* particular moment, as they alter each other through their mutual exposure.

Figure 4.13 . . . and inaugurating a series of more-difficult-to-master shots of *these singular* bodies touching and entwining.

The lack of visual mastery in these scenes challenges a phenomenological approach, which tends to fall back on a transcendent consciousness. Like Denis, contra the phenomenological tradition, Nancy does not posit a self-identical spectator.[56] Denis's films are constructed, narratively and visually, in such a way that we are denied the satisfaction of resolution and understanding. In a post-phenomenological manner, the spectator finds herself affectively contaminated by an image that denies full intelligibility. Affective and pre-cognitive relations of exposure attune the spectator to her own ontological non-immunity, in a world in which all encounters are contact with the unknown. Despite the human vulnerability that this reworking of the subject and the body entails, if it is in fact our condition as beings, then the recognition of this fragility to one another as it pertains to all, *including* the Western and able-bodied subject, is a starting place from which to think more ethically about our actions in the world.

Shildrick's writing shares concerns with my own work here – connecting a generalised bodily vulnerability to a reconceptualisation of ethics but within a disability studies context. As she writes, 'Far from being a simple matter of prudent protection, what is at stake in our vulnerability to non-self factors is an *ethics of relationship*.'[57] Barbara E. Gibson likewise sees a connection between notions of the person, ethics and biomedical constructions of the bounded body. She argues for a reconceptualisation of dependency or vulnerability as connectivity: 'connectivity suggests a radically altered ethics that is no longer premised on the rights of the generalized autonomous subject. Instead it

compels the becoming-self to appreciate and acknowledge difference by recognizing its own vulnerabilities and dependencies.'[58] The narratives of people categorised as disabled reveal this connectivity and bodily malleability through their statements that various pieces of technology, service animals and/or aids feel like parts of themselves. For Gibson, disability is a privileged experience expressing our connectivity and ongoing connection making as part of human becoming. Nancy shifts our language towards singular plurality as his own term for becoming or for the 'with-ness', openness and constant alteration of what is thought of as the subject or existent.

Denis's larger project of dismantling identity as a useful signifier of character, her use of the fragment, and the way in which she films sex scenes all critique the dominant notion of the defensive body. Keeping in line with the thematic of encounters as shaping a singular plural subject and applying it to new ways of thinking embodiment, we can see how labels such as disability or race are produced through encounters between bodies, rather than properties held by stable selves. We can also highlight the insufficiency of a label such as 'female' or 'disabled' to account for the other's singularity or even to tell us what that body can do. The concept of the body that operates in Nancy and in Denis's work demands a reworking of *ethics* that overlaps with critical disability studies. Key to this is questioning the vilification of vulnerability and dependence and recognising these terms as a necessary reality of existing in a world with others. By understanding vulnerability as a generalised ontological condition, as does *Trouble Every Day* and as do theorists such as Price, Shildrick and Gibson, less effort will be made to shore up the illusion of the bounded self by displacing vulnerability onto 'others', whether these others be racially othered or othered in terms of age or ability according to a standard/neutral body that is implicitly white and male.[59] Can we rethink vulnerability as a condition of self-becoming, after Shildrick?[60] In generalising our susceptibility to one another we shift away from defence as a paradigm for the body and towards connectivity – albeit one that, after Nancy, is always interruptive. Whereas Shildrick and Price use a Derridean/Butlerian model focusing on the body's discursive construction and performativity, and Gibson looks to Deleuze and Guattari for models of becoming that conceptualise the body as a connectivity machine, I submit a Nancean contribution. Nancy's focus on the body as always in process, always becoming *with* bodies, human, animal and mineral, and as a collection of parts amongst parts can add to this 'toolbox' of philosophical resources for rethinking the body outside of binaries of healthy/sick, abled/disabled and integrated/broken.

Although I am offering some of Nancy's and Denis's insights as ways of adding to a conception of the body that aligns with the concerns of critical disability studies, I would note here that Levinas also makes vulnerability the property of the ethical subject. This 'subject' is the product of an encounter or

a relation that renders her vulnerable and weak before the other to whom she is responsible. This reversal – the ethical subject is not the neutral party who aids those who are in need or vulnerable per se, but is herself vulnerable and open to outrage – is part of why his philosophy provokes such strong feelings in his readers. I return to this aspect of his writing in the Coda, where I discuss our vulnerability to texts and the affective reorientations they demand of us. The next and final section will turn to Levinas for additional conceptual resources for developing an affect-based post-phenomenological account of film spectatorship. I turn to Denis's use of dance, going beyond the parameters of *Trouble Every Day* to offer a counter to the suffering so prominent in her exploration of the horror genre and to look instead at the potential joy and wonder of bodies exposed in movement. Dance functions as a kind of 'saying' – an affective and ephemeral encounter with the other.

EMBODYING THE ENCOUNTER

I have been working towards a post-phenomenological account of embodiment, to which, as I elaborate here, Levinas can also contribute. I go into some detail in this section to explore his relationship to vision and the body, because the bodily dimension of his thought is somewhat overlooked in Levinas scholarship.[61] In fact, he has even been read as emphasising vision at the expense of the bodily, a perspective which is countered in particular by a close reading of his final major work on ethics, *Otherwise than Being*.[62] In his emphasis on the bodily, tactile way in which the ethical is intimated, Levinas in fact *critiques* vision as a disembodied tool of a transcendental consciousness, which aligns with feminist critiques of the vision-centred history of philosophy. This perspective conceives of sight, or the phenomenological apperception of an object, as that which requires distance or separation from what is viewed, a distance which also encourages a mastery of the other/object. Because of this, vision is not the 'sense' of the ethical for Levinas. He writes, 'Sight, by reason of its distance and its totalizing embrace, imitates or prefigures the "impartiality" of the intellect and its refusal to hold to what the immediacy of the sensible would dispose, or what it would constitute.'[63] He similarly moves away from the representational or semiotic and towards the viscerality of encountering the other, or, put in other words, of being-with. The ethical encounter signifies in highly somatic ways and Levinas works hard to avoid language that connects this intimation to any notion of sight as mastery or possession. Terms like 'knowing', 'cognition' and 'experience' are always associated with the ontological in Levinas, and with the realm of light, enlightenment, vision and totality. Once I *know* something I have assimilated it to my own consciousness or worldview, thus I have repressed the alterity of the other and reduced it to my own understand-

ing. For Levinas, ethics takes place in darkness, in the space of *not* knowing, *not* mastering, and being vulnerable and exposed to the call of the other. In his emphasis on contact and proximity over language and visual mastery he argues that contact is 'a way of signifying quite different from that which connects exposition to sight'.[64] Here we see Levinas reworking the meaning of signification away from a representational schema and towards the idea of sensibility. In more current theoretical language, signification for Levinas is affect, where affect denotes the bodily sensations that precede any linguistic designators of emotion (such as happiness or fear). Signification is sensation, proximity and contact. This bears a strong affinity to the ethical approach of Denis, who gives precedence to the exposure of the body in all its strangeness over visual and narrative clarity. Her work illustrates how even within an (audio)visual medium such as film, contact prevails over cognition or representation.

There are moments in *Otherwise than Being* where Levinas opens the possibility of reworking the visual in a suggestive way. As articulated in the quotations above, vision 'announces' contact and exposure. He argues furthermore that the functions of sight 'may not be exhausted in openness and cognition',[65] 'openness' and 'cognition' being words that stand in for the phenomenological tradition that he is writing against. Levinas refigures vision in haptic terms. The eyes are most useful as indicators when they act like organs of touch. He writes, 'Sight is, to be sure, an openness and consciousness, and all sensibility, opening as a consciousness, is called vision; but even in its subordination to cognition sight maintains contact and proximity. The visible caresses the eye. *One sees and one hears like one touches*.'[66] Here the auditory is connected to vision and touch in a way that implies their interchangeability. What is significant is not the sense itself but *how* it senses, what alterities it leaves unthematised and remains exposed to, the way in which it touches on the other. This suggests the vital possibility that we may be able to see otherwise, or to disrupt our conventional patterns of looking to be open, even in an ethical sense, to what is unexpectedly other. As argued, Denis and Godard shift the codified terms of viewing such that we are placed in a kind of affective proximity to the bodies on screen, rather than looking at them from a perspective of distance and mastery.

This approaches a form of haptic spectatorship. In the sense that the image bears a highly tactile charge, it touches from across a distance. Touch troubles the bodily separation that enables one to totalise what is seen. Levinas writes that 'Sensibility must be interpreted as touch first of all'[67] and that 'To approach is to touch the *neighbor*, beyond the data apprehended at a distance in cognition, that is, to approach the other'.[68] This contact in proximity touches on the other without fusion; it retains the otherness of the other without reducing her to the Same. In language that comes surprisingly close to Nancy's model of interruptive touch, Levinas clarifies: 'To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in

the other. In contact itself the touching and the touched separate, as though the touched moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me.'[69] Referring back to alterity aesthetics, as discussed in the previous chapter, this is a touch that cannot grasp, refusing the comforts of categorisation. Levinas often refers to the encounter with the other as a caress, but because this interaction takes place in an ethical sphere that is prior to the ontological, it figures as a trace.[70] As a trace, the contact is present only in its absence; it is revealed only as it withdraws and is therefore beyond my reach. This tactile trace is the residue of the ethical encounter, one that is echoed in the bodily interaction between viewer and film.

This bodily encounter is intimated in the tension, anxiety and horror of *Trouble Every Day*, reminding us of our susceptibility and *co*-existence. As a counter to the pain of exposure that has predominantly figured in this chapter, the role of dance in Denis's oeuvre more pleasurably showcases the bodily impact that the image has on the spectator. Dance reveals the more joyous and often erotic side of exposure in contrast to the darkness of the horror genre. Furthermore, a turn to dance is necessary in relation to some of the larger implications of this study. The so-called 'death of the subject' or deconstruction of subjectivity need not be a cause for despair or a sign of nihilism. Importantly for feminism, which has a deep investment in the dismantling of the subject but also a troubled relation with the practical political need to assert the reality of the category 'women', it is crucial to emphasise the affirmative, generative and creative possibilities that the opening of the subject can offer. Dance thus provides a needed counterpoint to the discussion above, as it is exemplary of the kinds of bodily creativity that a rethinking of relationality and subjectivity enables. As opposed to *Trouble Every Day*, which takes some of Denis's bodily preoccupations to their extreme limits, dance is perhaps the most paradigmatic motif of her work, which showcases the elusive singularity that her films address. This can be thought of in terms of the affective trace of the encounter with the other – a bodily reminder of relationality and responsibility. It is an encounter that works in a pre-cognitive way. In lieu of dialogue or explanatory images we are offered a body in motion, exposing its ineffable uniqueness to us. Denis's use of dance connects to her powerful use of music and interest in filming bodies more generally. We saw this in the previous chapter, which discussed the familial dance scene in *I Can't Sleep* and Galoup's post-mortem discothèque romp in *Beau travail*.[71]

US Go Home, a film Denis made for a French television series, features many dance scenes, specifically of teenagers dancing at a party. In an early scene, Alain, the elder of the two teen siblings that the film centres on, plays a record of the Animals' song 'Hey Gyp'. He absent-mindedly sings along and lights a cigarette, then jumps on his bed and begins to move his arms, dancing back and forth, while singing and smoking his cigarette unselfconsciously. As

Figure 4.14 Alain dancing to 'Hey Gyp' in *US Go Home*.

the song grows increasingly frenzied, he sings and moves with corresponding abandon, giving himself over to the sexual and expressive affect of the music (Figure 4.14). Previously, Alain has appeared sullen and distant, coldly rejecting his sister's pleas to accompany her to a party and reading Seneca aloud in bed, railing against the pleasures of the body – sexual or otherwise. The lingering and delightful scene of Alain dancing to his record (which lasts the entire duration of the song, almost four minutes, and is shot in one take) evokes the tensions attendant on the ephemeral stage of adolescence – in it we witness both his irreducible singularity and the unspoken desires and capacities of his body. This scene is exemplary of the way that Denis uses dance not just to supplement narrative but also in place of it. The body interrupts narrative and operates in excess of articulable meanings. Like the fragmented and non-appropriable body discussed above, proximity ruptures myth through the exposure of the dancing body. The spectacle of the dance reveals a non-thematisable element of character that refuses to be pinned down, providing a bodily encounter with alterity. The moment when the body engages with music can never be exactly repeated, thus expressing the sensations of a unique and fleeting moment in time. The bodily relationship with film that is intensified in the horror genre is similarly concentrated through Denis's particular use of dance.[72]

In the more recent *35 Shots of Rum*, a pivotal sequence revolves around a dance scene in a small bar. The four main characters – a father and his daughter, who have a close and domestic co-existence, and two neighbours, one who has feelings for the daughter and a second who has a romantic past with the father – are all en route to a concert when their car breaks down in the pouring

Figure 4.15 The Commodores' song 'Nightshift' comes on in *35 Shots of Rum*, as the father and daughter dance.

rain. As they seek shelter after their plans have fallen apart, a bar owner reopens her tavern for them. The father dances with his former love interest; their comfortable intimacy is palpable. The Commodores' song 'Nightshift' comes on as the father and daughter dance – again their bodies express their closeness and the affection they have for each other (Figure 4.15). As the song plays on we see the young male neighbour cut in on the father and the immediate shift in the body language of the new couple (Figure 4.16). As they dance, their sexual attraction moves from tentative to explicit, as he undoes her hair and eventually they kiss. The father responds by reaching out to the bar owner as she delivers a late-night meal – their attraction is similarly palpable as we see their bodies move together (Figure 4.17), before the scene cuts to the dejected face of the father's former flame, who throughout the film has continued to carry a torch for him. The scene is central in the sense that key decisions seem to be made through body movement – the daughter and neighbour establish their romantic relationship; she is preparing for her wedding at the end of the film (presumably to him, although typically for Denis we never see the groom, so the film refuses clear answers). The father has also definitively rejected his former girlfriend, while still asserting his own sexuality and ability to find pleasure in life outside of his daughter, whom he knows he will have to let go. Yet this synopsis of inferable consequences hardly captures the scene's affective power. The bodies express so much that is not reducible to language or a list of character attributes. Dancing reveals singularities or alterities and affectively impacts the viewer. This of course connects to the alterity aesthetics previously discussed, while adding in the bodily dimension of this encounter

Figure 4.16 The neighbour cuts in and we register an immediate shift in the body language of the new couple.

Figure 4.17 The father finds his own romance on the dance floor.

with the other. Put into the Levinasian terms introduced in the previous chapter, dance functions as a kind of 'saying' – an ungraspable movement that refuses to be fixed into representation, or 'said'. Translated into the language of this chapter, it engages the body in a refusal of myth, showing how the body exceeds its own narrative containment and interrupts the linear progression of the film to expose a singular being in motion.

As I've argued throughout this book, we can see in Denis's work the attempt to move beyond identities that are fully encapsulated by the terms of the system and to challenge the sovereign subject. To return to Wendy Brown's writing on the perils of identity-based modes of organising, which was referenced in the introductory chapter, Brown advocates 'the partial dissolution of sovereignty into desire' in place of identity politics. Denis's images move away from the complete and psychologised body-person and towards sensual audio-visualscapes of desire. Instead of dialogue, we are given a dance. In place of communication, we are offered creative forces that challenge us to encounter the world differently. As Brown says,

> If every 'I am' is something of a resolution of desire into fixed and sovereign identity, then this project might involve not only learning to speak but to *read* 'I am' this way, as in motion, as temporal, as not-I, as deconstructable according to a genealogy of want rather than as fixed interests or experiences.[73]

We can add to *view* 'I am' in this way to describe the flowing progression of bodies on screen in Denis's cinema. Brown's argument resonates with Tamsin Lorraine's comment:

> If what feminists are trying to do is pursue the consistency of thought components in order to destabilize old identities and perspectives and stabilize more promising identities and perspectives in keeping with the life flows of becoming-other than we are, then feminist theory is more about creating ways of skillfully evolving with life rather than getting a static representation of reality 'right.'[74]

By reopening bodies to desire and failing to account fully for them in the mind of the spectator, Denis's work encourages us to reopen ourselves to a future that can't be known or anticipated through our current categories, even if it must also always be shaped in part by the histories that have come before us. She asks us to *see* 'I am' as in motion, temporal and singular each time differently.

Although Levinas's 'face-to-face' encounter may sound deceptively visual, it is in fact intimated in various somatic ways. The other 'excites' simply by virtue of her proximity.[75] The psyche 'pants and shivers',[76] multiple references are made to trembling at the presence of the other, and proximity is sensed as a restlessness.[77] The subject shudders in the ethical encounter; Levinas describes the 'shudder of subjectivity'[78] and the modality of an obsession as 'a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition'.[79] These references to trembling, shivering and shuddering and the aforementioned focus on bodily

pain take on a horrific valence when read alongside a film like *Trouble Every Day*. Perhaps this is because the film refuses a transcendence that Levinas relies on to give meaning to being – the suggestion of infinity or God as that which ultimately supports his ethical system. In this sense Denis diverges from Levinas, yet Denis participates in the attempt to evoke the ephemeral in her work, to avoid fixing things into frozen images, and to reveal a world where bodies move each other. But in the limit case that is *Trouble Every Day*, there is no redemption or meaning to be found outside of the diegetic world. Bodies are key to the ethics of Denis's cinema, as they are to Levinasian ethics. Yet, counter to the pain of exposure, Denis's oeuvre also gestures towards the unique power of bodies on screen to offer us more pleasurable affective encounters that are bodily reminders of the ethical relation. One of the key ways in which she does this is through her distinctive use of dance, facilitating encounters with the spectator, bodily in every sense, and impacting us in a place beyond the thematisable. Even in the horrific tale that is *Trouble Every Day*, there are moments of care between strangers – a lab technician offering to help Shane because she feels concern for him, a former landlady of Shane's offering company to a lonely and abandoned June, and a valet sheltering June, despondent, from the pouring rain and convincing her to come back in from the cold.

CONCLUSION

Whereas Levinas and Nancy primarily give an account of the body that applies to our existence outside of the cinema, films offer their own perspectives on embodiment – sometimes reinforcing our illusions of coherent subjectivity, and bodily and visual mastery, and other times challenging them and asking us to look and feel differently. Denis presents us with an ethical filmmaking practice, attentive to bodily singularity and privileging exposure over closure. Going further than the philosophers, her films acknowledge the historical and geographical dimensions of embodiment, even if they challenge the value of identity categories as a lens through which to understand the image. They thus attune us to a more general condition and establish a space of sensitisation to the bodily non-immunity key to the concept of the ethical I have elaborated.

The body is central to an account of ethical spectatorship – the subject is constituted *with* and the body's porousness and vulnerability is a constant reminder of this relationality. Denis's films evoke encounters that attune the viewer to this shared bodily condition, undermining illusions of autonomy from the external world. *Trouble Every Day* is a particularly difficult case study because it does not shy away from the risk inherent in challenging notions of the bounded subject. Despite the danger, the recognition of our susceptibility

to one another may be a place from which we can act in ways that better acknowledge mutual risk, and that also make visible the joy and beauty of our shared messy world that offers no meaning outside itself.

NOTES

1. For a critique of the ways in which European discourses of alienation or a fragmented subject are blind to their own privileged status, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008); Kelly Oliver, 'Alienation as the Perverse Privilege of the Modern Subject', in *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 3–26.
2. Here I refer to Denis's upbringing in various parts of French colonial Africa, as referenced in Chapter 1. See, for example, Mark A. Reid, 'Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations', *Jump Cut* 40 (March 1996): 67–72.
3. I adopt the phrase 'monadic modern body' from Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
4. For Deleuze-inflected readings see Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); E. Ann Kaplan, 'European Art Cinema, Affect, and Postcolonialism: Herzog, Denis, and the Dardenne Brothers', in Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (eds), *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 285–302; Elena del Río, 'Body Transformations in the Films of Claire Denis: From Ritual to Play', *Studies in French Cinema* 3.3 (2003): 185–97. For readings in terms of haptics or touch see Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Leeds: Maney, 2011); Ian Murphy, 'Feeling and Form in the Films of Claire Denis', *Jump Cut* 54 (Fall 2012), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc54.2012/IanMurphyDenis/> (last accessed 20 May 2015). For other body-based approaches see Adrian Martin, 'Ticket to Ride: Claire Denis and the Cinema of the Body', *Screening the Past* 20 (2006), <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/20/claire-denis.html> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
5. *Compears* is a Nancean neologism that indicates that we always enter the world *with* others and continue to do so throughout our lives.
6. For example, group identities based on gender, race, religion or nationality.
7. Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess', *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2–13. See also Carol J. Clover, 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film', *Representations* (special issue *Misogyny, Misandry, Misanthropy*) 20 (Autumn 1987): 187–228; Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993). All three read the genre through the lenses of body, identity and gender and come from a psychoanalytic perspective.
8. Williams, 'Film Bodies'.
9. This is recounted in Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
10. Flachra Gibbons and Stuart Jeffries, 'Cannes Audience Left Open-Mouthed', *The Guardian*, 14 May 2001, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/may/14/cannes2001.cannesfilmfestival> (last accessed 20 May 2015); Serge Kaganski, 'Cannes 2001: Trouble Every Day de Claire Denis', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 22 May 2001, <http://

www.lesinrocks.com/2001/05/22/cinema/actualite-cinema/cannes-2001-trouble-every-day-de-claire-denis-11218534/> (last accessed 20 May 2015).

11. This paradox of the film being both too much and not enough is discussed in Philippe Met, 'Looking for Trouble: The Dialectics of Lack and Excess, Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001)', *Kinoeye* 3.7 (9 June 2003), <www.kinoeye.org/03/07/met07.php> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
12. Tim Palmer, 'Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body', *Journal of Film and Video* 58.3 (2006): 22–32.
13. For a series of debates around genre and the status quo see Jean-Loup Bourget, 'Social Implications in the Hollywood Genres', *Journal of Modern Literature* 3.2 (April 1973): 191–200; Judith Hess, 'Genre Films and the Status Quo', *Jump Cut* 1 (1974): 1–18; Robin Wood, 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur', *Film Comment* 13.1 (January 1977): 46–51.
14. See Clover, 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film'.
15. In moving away from psychologisation, I mean to critique the idea that a diagnostic category or even a full biographical account of one's childhood can fully encapsulate who a person is; or that one can be reduced to or accounted for through psychological explanations.
16. For an overview of the psychological problems affecting the killers of the slasher canon, see Clover, 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film'.
17. In Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 129.
18. This fact is often remarked upon as Dalle is known for her highly verbal performances and her popular nickname is 'La Grande Bouche', or 'The Big Mouth'.
19. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001), p. 138.
20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 43.
21. For a feminist reading of Levinas and maternity see Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006).
22. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 109.
23. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
24. Mayne, *Claire Denis*, p. 108.
25. It should be noted that Denis regularly works with Agnès Godard as her director of photography. Although I may refer solely to Denis as shorthand, Godard's own creative contribution and signature should also be understood as implied.
26. Mythology, in contrast to finitude, offers universal, eternal and immutable narratives.
27. Marie-Eve Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 88.
28. Noël Burch, 'Film's Institutional Mode of Representation and the Soviet Response', *October* 11 (Winter 1979): 77–96; 84.
29. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Corpus', in *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 2–122; p. 15.
30. Mainstream Hollywood cinema deserves sustained examination in this respect. However, in its tendency towards closure and full comprehension, as well as its conventional and gendered ways of representing bodies, it seems to offer less of these open and unexpected bodily encounters.
31. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 76. While Levinas's account of the skin is indeed more subject-centred than Nancy's, at the same time his rendering of the body works against any traditional notion of the subject as a space of bodily propriety. Nonetheless, Levinas wants to keep 'me' as the subject of ethical responsibility. Here I am more interested in the connections between the thinkers than the discrepancies, as I think they help us to develop

an account of the body that works against hegemonic constructions, even if they don't go far enough in historically locating the subject they work against.

32. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 85.
33. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18.
34. Mulvey's argument deals with a classical style of editing and shot construction (her main examples are von Sternberg and Hitchcock films). Because Denis is not operating within this idiom or with classical Hollywood narrative conventions (i.e. male protagonists pursuing linear narratives, who are distracted by dangerous and beautiful women who must be fetishised or punished to assuage the male viewer's castration anxieties), Mulvey's analysis has limited application.
35. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 49.
36. Ibid. p. 106.
37. The film records an encounter with bodies and light and its meaning is further shaped by the histories and particularities of its many viewings and receptions. These are some of the ways in which film bears the trace of an encounter.
38. For a psychoanalytically inflected reading of the film in relation to skin see Sebastien Scholz and Hanna Surma, 'Exceeding the Limits of Representation: Screen and/as Skin in Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001)', *Studies in French Cinema* 8.1 (2008): 5–16.
39. Nancy also focuses on the skin in his writing on *Trouble Every Day*, referring to the film as 'pellicule expeausée'. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Claire Denis: Icon of Ferocity', in James Phillips (ed.), *Cinematic Thinking: Philosophical Approaches to the New Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 160–8.
40. There are also many examples in Levinas of terms that attempt to complicate an easy separation between mind and body. Megan Craig similarly notes this and focuses on his use of trauma. Megan Craig, *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
41. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 502.
42. Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 107.
43. As always, Denis exploits a tension between this exposure to singularity and the contexts in which subjectivities are made and unmade. In *The Intruder*, for example, we are exposed to many border crossings that are explicitly linked to Trebor's privileges of mobility and his past in colonial Tahiti where he fathered a child with a local woman. That said, the film maintains that we cannot 'understand' or pigeonhole his character based on these identity-based privileges.
44. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The "There Is" of the Sexual Relation', in *Corpus II*, trans. Anne O'Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 1–22.
45. Ibid. p. 10.
46. This notion of her films as *corpi* also extends to thinking across Denis's body of work.
47. 'Abledness' is a term suggested by Fiona Kumari Campbell to address the risk of occluding forms of intellectual or mental disability with the term 'able-bodiedness'. While my focus here is on the depiction of the body, it could be extended to discussions of less visible 'disabilities', much as the illness in *Trouble* is itself invisible. See F. A. K. Campbell, *Counters of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
48. Margrit Shildrick, 'Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk', *Journal of Medical Humanities* 21.4 (2000): 215–27; 219.
49. See F. A. K. Campbell, 'Re-cognising Disability: Cross-Examining Social Inclusion

through the Prism of Queer Anti-Sociality', *Jindal Global Law Review* 2 (August 2013): 209–38; Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

50. Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending*, p. 8.
51. Shildrick, 'Contagious Encounters', p. 221.
52. Ibid. p. 218.
53. Ibid. p. 216.
54. See also Douglas Morrey, 'Textures of Terror: Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day*', *Belphégor* 3.2 (April 2004) for a discussion of the film in relation to its depiction of the body as landscape and its relation to the horror genre; available at <http://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/47680/03_02_Morrey_textur_en_cont.pdf?sequence=1> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
55. This is also a feature of the haptic cinema that Laura U. Marks discusses in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), although she is interested in experimental intercultural works and uses different theoretical reference points than I do here, including phenomenology and Deleuze.
56. See also McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, p. 19.
57. Shildrick, 'Contagious Encounters', p. 216; italics mine.
58. Barbara E. Gibson, 'Disability, Connectivity and Transgressing the Autonomous Body', *Journal of the Medical Humanities* 27 (2006): 187–96; 188.
59. See also Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, 'Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept', *Hypatia* 26.3 (Summer 2011): 591–609 for a discussion of materialist feminism and disability that takes up the issue of a generalised vulnerability as a basis for rethinking the stability of the term 'disabled'.
60. Shildrick, 'Contagious Encounters', p. 222.
61. Catherine Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) includes a discussion of the caress, but it remains relatively ungrounded in the materiality of the body. Lisa Guenther, in *The Gift of the Other*, does a wonderful job discussing the bodily metaphors of maternity in Levinas's writing from a feminist perspective.
62. See, for example, Narnia Bohler-Muller, 'Justice as Breath(ing)', *International Journal of the Humanities* 4.4 (2006): 25–34. The author discusses Luce Irigaray's and Adriana Cavarero's critiques of Levinas as privileging the visual. Conversely, see Craig, *Levinas and James*, for an account of Levinas that addresses the significant role of embodiment in his philosophy.
63. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 63.
64. Ibid. p. 100.
65. Ibid. p. 100.
66. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Language and Proximity', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp. 109–26; p. 117; italics mine.
67. Ibid. p. 118.
68. Ibid. p. 125.
69. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 86.
70. For more on the caress see Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Diane Perpich, 'From the Caress to the Word: Transcendence and the Feminine in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas', in Tina Chanter (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 28–52.

71. Denis has also made a film on choreographer Mathilde Monnier, *Vers Mathilde* (2005).
72. Of course, this affective engagement is further intensified by the music that accompanies the dance sequences. One of Denis's great talents is in choosing music that tends to linger with the spectator long after the film ends.
73. Wendy Brown, 'Wounded Attachments', *Political Theory* 21.3 (August 1993): 390–410; 407.
74. Tamsin Lorraine, *Deleuze and Guattari's Immanent Ethics: Theory, Subjectivity, and Duration* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), p. 21.
75. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 16.
76. Ibid. p. 66.
77. Ibid. p. 82.
78. Ibid. p. 84.
79. Ibid. p. 87.

Coda

Our disposition towards the world – the mode in which we encounter it, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are within it, and how we share this world with others – shapes and is shaped by our affective attachments. It has been my aim to offer a generative set of thoughts by putting Denis, Levinas, Nancy and others into a conversation that I have argued offers one useful way to think about the ethical in relation to cinema. This is by no means the one 'true' path or the sole means to shift our sensibilities. I have made explicit the metaphysical imaginaries that inspire what I have termed a feminist cinematic ethics – part of which has been an ethics of sense and another part an aesthetic of alterity. These film-based ways of approaching the world both reflect and attune us to a shared vulnerability and responsibility.

The way in which affect shapes the encounter with a film or a philosophical text is central to what has been discussed. Shifts in thought or ways of perceiving often occur through an author's rhetorical strategies or the affective resonances that a text carries for a given reader, or a film for a given viewer. The notion of 'affective reorientation' which I borrow from Christopher Janaway's writing on Nietzsche is useful in this regard.[1] Through his reading of the German philosopher, Janaway emphasises the affective forces that shape our moral judgements, often unreflectively. The notion of affective reorientation further highlights our susceptibility and exposedness – to written texts and to films, both of which play a role in shaping the modes in which we encounter others. Denis, Levinas and Nancy all challenge our affective orientations in the attempt to ask us to think differently about the world.

Levinas's hyperbolic, almost sadistic demand for infinite and unending responsibility may be alienating or compelling to the reader. The rhetorical style and difficulty of his texts challenge the Western reader who is perhaps used to thinking of ethics in terms of cultivating virtues or developing strategies for judging between competing claims. Levinas makes ethics feel much

riskier. Instead the reader is offered a traumatised and inadequate-to-the-task notion of a self always in debt to the other. The notion of affective reorientation helps us to see this as a strategy for radically challenging a deeply entrenched notion of the (rational and autonomous) self that can assimilate the other into a given representational framework and then decide how responsible one ought to be towards this other. Instead, Levinas's work forces us to ask what it might mean to start from a different sensibility.

Nancy, for his part, takes up many tenets associated with poststructuralism and postmodernity – the need to rethink community in the wake of its seeming loss, the deconstruction of the subject, and the rejection of grand narratives or foundational logics. Yet, perhaps contrary to the reader's expectations, these themes are not the cause of pessimism or a general cultural deflation. These challenges and opportunities are met with joy and creative openness in his writing. In this way he turns what would be the West's own funeral dirge into an affirmation of new opportunities to understand our being-together-in-the-world differently and more ethically. This is an affective reorientation of a different kind from Levinas's, but it is no less powerful in terms of its potential consequences for how we orient ourselves in the world.

To some extent, I have used both Levinas and Nancy as storytellers – creators of ethical imaginaries. I am not claiming the status of truth for either, but the stories they tell, like Denis's multisensory films, enable us to see the world in a particular way. This framework seems useful, generative and even hopeful to me at this particular historical moment, when, despite the supposed loss of metanarratives, political and social discourses seem nonetheless to lean affectively towards the reductive and categorical. The affective reorientation and ethical sensibility they ask of us may not offer a roadmap for politics but it may be the backdrop through which we can better ask questions of the political.

Finally, Denis's films, as I have argued throughout this project, work against our expectations for cinema. We learn to drift through her films, to allow the sensory and affective to take precedence over cognition or comprehension, and let others remain in their opacity. While for some viewers this could result in frustration, displeasure, boredom or confusion, I argue that her films offer an opportunity for an affective reorientation to cinema viewing and, through the film, to the world beyond the cinematic frame.

NOTE

1. Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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