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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Feeling and form in the films of Claire Denis

by Ian Murphy

Images from *Beau travail*



Beau travail is set largely in Djibouti at a French Foreign Legion outpost in the Horn of Africa.



On her childhood spent travelling through colonial Africa, Denis has said, "I remember being dazzled by the beauty of the Red Sea, the desert. You don't forget a landscape like that. I always thought of Djibouti as a place where human history hasn't really begun yet – or perhaps it's already over..." (Romney, 2000)

> "If cinema does not give us the presence of the body and cannot give it to us, this is perhaps also because it sets itself a different objective: it spreads an "experimental night" or a white space over us; it works with 'dancing seeds' and a 'luminous dust'; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, that contradicts all natural perception. What it produces in this way is the genesis of an unknown body."
> – Gilles Deleuze [1][open endnotes in new window]

The features, shorts and documentaries of French filmmaker Claire Denis represent one of the more curious riddles of contemporary cinema. Her career-long experimentation with genre forms has made her work a study in extremes, yet it is difficult to chart a decisive authorial relationship between each of the odd, elliptical statements she has issued over the past two decades. Consider the variation in theme and tone that makes uneasy bedfellows of the dreamy sibling-relationship drama *Nénette et Boni* (1996) and the gruesome sex-cannibal horror *Trouble Every Day* (2001), or of the free-form Möbius strip of *L'intrus* (2004) and her recent melodrama on the legacies of postcolonialism, *White Material* (2009). [2] In the absence of a clear generic pattern, critics have fastened onto those broad stylistic trademarks that cement her work in auteur territory. The unofficial repertory company of actors recycled from one film to the next, including (but not limited to) Alex Descas, Michel Subor, Grégoire Colin, Isaach De Bankolé and Béatrice Dalle. The trusted base of long-term technical collaborators, such as cinematographer Agnès Godard, editor Nelly Quettier, sound designer Jean-Louis Ughetto, and composers Dickon Hinchliffe and Stuart Staples of the British band Tindersticks. [3] The minimal dialogue, free-form approach to narrative, and tendency to punctuate certain scenes with an incongruous but cannily chosen pop song (think of the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows" in *Nénette et Boni* or The Commodores' "Nightshift" in *35 Shots of Rum* (2008). Still the films refuse to yield up their secrets, to be known with certainty.

The willful eclecticism that makes Denis' body of work consistently interesting also makes it difficult to situate within any definitive



The film's deserts, cliffs and seascapes, though exotically beautiful, are rendered with fluid, dispassionate austerity.



Beau travail demonstrates Denis' preference for Antonioni-esque still frames in which the human figure often takes secondary importance to empty spaces, inanimate objects, and natural or industrial environments.



The legionnaires spend their days in a hermetically sealed-off universe, staging ludicrous training rituals without an empire to conquer or enemy to attack.

theoretical contexts. In some respects, it seems that her spiritual lineage lies less with the French New Wave filmmakers whose flame burned brightly during her formative years than with what Paul Schrader has termed the transcendental style of international filmmakers like Ozu, Bresson and Antonioni. [4] We can, to some extent, trace her subversion of classical modes of spectatorship back to those directors' predilection for long takes, minimal dialogue, and the repetition of still or "empty" frames in which the human figure is frequently edged off the screen, replaced by an alienating focus on depopulated spaces, inanimate objects, and natural or industrial environments. In Denis' case, though, wide-angle compositions in which figures are inscribed as one object among others in the frame, dwarfed Antonioni-style by their surrounding landscapes, are alternated with isolating and fragmentary close-ups of those same bodies filling the frame. The effect of these tight close-ups can be warmly sensuous as in *Nénette et Boni* or claustrophobic and menacing as in *Trouble Every Day*, but the principle remains the same. Human flesh seems trapped under a microscope, framed so close that the viewer acquires a vivid sense of its texture, weight and movement in space, but simultaneously it is denied any corresponding axis of perspective, depth or location in the film's overall scenographic space.

The emphasis on the lived experience of the human body means that Denis' cinema can be only partially located within the transcendental aesthetic, which for Schrader is less concerned with subjectivity and finally depends on a quality of epiphany bursting through the minor key of everyday "stasis." In her incisive book-length study of Denis' career, Martine Beugnet helpfully reads Denis' focus on sensation, movement and physicality in terms of Gilles Deleuze's influential philosophy of time-image cinema, in which time is set free from the causal framework of traditional narrative to "become the actual texture of the film." [5] Indeed, the gaps in narrative space that characterize Denis' approach to storytelling are self-consciously Deleuzian. Bypassing such frivolities as exposition and psychology, the screenplays she writes with regular collaborator Jean-Pol Fargeau are jagged and nonlinear, built around a series of structured ellipses that betray a perverse disregard for the laws of time, space and logic that govern traditional narrative. Denis has spoken at length about this process, which she and Fargeau initiate by writing "full" story drafts to establish the specific relationships between characters, incidents and timelines. The finished-looking script, however, is only used as a private blueprint for the collaborators. At that stage the real work begins, with successive layers of text stripped away until the story feels sufficiently "musical." [6]

The notion of a "musical" approach to film narrative is significant for this article. Beugnet states that, once they are "freed from their functions as mere links in a chain of causes and effects, images are thus offered up to contemplation and observation." [7] If images are



These rituals are invariably performed under the blazing desert sun, with acres of youthful male flesh expressing the Legion's homoerotic tensions and fascistic ideals of masculinity.



The soldiers' movements during the rituals constitute a highly choreographed rhythmic space between martial arts, yoga and dance.



The paternalistic love triangle at the film's centre unfolds as a relay of sub-hysterical gazes between our protagonist, the tortured Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant) …

cut loose from the implicitly understood laws of narrative cinema, they inevitably inhabit a different role in relation to the other elements of a film – editing, camera movement, score, sound design. In the case of Denis' cinema, I contend that the images assume a purely sensual and symbolic relation to these other elements, whereby they only carry meaning as part of a complex whole. When the viewer's relation to the image is opened up, subjected to interrogation in a manner not possible in traditional narrative cinema, it also has meaningful implications for the senses of hearing and touch – faculties that cinema typically considers ancillary to the unifying stability and coherence of vision.

I draw upon the aesthetics of philosopher Susanne Langer and 'haptic' cinema theorist Laura U. Marks to argue that, in privileging tactile and auditory modes of spectatorship, Denis creates a rhythmic form whose material structure is closer to music than the language of narrative cinema. This in turn facilitates a deeper engagement with the memories, perceptions and intuitions that make up the viewer's inner life, what Langer calls "the verbally ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience." [8] While the argument could be extended to a number of Denis' films, I agree with Beugnet that 1999's dizzying postcolonial fable *Beau travail* and 2002's low-key romance *Vendredi soir* remain

> "the most accomplished examples of a filmmaking that privileges the visual and the rhythmic (that is, the way the images are edited together but also the structure of the soundtrack, ambient or musical) over scripted dialogue and plot." [9]

To this I would add that while Denis' cinema of feeling and form can demand a new type of psychic engagement from viewers, it can also reward them with a deeper connection to the self, to "the genesis of an unknown body." [10]

Beau travail—the listening eye

> "Cinema is not made to give a psychological explanation. For me, cinema is montage, editing. To make blocks of impressions or emotions meet another block of impressions or emotions, and put in between pieces of explanation, to me it's boring... Our brains are full of literature – my brain is. But I think we also have a dream world, the brain is also full of images and songs, and I think that making films for me is to get rid of explanation." – Claire Denis [11]

Beau travail is Claire Denis' idiosyncratic take on the narrative laid out in Herman Melville's 1924 novella *Billy Budd* and the 1951 Benjamin Britten opera of the same name. Far from a direct adaptation, Denis' film is an impressionistic, free-form reconstitution of the more mythic and allegorical elements of the story, which concerns the homoerotic battle of good and evil that arises when a saintly young seaman is accused of conspiracy to mutiny by his ship's



... Sentain (Grégoire Colin), the innocent object of his jealous rage…



… and Forestier (Michel Subor), the mysterious platoon commandant who lords over the whole flock.



The gaze is fundamental in establishing Galoup's erotically charged hatred for Sentain during this martial arts exercise.

malevolent Master-at-Arms, John Claggart. One fundamental change in Denis' version is that this psychic war has been transplanted from the HMS Bellipotent of Melville's text to the French Foreign Legion, where a regiment of soldiers has been stationed indefinitely in the Northeast African outpost of Djibouti. The film thus unfolds within the ravaged narrative context of postcolonialism where, without an empire to conquer or enemy to attack, the soldiers spend their days in an hermetically sealed-off universe, perfecting ritualistic daily routines, consorting with local women, and performing endless training exercises under the white-hot sun.

Another key difference in Denis' adaptation is that our protagonist is no longer the saintly Billy Budd type but the villainous Claggart figure, here named Galoup and recast as a tortured sergeant major (Denis Lavant) who feels "something vague and menacing take hold"with the arrival into his fold of new recruit Sentain (Colin). Innocent, heroic and beautiful, Sentain's seeming perfection drives Galoup into a state of barely suppressed rage that encompasses both lust and jealousy, especially when Sentain wins the paternalistic favor of platoon commandant Bruno Forestier (Subor). "There must be a chip in Sentain's armor,"Galoup tells us in tense voiceover narration. "We all have a trashcan deep within."

As usual for Denis and Fargeau, the script of *Beau travail* is a bare skeleton. Long stretches of spooky silence are punctuated by a handful of verbal sentiments, most of which shed so little light on characters' rationale or emotional life that they feel willfully unhelpful. This is partly because the band of youthful legionnaires at its center purposely lacks personality: they are nameless, featureless, and almost comical in their male-model beauty and inertia, an amorphous mass who have sublimated any notion of selfhood to the greater calling of national identity and the futile postcolonial project of the Legion. Yet the tone of withholding and estrangement also extends to those landscapes that Denis was dazzled by as a child. [12] The deserts, cliffs and seascapes of Djibouti may be wildly beautiful, but Agnès Godard's camera pans across them with a crystalline depth of field that suggests not exotic rapture but the kind of fluid, dispassionate austerity that marked the primitive island scenery of Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960). Furthermore, as if to cement the film's status as visualist critique of Western male expansionist myth, *Beau travail* is intimately concerned with issues of the gaze.

The homosocial environment of the Legion, humid with psychic repression and fascistic ideals of masculinity, lends itself naturally to an intertextual dialogue that incorporates the transgressive mythologies of Melville and Britten, but also Jean Genet and a lineage of filmmakers ranging from Fassbinder to Jarman, Eisenstein to Riefenstahl. [13] As such its narrative allows ample space for exposed male flesh and hysterical gazing behavior. Galoup, wolfish and pug-nosed, watches Sentain with the overheated resentment of a Biblical misfit; Sentain looks back, blameless and bemused; Forestier watches over both men with a leer at once sinister and jaded. There are martial arts exercises so absurdly homoerotic that the gaze becomes foreplay to a hate fuck that never happens: Galoup and Sentain circle



Their glowering eye contact and spatial opposition as they predatorily circle each other inscribes the scene as a tongue-in-cheek queer pastiche of the climactic showdown in *Once Upon a Time in the West*.



Martine Beugnet notes that this long asynchronous shot of the legionnaires walking across a lunar desert landscape from right to left contradicts our traditional sense of movement in time, in the process frustrating our optical engagement with the film-as-narrative.

each other like predators on the beach, their eye contact stealthy and ferocious as Britten's opera booms over their silliness. [14] The more charged the gazes grow, the less they tell us about anything.

Perhaps that is because Denis' cinema does not equate visualism with knowledge. Nor does it privilege sight as the primary faculty of human understanding. Sight in her films is always unstable, lacking integrity. That alone makes it necessary for her to abandon that filmic system built around the visual faculty at the expense of all others: the classical narrative. Within this system, the foundations of backstory, causation, and human psychology find their form in the invisible alchemy of the continuity edit. As theorized by the likes of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, continuity operates by orchestrating an artificial syntax between establishing shots, POV shots, eyeline matches and shot-reverse shots to create the illusion of pictorial depth and, with it, a coherent narrative space. In doing so it proposes merely to follow

> "the 'natural attention' of the spectator. First the onlooker surveys the scene (establishing shot); as the action continues, he or she focuses upon a detail (cut-in), or glances back and forth at the participants in a conversation (shot/reverse shot), or glances to the side when distracted by a sound or motion (cutaway)." [15]

The classical shot cannot be understood outside of its essential discursive function, a chain of cause and effect that sutures the viewer into a diegetic perspective and stimulates a psychic response. It achieves this by co-opting the viewer's whole sensory field into the unifying structure of vision. If we take each shot as a single unit of meaning, we may understand the classical narrative as a style that attempts to unfold like a language, with visual utterances assuming the fixed status of what Susanne Langer terms "conventional reference" [16] when they are ordered in a recognizable spatio-temporal sequence. As Langer sees it,

> "Language in the strict sense is essentially discursive; it has permanent units of meaning which are combinable into larger units; it has fixed equivalences that make definition and translation possible... The meanings given through language are successively understood, and gathered into a whole by the process called discourse." [17]

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The amplification of incidental sound effects, such as the amniotic flapping of legionnaires' flippers in underwater training, is equally important to Denis' construction of a musical rhythm.



As the film progresses, Galoup's psyche is explored more deeply in tactile and aural registers, often through intimate close-ups that emphasize his ears as much as his eyes.



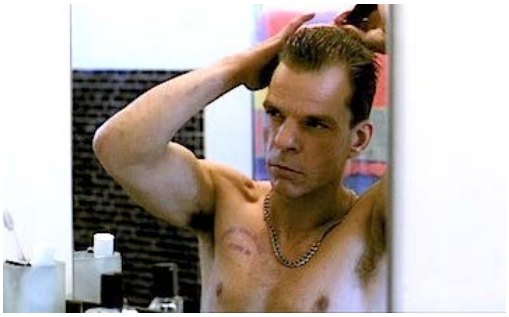
This camera set-up, positioned behind Galoup's head at a traumatically noisy campfire dance, even frames his ears in silhouette.

Adrian Martin has written elsewhere of the visual techniques Denis uses to break classical chains of command, a dense process that includes but extends beyond such French New Wave traditions as disembodied voices on the soundtrack and characters' breaking the fourth wall. [18] [open endnotes in new window]Essentially she demolishes the three-way harmony between scene, camera and editing, breaking up shot linkages in a manner that does violence to the syntax of continuity and the laws of mainstream spectatorship. Martin offers the opening three minutes of Denis' semi-autobiographical 1988 debut film *Chocolat* as evidence, citing the discord between establishing shots that set up spatio-temporal context and usher in the objective illusion, shots of a character looking at an off-screen object that announce the suturing process, and eyeline matches that do not match the expected POV and thus lead us astray. His example is enlightening: a long but relatively conventional opening shot of a quiet beach, followed by another conventional shot of a young white woman gazing across the sand at a black child on the shore, followed by an overhead close-up of the child in the water. This last shot is the one that violates cinema's traditional laws of looking, because it cannot be intended to represent the gazer's distant perspective. And with images desubjectified, divested of certain ownership, classical viewers have both visual identification processes and the spatio-temporal ground torn from beneath their feet.

Martin, Beugnet and others have traced the development of Denis' visual aesthetic in the years since *Chocolat*, identifying the ways in which she has refined her methods of ellipsis and worked out new narrative devices with which to plant seeds of doubt in our minds about the knowledge-value of vision. Certainly there is a distinct sense of a filmmaker who has gradually developed her own mercurial brand of Deleuzian time-image cinema, moving from the relatively accessible use of parallel editing structures in films like *US Go Home* (1994), *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994) and *Nénette et Boni* to the extreme case of a film like *L'intrus*, in which the viewer's attempts to grasp the most fundamental details of narrative incident, chronology or spatial organization are constantly frustrated by the manner in which every scene – indeed, every image – unfolds in an uncertain limbo between flashback, memory and dream.

One of the devices through which Denis attains a state of narrative flux in *Beau travail* is, at least on the surface, a fairly conventional, novelistic one: that of the unreliable narrator. Rather than provide the viewer with a stable point of objective reference, Galoup's voiceover is misleading and impressionistic, frequently dropping off the soundtrack for long stretches before returning with a sticky, close-up murmur to offer an opaque digression or aside that collapses the boundaries between reality and myth, memory and dream. [19] Without other sources to corroborate Galoup's observations or orient us in terms of geography, time zones, or chronology of events, we are never quite sure what to believe. As a result we are forced to trust the hazy impressions gleaned from signifiers like location and costume changes.

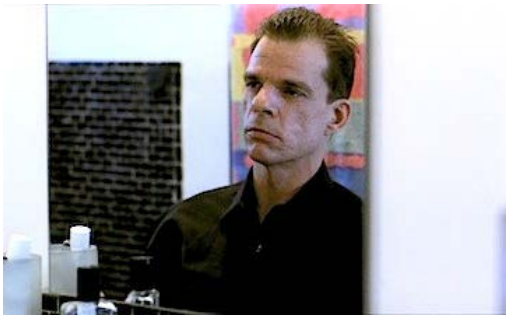
Beyond the narration, Beugnet has described how Denis also destabilizes viewer perspective at the level of editing and mise-en-scène, citing among many examples a long asynchronous shot of the legionnaires walking across a lunar desert landscape to the dreamy strain of Neil Young's "Safeway Cart." [20] In this case, the fact that the legionnaires move across the screen from right to left – in effect contradicting our traditional sense of movement in time – is an optical defamiliarization tactic familiar from such films as Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of*



In the film's most unnerving scene, a near-silent itinerary of the sergeant combing his hair and dressing in a bathroom mirror will cut to the deafening underwater explosion of a helicopter.



As Galoup buttons his shirt, his sporadic voiceover narration sutures us into his subjectivity



His gaze into the mirror signals the explosion as the brain-event of a man who has lost all pretense of grid-like Cartesian interfacing with his environment.

Glory (1957) and Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (1985). The film consistently plays such tricks on our vision to prevent us from accumulating meanings that obey the cause-and-effect psychology of traditional narrative cinema. Long shots and still frames of landscapes cut unexpectedly to close-ups of faces and bodies, with a distressing lack of master shots to smoothen the transitions or even securely localize the spaces of action. Instead, the wildly uneven duration of the shots and the alternation between straight cuts, dissolves and superimpositions conjures up a distinct sense of improvisation at the editing desk – a sense that Denis and Quettier are searching for new ways to riff upon cinematic time and space. More obviously, it causes the film to speed up and slow down in tempo. Taken as a whole, these strategies constitute the development of a strange, almost seasick rhythm, which critic Jonathan Romney picked up on when he compared *Beau travail* to the free-jazz compositions of Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman. [21] [22] It is rhythm that pulls the film outside the established syntax of traditional narrative and into another realm: music. According to Langer,

> "Music, like language, is an articulate form. Its parts not only fuse together to yield a greater entity, but in doing so they maintain some degree of separate existence, and the sensuous character of each element is affected by its function in the complex whole. This means that the greater entity we call a composition is not merely produced by mixture, like a new color made by mixing paints, but is articulated, i.e. its internal structure is given to our perception." [23]

Of foremost importance to Denis' construction of a musical rhythm, and the articulation of its structure to our perception, is the role of sound. No auditory sensation goes unheard – or unfelt – in the monosyllabic male world of the Foreign Legion. The sparsity of dialogue makes us pay closer attention to everything we do hear.

- The scratchy static of a sweeping brush along the ground.
- The bassy hum of a breeze as the legionnaires walk a precarious high-wire.
- The steam hissing from Galoup's iron as he starches his shirt.
- The whoosh of shaving foam from a can.
- The brushing of a razor upon skin.
- The abrasion of hands, feet and torsos against raw earth as the men wriggle under the barbed wire of an obstacle course.

Aural contrasts register in jarring fashion, like an abrupt cut from bubbly dance music in the local discotheque to the amniotic flapping of legionnaires' flippers in underwater training. *Beau travail* is, to borrow Steven Connor's phrase about another work – Walter Ruttmann's eleven-minute audio recording *Wochenende* (1929) –

> "a sound-film requiring a kind of listening eye, a gaze mutated into the conditions of hearing." [24]

An individual analysis of any one of these sound effects may elicit puzzlement at Denis' decision to mike up ambient or incidental noise higher than is usual in cinema. Taken cumulatively, though, her aural design works in concert with Galoup's trenchant narration to transport the viewer into his ever-darkening brain states. Even more so than her visual subversions, it is this emphasis on aural subjectivity that creates a cinematic rhythm whose import is purely symbolic.

For Langer, music attains the status of "significant form" by virtue of being symbolic rather than discursive. She believes there is a close logical resemblance between its formal structure and the forms of human feeling. What distinguishes music from language is that, rather than being understood successively through chains of "conventional reference," music operates as a complex symbol for the processes of our psyche, a "tonal analogue of emotive life" [25] that is capable of expressing what words cannot. So, too, Denis' narrative project in *Beau travail* gradually reveals itself as an auditory account of her protagonist's mental life, a

psychic limbo where

> “the singular space of the visual is transformed by the experience of sound to a plural space.”[26]



It is a strikingly potent audiovisual, the blue sea suddenly bursting with an inky red that, in literal terms, could be either blood or fire.

Sounds build upon one another to form pictures, providing the internal psychodrama of a man who, blindsided by jealousy, gradually loses all pretense of grid-like Cartesian interfacing with his environment. In turn Denis renounces the temporal continuity and spatio-visual reassurances of the classical narrative. As Steven Connor reminds us,

> “The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and music travel.”[27]



Denis has attuned us so intimately with Galoup's synaptic jitters that the expulsive redness filling the screen could just as easily be an aneurysm popping in close-up.



The red sound-image serves no practical purpose in *Beau travail*'s story-world, operating instead in a purely symbolic realm closer to music than narrative cinema.



It feels like Galoup’s inner epiphany of impending apocalypse: "That day something overpowering took over my heart. I thought about the end. The end of me. The end of Forestier."



His admission that "first we just heard a deafening noise" cues the explosion as a psychic code red, so that even if we are not sure where we stand in the narrative chain of events, it all makes a deeper, more intuitive kind of sense.

Emotions also travel through these channels, and Denis brings troubling emotional undertows to her wall of sound. The human body is an echoing chamber, a site where the seeing-equals-knowing ethos of vision lies exposed as an impotent construct. As one might expect from a director twisting film form into the shape of music, Denis has more faith in hearing as a structuring essence of life, a faculty that is acquired embryonically long before vision and only leaves the body in death after the other senses have shut down. Hence the most unnerving scene in *Beau travail* is not a gaze-related one, but the one that cuts from a near-silent itinerary of the sergeant combing his hair and buttoning his



The incident marks the turning point in Galoup's life, the moment when he is eternally banished from Forestier's affections because "it was then that Sentain's heroism came to the fore."



Galoup's mysterious, ostensibly sexual assignation with beautiful Djibouti native Rahel (Marta Tafesse Kassa) suggests he is not completely cut off from the plane of touch, but clearly hers is not the touch he craves.



Claustrophobic close-ups of torsos, limbs and palms during the training rituals appear to mock Galoup's bitter longing for tenderness.

shirt in a bathroom mirror to the deafening underwater explosion of a helicopter.

This incident marks the turning point in Galoup's life, the moment when he is eternally banished from Forestier's affections because "it was then that Sentain's heroism came to the fore." It is a strikingly potent audiovisual, the blue sea suddenly bursting with an inky red that, in literal terms, could be either blood or fire. Denis has attuned us so intimately to Galoup's synaptic jitters that the expulsive redness filling the screen could just as easily be an aneurysm popping in close-up. The red sound-image serves no practical purpose in the narrative, operating instead in that purely symbolic realm where

> "the factor of significance is not logically discriminated, but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function." [28]

It feels like Galoup's inner epiphany of impending apocalypse. He tells us,

> "That day something overpowering took over my heart. I thought about the end. The end of me. The end of Forestier."

His admission that "first we just heard a deafening noise" cues the explosion as a psychic code red, so that even if we are not sure where we stand in the narrative chain of events, it all makes a deeper, more intuitive kind of sense. Life begins with sound. Life ends with sound. The crisis that bifurcates Galoup's life is thus organized in terms of sound.

If sound is the sense whose constant presence defines Galoup's life, touch is the sense whose absence is most painfully felt. Touch functions as the invisible anchor of *Beau travail*, an off-screen vanishing point that charges every cell of the film. Touch is also, obviously, the sense most literally connected to the thematic of desire that haunts all of Denis' films. She seems to be aware that what matters most in desire is the failure to satiate it, for once satiated it can no longer be desire. Galoup's desire is potent precisely because it remains unconsummated. Whether he wants to have sex with Sentain or kill him (or probably both), he never gets to lay a hand on him. Nor is he welcomed back into the paternal bosom of Forestier's affections. Galoup is not completely cut off from the plane of touch, as evidenced by his mysterious, ostensibly sexual assignation with beautiful Djibouti native Rahel (Marta Tafesse Kassa). Clearly, though, hers is not the touch he craves. Thus we may interpret the soundtrack's gradual descent into cacophony as the crumbling sound-world of a man driven mad for want of tactile comfort.

The scene where Sentain is publicly praised by Forestier for his act of courage typifies Denis' rhythmic approach to both tactile sensation and quiet-loud dynamics: Galoup, alone in his room, briefly interrupts his own seething silence to tear off his military shirt and whip it through the air. Other significant collisions of sound and touch have a similarly dark import. When the legionnaires and natives join for a campfire dance, Denis' camera fixes itself on the back of Galoup's head, his large ears outlined in silhouette. His clanging internal racket is attuned to an aural set piece that incorporates the whistling of soldiers, the smashing of glass, the sizzle of firewood, the beating of hands upon wooden drums, and a fist-fight between two men on the sand. At such moments our attention is drawn to the status of rhythm as ancient, patterned movement, a primordial energy whose form is measured in sound and silence. Rhythm is a force that depends not on the unifying primacy of vision, but on a sympathetic correspondence between those senses that predate vision, and this means that it is also, in Langer's words,

> "a kind of symbolism peculiarly adapted to the explication of



Sound and touch collide in violence as the legionnaires slap against each other's chests in a compromise between an embrace and a wrestling grip.



Decentred compositions like this one emphasize Galoup's loneliness, isolation, and failure to adjust to civilian life in Marseilles.

'unspeakable' things." [29]

The film's numerous training rituals, which constitute a rhythmic space between martial arts and dance, offer another case in point. In one, the legionnaires slap against each other's chests in a homoerotic compromise between an embrace and a wrestling grip, their bodies crashing into each other with unfettered violence. Balletic and sculptural in their choreography, these rituals are full of outstretched palms and angled elbows, shot up close as if to mock Galoup's bitter craving for tenderness. There is, halfway through the film, a brief interlude where sound and touch meet in harmony: Sentain, having his head shaved by another soldier, chuckles happily as his comrade dusts the loose stubble off his scalp. But his simple sensual pleasure is undercut by the very next shot, as the self-loathing Galoup loads a fresh magazine into his rifle and gazes ferociously into the camera.

The focus on psychic subjectivity, and the sheer vividness of Denis' rhythmic articulations, ensure that our empathies lie with the spiteful, spurned Galoup rather than the catalytic cipher Sentain – even when the latter, punishingly expelled in the wilderness after Galoup has plotted against him, nearly burns to death on a sun-drenched salt beach. Desire is expressed as an animal state, a condition beyond the grasp of moral judgment or conscious recognition, and a force that refuses to yield to the laws of discourse. It is simply, in Galoup's own words, something overpowering that takes over your heart. In this case, we have no right to expect the discursive properties of language – syntax, grammar, logic – to magically emerge from his voiceover narration:

> "Everybody knows that language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions, memories and echoes of memories, transient fantasy, or its mere runic traces, all turned into nameless, emotional stuff." [30]



Galoup, raw with self-loathing, loads a fresh magazine into his rifle and gazes ferociously into the camera.



The intense focus on Galoup's subjectivity ensures that our empathies lie with him rather than Sentain, even when the latter nearly burns to death on a smoldering salt beach.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



As Galoup lies on a bed contemplating suicide, a vein on his bicep pulses to the tinny dance beat of Corona's "Rhythm of the Night."



Fallen from the code of the Legion as from the land of narrative, Galoup prepares for a solo breakdance in a mirrored nightclub.

Nor should we expect Denis to articulate the problem of desire within the linguistic bounds of traditional narrative cinema. And once narrative has failed us, what remains in life besides bodies in motion? Among many possible readings, *Beau travail*'s much-debated closing scene can be interpreted as a spectacular catharsis of the failure of narrative and the simultaneous persistence of pure feeling. Galoup, now expelled from the Legion himself and failing to adjust to civilian life in Marseilles, lies on a bed with a gun in his hand, ostensibly contemplating suicide. Beside a tattoo of the Legion code on his chest – "Serve the good cause and die" – a vein on his bicep pulses to the tinny beat of Corona's gay house anthem "Rhythm of the Night." Thus we are led into one of the most bizarrely exhilarating closing scenes in modern cinema, another of those episodes that occupy a psychic wasteland between flashback, hallucination, memory and dream: the sergeant alone in a nightclub and dressed in a dandyish black Fred Astaire outfit, which he had earlier worn in Djibouti; his reflection multiplied by a hall of diamond mirrors; fallen from the code of the Legion as from the land of narrative; breakdancing furiously.

This closing dance scene, which feels like the postscript to a musical from another planet, has no individual function within the film's story-world. It is useless to try and reinscribe it within the laws of syntax by constructing a timeline of events, reassessing the spaces of action, or speculating upon location or costume changes. Its relation to what has come before is not discursive but symbolic, and its significance is not of the order of meaning but of vital import. Langer reminds us that music is

> "a highly articulated sensuous object, which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey. Feeling, life, motion and emotion constitute its import." [31] [open endnotes in new window]



It is useless to try and reinscribe *Beau travail*'s closing scene within the laws of syntax by constructing a timeline of events, reassessing the spaces of action, or speculating upon location or costume changes – its significance is not narrative, but musical.



The torrent of spastic action unleashed by Galoup's whirling, spinning body sensuously evokes the endurance of desire as the great unrepresentable of human language.

Like music, it is only as a complex whole that *Beau travail* makes sense. And more than any narrative considerations, the torrent of spastic action unleashed by Galoup's whirling, spinning body sensuously evokes the endurance of desire as the great unrepresentable of human language. Words fail us, feelings persist, and sometimes we have no choice but to trust our own strange rhythm.

Vendredi soir—the acoustic womb

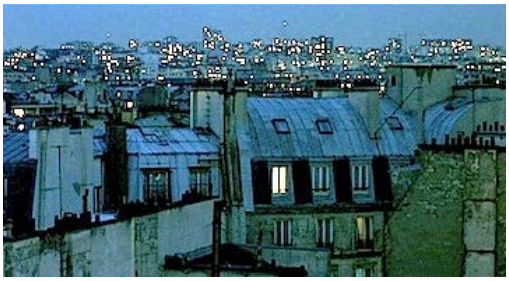
> "We begin to hear before we are born, four-and-a-half months after conception. From then on, we develop in a continuous and luxurious bath of sounds: the song of our mother's voice, the swash of her breathing, the trumpeting of her intestines, the timpani of her heart." – Walter Murch [32]

With her 2002 film *Vendredi soir*, Claire Denis advanced her journey into the rhythmic landscapes of desire, reaching further towards a cinematic form that seeks to transcend the expressive limitations of words and vision. Upon first inspection, the film seems atypical territory for the director: a two-character romantic drama co-adapted with Emmanuèle Bernheim from the latter's novel about a one-night stand that takes place during a 24-hour public transport strike in Paris. Warm and gentle, the film unfolds in ordered chronological sequence and sustains a disarming minor key throughout. The lightness of its tone and subject matter are far removed from the dazzling subversions of *Beau travail* or *L'intrus*, films where Denis launches a far more direct assault upon cinema's traditional discourses of narrative, form and spectatorship. Despite its favorable critical response upon release, *Vendredi soir* remains one of the less studied works in Denis' canon. In fact it represents her most quietly radical experiment in film form to date.

Images from *Vendredi soir*



Vendredi soir is Denis' take on the "brief encounter" subgenre: a gentle romance about a one-night stand that takes place during a 24-hour public transport strike in Paris.



The long introductory scene, with establishing shots of Parisian rooftops, apartment windows and motorways shot in dusky twilight, positions the film halfway between travelogue and urban

Reflecting on a mode of vision that first gripped Western thought during the Scientific Revolution, Steven Connor explains how "the rationalized 'Cartesian grid' of the visualist imagination" [33] posits "the perceiving self as a single point of view," a view "from which the exterior world radiates in regular lines." [34] There is a certain pretension towards omniscience about a mode of looking which values the world as an external plane of space, something ready to be penetrated, fragmented, and assimilated by the human gaze. Traditional narrative cinema attains its illusionistic power through a similar pretension, a complex relay of editing and mise-en-scène where objects are represented as clear forms in deep space, actions are localized within the space, and stable patterns of relation are established between each element in the frame. In her book *The Skin of the Film*, Laura U. Marks characterizes this mode of spectatorship as "optical visuality," a type of looking that necessarily stages a relationship of distance and separation between the viewing subject and the object of its vision. [35]

Optical looking lends itself usefully to the visualist functions of traditional narrative, but Marks feels there are also times

fairytale.



Still frames capture the city of light with a painterly romanticism far removed from the jagged formal assaults of *Beau travail*.



Our protagonist is Laure (Valérie Lemercier), a thirtysomething middle-class Parisian woman who gets caught alone in a citywide traffic jam on her way to start a new life with her boyfriend.



Laure's uncertainty over her impending lifestyle change is conveyed not through dialogue but a series of rhythmic visual strategies, such as this impressionistic superimposition of her old apartment over her face.

> "when words, sounds, and images trap as much as they free: when giving expression to some things that are cinema's proper territory prevents the expression of something else." [36]

Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze's time-image cinema and Henri Bergson's model of multisensory perception, Marks promotes a theory of embodied spectatorship she terms haptic visuality – a mode of looking that closes the gap between subject and object by having "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch." [37] In contrast to optical vision, whose function is to distinguish forms and establish meaningful connections between them, a haptic look engages the perception of the whole body by encouraging a dynamic interplay between the senses. The eyes move across the screen in search of texture, less concerned with narrative meaning than with the affective materiality of the image as something that means in itself. The haptic mode of looking is thus well equipped to process a cinema of pure form – a cinema towards which Claire Denis has increasingly tiptoed.

Between *Beau travail* and *Vendredi soir*, Denis startled critics by taking a grisly detour into the body horror sub-genre. *Trouble Every Day* was an exceptionally morose, nonlinear film about two people (Vincent Gallo and Béatrice Dalle) stricken with a mysterious medical condition that, upon their sexual arousal, breeds a *Cat People*-style hunger for human flesh. Featuring long wordless passages punctuated by graphic bursts of sexual cannibalism, the film's genre trappings and metaphorical density allowed Denis to take an anthropological approach to the problem of desire. Its extreme (though non-pornographic) close-ups of copulating human bodies registered in an unusual manner: not as clear figurations or distinct forms, but as dislocated swatches that took several moments for the viewer to recognize and identify as muscle, hair or skin. As such, they created a haptic viewing experience in which the viewer's eyes, denied the narrative movement provided by deep-space representation, assumed an intimate, caressing relationship to the surfaces and textures that filled the frame. Viewers were "more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze." [38] And unlike its more acclaimed predecessor, *Trouble Every Day* featured no voiceover to lead the viewer – even if only astray – through its nightmares of the flesh. It was as though the failure of Galoup's narration in *Beau travail* had liberated Denis from hacking through useless thickets of verbal language. Coupled with Tindersticks' most minimal score to date, the effect was one of floating aimlessly, unmoored from any sense of perspective or spatio-temporal reality. Both the elimination of voiceover and haptic treatment of bodies in flagrante delicto were carried forward to her next film, though with very different results.

Vendredi soir tells the story of Laure (Valérie Lemercier), a thirty-something middle-class Parisian woman who gets caught alone in a citywide traffic jam on her way to start a new life with her boyfriend. Quietly anxious over her impending lifestyle change, she is emboldened by a strange voice from her car radio encouraging drivers to pick up commuters seeking refuge from the winter night. Acting on a whim, she extends her charity to Jean (Vincent Lindon), a charismatic mystery man in a dark suit; with only a handful of words exchanged, they share a tender brief encounter. We never find out what their jobs are, what kind of relationship Laure is in, or if Jean harbors any motivations beyond the physical. Nor are we granted any insight into what their respective pasts or futures hold, though we never labor under the illusion that they have a future together. The absence of exposition means that Denis' focus is again neither moral nor psychological, but experiential. She wants us to inhabit Laure's subjective experience of the night, which is transient, uncensored and precious. [39]

The sights and sounds of Laure's world are rendered with the kind of skin-like intimacy that necessarily invokes a haptic viewing experience. Without clusters of dialogue, the film unfurls as a proliferation of textures and surfaces, sensations and details that form impressionistic insights into our heroine's psyche. Over the



Stuck in traffic, she hears a radio DJ encouraging drivers to pick up commuters seeking refuge from the winter night.



A giant pair of neon blue spectacles blinking beside an optician's shop window underscores the sense that Laure does not quite know what she is looking for in life.



Enter Jean (Vincent Lindon), a charismatic mystery man in a dark suit.



Strangers connecting in a sea of cars. We never find out what their jobs are, what kind of relationship Laure is in, or if Jean harbors any

course of the film, Laure indulges a few optical flights of whimsy that speak to the bittersweet magic-realism she sees in the world around her. Letters on a car number-plate reconstitute themselves; a lampshade flies across the room, attaches itself to a light bulb and switches itself on; the arrangement of olives and anchovies on a pizza assumes the appearance of a face, which then smiles at her. While these fleeting visual projections are rendered with optical clarity, their lack of innate meaning ensures that our engagement with them is not a cognitive response to the causal chain of narrative but a tactile identification with an ephemeral gesture. Marks explains that haptic cinema calls upon the viewer's private storehouse of intuitions, perceptions and sense-associations to fill in the narrative blanks and feel our way through the film. Depending on our individual memory banks, these images might suggest that Laure is prone to unsatisfied, nostalgic yearnings for the impulsive spontaneity of childhood, when object relations answered to their own logic and everything felt possible. If this is the case, we may also surmise that she nurtures a buried romantic streak that still believes, against her better judgment, in the possibility of finding Prince Charming in a traffic jam.

The visual strategies through which Denis constructs the rhythms of *Vendredi soir* are recognizable to those familiar with her aesthetic. She employs suitably impressionistic lighting and a color palette that shifts from grainy desaturation to flashes of luminescence. There are dreamy dissolves and superimpositions, compositions that alternate between deep and shallow focus, and instances of slow motion so understated that they register less as camera tricks than as subliminal, first-person impressions. There are also fleeting moments of what Adrian Martin has termed "poetic undoing," a dissemination of interstitial shots that are detached from Laure's consciousness and the spatio-temporal reality of our story-world – a lone woman walking along an empty road; Paris reduced to the harsh blur of a street lamp; the empty space of Laure's deserted apartment. [40] The import of these lyrical apparitions is again purely sensual and symbolic rather than functional in any narrative sense. Taken collectively, the jazz-like variations of mood and tempo trigger unexpected overlaps and correspondences within the viewer's perceptual field, encouraging him or her to surrender the optical mastery associated with narrative and instead assume a pleasurably haptic relationship to the screen.

As with *Beau travail*, sound plays a crucial role in drawing us into the rhythms of lived experience. Denis frequently switch-hits between lulling the viewer into cavernous aural spaces and spitting him/her back out into auditory self-awareness. The long intro scene, with establishing shots of Parisian rooftops, apartment windows and motorways shot in dusky twilight and set to Hinchliffe's ethereal main theme, positions the film halfway between travelogue and urban fairytale. Our dreamy illusion is rudely interrupted by the excoriating sound of Laure rolling a strip of masking tape over cardboard boxes as she hesitantly packs up her possessions. There is a similar dynamic shift a while later, when Laure briefly slips away from Jean's disarming in-car seduction to telephone a friend who is expecting her for dinner. In this scene, the screeching cry of the friend's baby on the other end of the line (again, a naturalistic sound effect that is miked up higher than usual in films) serves to auditize the very commitment fears Laure wants to escape on this fateful Friday night.

While such moments expand upon *Beau travail*'s exploration of unsettling auditory contrasts, Denis' chief sonic concern in this film is the illusion of silence. *Vendredi soir* often turns the sound down so low that it is left to Hinchliffe's lush, twinkly score to remind us that we are not watching a silent film. Of course, what we generally regard as silence in a contemporary film are simply those moments bereft of spoken dialogue, diegetic or soundtrack music, or large-scale sound

motivations beyond the physical.



Though she has quit smoking, Laure finds herself pleasurably enveloped in the warmth of Jean's cigarette smoke on this freezing night.

effects. One of the more subversive qualities of *Vendredi soir* is the manner in which its audio track is furnished with an intricate layer of micro-sounds from start to finish: rather than a silent film, it is a subliminally noisy one. Several moments initially translate as silent or near silent due to their absence of dialogue, music, or action-based, plot-propelling sound effects. Yet even on a passive viewing, we subconsciously absorb the bustling undergrowth of sonic flora and fauna Denis locates in such moments – the mild breeze of the urban night, the faint click-clack of Laure's high heels as she walks along a quiet curb, the hum of distant traffic when Laure and Jean find themselves on a ghostly backstreet. [41] While Marks' chief concern lies with the tactile properties of the image, she also acknowledges the haptic potential of sound in forming an embodied and multisensory viewing experience:

> "Of course we cannot literally touch sound with our ears, just as we cannot touch images with our eyes; but as vision can be optical or haptic, so too hearing can perceive the environment in a more or less instrumental way. We listen for specific things, while we hear ambient sound as an undifferentiated whole. One might call "haptic hearing"that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to." [42]

If Marks considers all sounds haptic until they resolve into aural clarity, there are other theorists for whom hearing is an innately haptic experience. The music therapist Edith Lecourt, who writes of the "subjective ear noises" [43] of deaf patients prone to auditory hallucinations of distant choirs and disembodied voices, defines hearing as "a veritable acoustic womb" [44] that envelops us from birth to death:

> "Sound reaches us from everywhere, it surrounds us, goes through us." [45]

Given that we cannot ever pinpoint its location in space, confine its operation to our ears alone, or hear it for the same functional purposes that we do in mainstream cinema, sound is unusually well adapted to haptic representation. Connor suggests that

> "our vulnerability to the alterity of sound – or of sound as the sign of alterity – is vulnerability to the doubled self of the man-made; man-made sound emanates from 'us', but assails and pervades us from an enigmatically indefinite 'out there'" [46]

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Laure in *Vendredi soir* is confronted with the same tensions between optical and auditory modes of experience that terrorized Galoup in *Beau travail*. On three occasions in the first 35 minutes, she is shown rubbing her fists to her eyes in a combination of sleepiness and disillusionment. The sense that she does not quite know what she is looking for in life is underscored when she first lays eyes on Jean, framed as a gauzy dissolve from a giant pair of neon blue spectacles blinking beside an optician's shop window. Later, after phoning her friend to cancel dinner, she loses her bearings and briefly panics that he has absconded with her car and belongings. "Have you seen my car?"she incredulously asks a fellow driver; "It was just here." (The man's response is predictably sarcastic: "In front of me? And you can't find it. It must've flown off.")



Unwittingly sparking a battle of wills, Jean attempts to navigate out of the traffic jam by taking the wheel and speeding down a backstreet.



Laure, still uncertain whether she wants to surrender control to this seductive stranger, passively surveys life from the passenger seat.

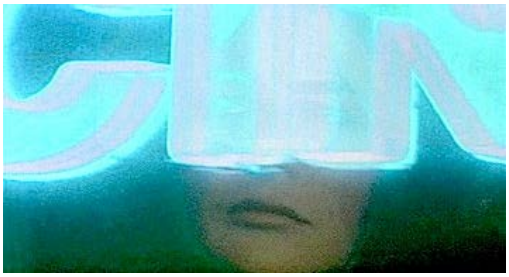


Urban tableau flies past the window, a time-travelling blur of neon lights, buildings and shop-fronts.



Laure's vision, chronicled through choppy, dislocated framings of Jean's hands on the wheel, is rendered haptic by the speed at which they travel.

The sensory conflicts of the film's first half climax in an odd, ambiguous scene that inadvertently brings their romantic dilemma to boiling point. Unwittingly sparking a battle of wills, Jean attempts to navigate out of the traffic jam by taking the wheel and powering the car down a backstreet. Laure, still uncertain whether she wants to surrender control to this seductive stranger, passively surveys life from the passenger seat. Urban tableau flies past the window, a time-travelling blur of neon lights, buildings and shop-fronts as Bernard Herrmann-esque strings saw and chop anxiously on the soundtrack. Laure's vision, chronicled up close in choppy, dislocated framings of Jean's hands and collar, has become seriously compromised, reflecting "the unsteadiness of the ways of looking and seeing characteristic of city life – the glance or the glimpse rather than the sustained gaze."[47] [open endnotes in new window] Blinded by sensory overload, she demands that her travelling companion stop the car and let her out.



The travelling companions' encounter is abruptly cut short when, blinded by sensory overload, she demands that he stop the car

and let her out.



The film becomes charged with desire. Having reconciled at a nearby café, Laure and Jean brush past each other in slow motion on the stairs.



Laure and Jean give in to their desire as they kiss on the street.



Moving to a drab hotel room, they embrace like lifelong lovers.

The scene expresses a common condition of the postmodern urban consciousness, where “the molestations of vision brought about by urban experience” [48] inevitably lead to a psychic loss of control, and with it an alienating sense of suspicion about the accuracy of visual knowledge. Denis now cements the visualist critique by self-consciously drawing our attention to the haptic role that sound is playing in this drama. We may not be specifically aware of the car engine humming in the background, but its low rumble has functioned as a sympathetic vibration through the first half of the film, lulling us into a warm envelope of mechanical sound as surely as Grégoire Colin drifts to sleep to the rhythm of his coffee percolator in *Nénette et Boni*. The occasional metronomic ticking of the indicator brings an extra note of musicality to the mix.

Following Laure's demand to stop the car, Jean makes an abrupt exit, and his erstwhile companion, confused and regretful, moves to switch off the ignition. As long as the engine is running, there is a feeling that this dalliance could go somewhere, but as the ignition fizzles out, we feel a bassy pulse leaving our innards. Hence the scene forms a lo-fi epiphany in the middle of the film, louding our sensitivity to Denis' haptic treatment of micro-sound in physical space. As viewers, our body has become both Laure's body and the car's body, so the sense of deflated hope when Jean leaves the womb-like interior hits surprisingly hard. [49]

Just as the rhythmic structure of *Beau travail* was articulated to the viewer as a formal symbol of human emotion, *Vendredi soir* appeals to progressively deeper planes of psychic engagement through its tactile complex of image and sound. Because haptic cinema blurs the dynamic boundaries between the viewing subject and the object of its vision, it necessarily appeals to raw, embodied perception and a more intuitive, vulnerable mode of spectatorship than is possible within traditional narrative. In this regard, Marks has spoken of the propensity for haptic media to invoke the mimetic faculty of a viewer’s perception. She defines mimesis (from the Greek *mimeisthai* – “to imitate”) as a type of artistic representation “based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment.” [50] Mimetic art has the power to reactivate our forgotten sense-experiences by assuming their material form and reinscribing their presence within our bodies. In doing so, it can bring us into direct contact with the indexical traces of our own lost memories:

> “We move between seeing the object, recalling virtual images that it brings to mind, and comparing the virtual object thus created with the one before us. This viewing process reactivates a viewer’s complex of memory-images at the same time that it creates the object for perception.” [51]



Our eyes caress the frame as Jean undresses Laure. Subjectivity is expressed through intimate but dislocated close-ups of body parts – a common figuration of haptic cinema.



The love scene assumes the aspect of caretaking and fetal embrace as Jean’s fingers dance over Laure’s skin.



As with Denis' previous film *Trouble Every Day*, fragments of flesh are shot so close-up that it is often difficult to distinguish which body part occupies the frame at any given moment. But where the sex scenes in that film descended into nightmares, this one plays out as a pleasant dream.



Laure returns the compliment by paying attention to Jean's feet. She wonders if a blister on his heel led him to seek refuge in her car.



Vendredi soir features the cinema's most purely haptic love scene to date – an audiovisual poem of surfaces, textures and sensations that the viewer comes to experience as a flash of infant memory.



The grainy, under-lit flatness of the love scene is not merely a haptic signifier of primordial infant vision, but an attempt to mimetically re-immerse the viewer in that first bath of sound and touch which, once lost, is gone forever.



The subliminal burble of the space heater now assumes the sonic role of the car engine, supplying the film with an ambient ghost of mechanical rhythm.



Denis pushes the mimetic capacity of haptic cinema to its fullest potential in *Vendredi soir's* love scene. The minor miracle of this sequence is not that it is almost wordless, or that it lasts seven minutes, or even that it feels far more romantic than one would expect from a depiction of a one-night stand in a low-rent hotel room. Rather it is the manner in which the viewer's pretenses toward a distant, optical identification with the screen are renounced by a visual set-up that uncannily evokes the sensation of slipping into a dream. The surface plane of the screen is flattened, the framing is de-centered, the focus is fuzzy and shallow, the colors are bleached into different shades of sepia and gray, and the lighting is so underexposed that large portions of the screen are blacked out. As with *Trouble Every Day,* fragments of flesh are shot so close-up that it becomes difficult to distinguish which body part occupies the frame at any given moment. Where the sexual assignations in that film ended in horrifying violence, this one sustains its weightless state of grace. Optical vision is debased so that other senses can flourish: we are informed of the blister on Jean's foot, the smell of rubber on Laure's hands after opening a condom; we warm to the sparse minutiae of the hotel room and the golden glow of the space heater, whose subliminal burble now assumes the duty of the car engine in supplying an ambient ghost of mechanical rhythm. Our eyes caress the frame as Jean undresses Laure, fingers dancing over her skin, arms cradling her in a fetal embrace while Hinchliffe's score swells around them like a womb. The only reason none of this feels voyeuristic is because Denis' haptic form has so thoroughly activated the mimetic response: it feels like it is happening to us.

The mode of psychic engagement proposed by *Vendredi soir* powerfully evokes the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's theory of the skin ego, in which nine metaphorical psychic functions are attributed to the human skin. One of the

Laure and Jean enjoy a late supper at an Italian restaurant, though a request to hurry their food order and the bickering of a couple at a nearby table suggests the return of the social world.



Laure's pizza reflects her rapture by smiling back at her.

earliest of these functions is a so-called "acoustic envelope," wherein the newborn infant develops the illusion of being fused with its mother in a two-way skin. This skin is experienced not in terms of sight, but as a luxurious bath of sound and touch. As Steven Connor explains,

> "The skin ego is formed from, and remains powerfully associated with, sensory impressions which are previsual or at best weakly visual. We may surmise that the skin ego comes into being in the infant's early attempts to perpetuate or recreate the conditions obtaining in the womb, in which its existence is organized almost wholly in terms of taste, touch and hearing, and in particular a powerful combination of the last two." [52]

At this stage of the infant's development there is no clear demarcation between tactile and auditory sensations, so the feeling of being embraced by the mother is experienced through the enveloping warmth of her voice. With a little luck, this same warmth can be metaphorically "revived in the experience of [sexual] love, in which each, holding the other in their arms, envelops the other while being enveloped by them." [53] In this context, we may appreciate the grainy, under-lit flatness of *Vendredi soir*'s love scene as not merely a haptic signifier of primordial infant vision, but an attempt to mimetically re-immerse the viewer in that first bath of sound and touch which, once lost, is gone forever. The sense of psychic revelation induced by the mimetic mode of spectatorship also supports Susanne Langer's thesis that non-narrative art forms appeal to our intuitive knowledge of the inner life, and thus have the power to generate those moments of sudden understanding "which the mind reads in a flash, and preserves in a disposition or an attitude." [54]

Laure briefly experiences psychic re-immersion with Jean, but the mundane reality of the social world bursts their bubble of post-coital bliss: a snooty bellboy talks too much; a restaurant waiter asks them to hurry their food order; a couple bickers at a nearby table. They enjoy another sexual encounter in the bathroom, but the stroke of midnight heralds a Cinderella-like fall to earth. Their third attempt at lovemaking, back at the hotel, is a non-starter. Laure, suddenly turned off by Jean's touch, pushes his body away, and he falls asleep.



The superimposed memory of their lovemaking provides all the dialogue they need.



The couple enjoys another brief encounter in the bathroom.

She slips away in the middle of the night, leaving Jean the car as a sentimental gift. Against the blue dawn of the street, her pace quickens. She has not been devastated by her night with him, but it has left her a little different, and as Connor notes, the "birth into difference accomplished in and through the skin is also a birth into vision." [55] Running faster now, Laure passes another pair of neon blue spectacles by an optician's shop window; this pair, however, do not blink. Comfortable in her skin, at ease in her environment, Laure smiles radiantly as the fairytale theme twinkles around her for the last time. [56]



Our pleasure at the ending of *Vendredi soir* consists in witnessing Laure's desire being gently satisfied where Galoup's was cruelly, indefinitely deferred in *Beau travail*. Words are still few and far between, but for once we see a Claire Denis character making the transition from a vision that mutilates and degrades the

Jean cradles Laure on the street as the stroke of midnight heralds a Cinderella-like fall to earth.

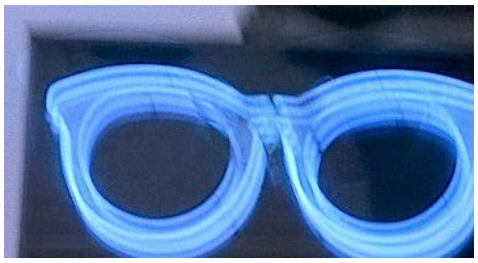
other senses into one that harmonically integrates them in a new democracy. The fact that this happy ending sheds light on the film's dormant Cinderella subtext only underscores the painful elusiveness of that transition for the rest of us. In this regard, there are obvious limitations to the mimetic response induced by a haptic viewing experience. Yet the specific constellations of sound, touch and image that constitute a Denis film means that to watch one is to surrender ourselves for a few hours to a strange fugue state, somewhere between a waking trance and a lucid dream. *Beau travail* proposes a cinematic form that shatters the laws of narrative in order to articulate the rhythms of the psyche. *Vendredi soir* presents us with the gift of being suspended, weightless and afloat, in a cocoon of amniotic fluid. In both cases, Denis seems to be giving us a chance to start over.



Laure slips away in the middle of the night, leaving Jean the car as a gift to remember her by.



Against the blue dawn of the street, her pace quickens.



Laure runs past another pair of neon blue spectacles by an optician's shop window; this pair, however, do not blink.



A future with Jean was never on the cards. Instead their Friday night has functioned as a fleeting return to infant subjectivity, and a gentle birth into vision.



Comfortable in her skin, at ease in her environment, Laure smiles radiantly as the fairytale theme twinkles around her for the last time.

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Notes

Special thanks to Julia Lesage for her supportive feedback and for introducing me to the work of Susanne Langer, whose 1953 book *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* inspired the title of this essay.

1. Deleuze, 201. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. I am inclined to agree with Adrian Martin's assessment of *White Material* as one of Denis' more qualified successes, and for the same reason: Denis' political critique of postcolonial Africa and her narrative, audiovisual stylizations are typically potent, but they operate within the context of a star vehicle for the commanding presence of Isabelle Huppert, who had originally propositioned Denis to adapt Doris Lessing's 1950 novel *The Grass is Singing*. Huppert's Maria Vial is a headstrong French coffee farmer determined to bring in the harvest at her plantation despite the eruption of a brutal civil war, and in Martin's words she feels like "a distant relative of Bette Davis in any number of 1930s and '40s melodramas." *White Material*'s function as star vehicle restricts Denis from exploring "the meaning of actor/character-as-body" (Beugnet) as convincingly as her other films, as well as from pushing images and sounds as elements that carry meaning in themselves.

3. Staples scored *L'intrus* as a solo project, as did Hinchliffe with *Vendredi soir*. Tindersticks are credited as a full band with the scores for *Nénette et Boni, Trouble Every Day, 35 Shots of Rum* and *White Material*. The soundtrack of *Beau travail* features a mixture of pop artists (Corona, Tarkan, Neil Young) and excerpts from Benjamin Britten's 1951 opera *Billy Budd*.

4. Antonioni is actually one of those filmmakers, like Pasolini, Rossellini and Renoir, whom Schrader locates on the margins of transcendental style. (I mention him above because I see less of a kinship between Denis and the third director whom Schrader focuses his central thesis upon, Carl Theodor Dreyer.) *35 Shots of Rum* ranks as Denis' most purely transcendental project to date, doubtless because she conceived it as a tribute to Ozu's father-daughter domestic drama *Late Spring* (1949).

5. Beugnet, 21.

6. Smith, 2005.

7. Beugnet, 27.

8. Langer, 1991, 78.

9. Beugnet, 14.

10. Deleuze, 201.

11. Romney, 2000.

12. Denis on an itinerant childhood spent travelling through colonial Africa:

> "I remember being dazzled by the beauty of the Red Sea, the desert. You don't forget a landscape like that. I always thought of Djibouti as a place where human history hasn't really begun yet – or perhaps it's already over. There's something in the landscape that's stronger than human civilization. There's no agriculture, for example, and there are live volcanoes. And there's the Legion."(Romney, 2000)

13. Of special interest for their aesthetic and intertextual links with *Beau travail* are Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938), Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950), Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976) and Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982). The film also bears a self-consciously intertextual relationship to Jean-Luc Godard's once-controversial Algerian War critique *Le petit soldat* (1963), in which Michel Subor played a young exile caught up with revolutionary groups, also named Bruno Forestier.

14. It is tempting to read this scene as a tongue-in-cheek, queer pastiche of the showdown between gunfighters Henry Fonda and Charles Bronson in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), wherein they circle each other slowly before opening fire.

15. Thompson, 202.

16. Langer, 1991, 72.

17. Langer, 78.

18. Martin, 2006. [return to page 2]

19. Beugnet, 119.

20. Ibid, 110.

21. Romney, 2000.

22. Jean-Michel Frodon has made a similar observation about the manner in which Denis' films

> "radically modify the status of the shot. The shot ceases to be the narrative and plastic unit with which the sequences that compose the film as a whole are built. The shot as unit becomes the shot as stroke or line, a visual sign that, only through its combination

> with other signs, will call forth a mental recomposition producing emotions and meaning" (2002).

Frodon, however, sees the editing rhythms as less informed by music than the aesthetics of contemporary kung-fu cinema.

23. Langer, 1991, 71.

24. Connor, 1997, 211.

25. Langer, 1991, 68.

26. Connor, 1997, 207.

27. Ibid.

28. Langer, 1991, 73.

29. Langer, 82.

30. Ibid.

31. Langer, 1991, 72. [return to page 3]

32. Murch, 2000.

33. Connor, 1997, 207.

34. Ibid.

35. Marks, 162.

36. Ibid, 129.

37. Ibid, 162.

38. Ibid.

39. When asked whether she ever enjoys films with snappy dialogue, Denis responded that:

> "when it's good, I really enjoy it. The only thing is, the type of story I like to tell is another sort of dialogue – it's the dialogue between sound and movement, and feelings and emotion."(Cochrane, 2009)

40. Martin, 2006.

41. In some ways, Denis' take on subliminal sound recalls the celebrated opening montage of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), where an arch compendium of life in a picture-postcard suburban Midwest finally settles upon the scene of a middle-aged man hosing his Norman Rockwell lawn before having a heart attack. From this shot, the camera slowly burrows beneath the grass to uncover a nest of bugs building their secret

subterranean home... and with it, a parallel sound-world that crunches, seethes and slithers at the edge of our consciousness.

42. Marks, 183.

43. Jacobus, 135.

44. Ibid, 133.

45. Connor, 214.

46. Ibid, 209.

47. Ibid, 210. [return to page 4]

48. Ibid.

49. According to Beugnet, on *Vendredi soir* Denis and Ughetto

> "had the opportunity to mix the sound with a SR surround system that recreates a rich and textured sound and generates a heightened feeling of being enveloped in it" (193).

50. Marks, 138.

51. Ibid, 148.

52. Connor, 2004, 50.

53. Segal, 47.

54. Langer, 80.

55. Connor, 2004, 50.

56. The fact that Laure only attains this blissful (and presumably temporary) state of visual integrity after a sexual encounter with a man could be said to undermine the film's feminist value, though the focus on her pleasure suggests otherwise. Beyond considerations of gender, the notion that good sex functions as a mind-cleansing visual restorative has enjoyed a broad cultural currency. See the sex scene between Gina Gershon and Jennifer Tilly in *Bound* (1996). Gershon plays a just-released convict who presumably has not had sex in a long time. Lying back in post-coital bliss after her first tryst with Tilly, she sighs wistfully, "I can see again."

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