

Women on the Other Side

Week 5: *L'Intrus* (France 2004)

Directed by Claire Denis
Produced by Humbert Balsan for Ognon Pictures and arte France Cinéma
Written by Claire Denis and Jean Pol Fargeau from the novel by Jean-Luc Nancy
Cinematography by Agnès Godard
Original music by Stuart Staples
Film Editing by Nelly Quettier
Production design by Arnaud de Moleron
Costume design by Judy Shrewsbury
Sound design by Jean Louis Ughetto
Runtime 130 minutes

Leading Players

Michel Subor	<i>Louis Trebor</i>
Katerina Golubeva	<i>Young Russian Woman</i>
Béatrice Dalle	<i>Queen of the Northern Hemisphere</i>
Grégoire Colin	<i>Sidney</i>
Florence Loiret	<i>Antoinette</i>
Henri Tetaïnanuarii	<i>Henri</i>
Jean-Marc Teriipaia	<i>Tony</i>
Anna Tetuaveroa	<i>The Mother</i>

In the dreamlike atmosphere Denis creates, it is not easy to distinguish between reality, memory and nightmare. (Philip French: *The Observer*).

I'm still scratching my head over this one, but the itch is mostly pleasant. (Xan Brooks: *The Guardian*).

The Intruder is a long and pretentious film that appears to be about a cold wealthy man reconsidering his selfish ways before and after a heart transplant. (hollywoodreporter.com)

Well shucks, I tried to like it, and at least I succeeded in not hating it and in getting something out of it. (schweinehunder from Canada: user comments on www.imdb.com)

Claire Denis has demonstrated repeatedly that film does not need to tell a story, that it is sufficient to create an experience that allows the viewer to take the ingredients and make of them what they will. (gradyharp from United States: user comments on www.imdb.com)

The range of responses to Claire Denis' *L'Intrus*, will warn you that next week's film is no 'pushover' and has had a tendency to divide opinions between filmgoers, making us ask what is the kind of cinema we enjoy?



Michel Subor as Louis Trebor in *L'Intrus*

The story broadly relates to the character of Louis Trebor, his journey from his home in the French-Swiss border to the South Sea islands, after a heart transplant operation. There are a number of apparent narratives and characters weaved around this main character – including an estranged son and a mysterious girl. However, the experience of the film is not as a conventional narrative, but as a series of fragmentary experiences, where we follow Trebor through a bewildering variety of locations. As the film unfolds, we cease to be certain whether what we are experiencing is an external reality, or projections of his memories or his unconscious state.

It is certainly the story of a man aware of his own mortality, reaching a crisis point. His relationships to those around him, however, do not make him a character we feel natural sympathy towards in this situation. Michel Subor's performance does not encourage this either. He is a Denis 'regular', having appeared in *Beau Travail* as the distant, complicatedly paternal commandant of the soldiers. In *L'Intrus* he brings to life a protagonist that it is hard to like or who provides an easy point of identification. His external appearance gives very little away about his mental state, and we are left to fill in the gaps of his motivation. Denis describes how Subor does not so much 'act' as 'become' the role that he is taking on.

Claire Denis

Denis's apprenticeship in filmmaking included working with some notable directors of art cinema: Wim Wenders (for whom she worked for fifteen years as an assistant director), Jim Jarmusch as well as Jacques Rivette (of the French *nouvelle vague*). Denis has, therefore, always been of the school of independent cinema, where there is attention to form as much as content. In Denis's documentary about him, Rivette compares a film's narrative or plot to a *pelote*, a ball of wool that is unravelled only as the film is made. In Denis, as in

Wenders, we can also find a love of shooting urban spaces and cityscapes, as characters move through them rather than staying in them or attaching to them.

The small budget for *L'Intrus*, given its ambitious locations, meant that Denis relied heavily on the collaborative team she has built around her. Agnès Godard has been her cinematographer since her first film, *Chocolat* (1988). They share much of the same real life 'film school', Godard working for Wenders as well; in addition, Godard has collaborated with Peter Greenaway and Agnès Varda – both filmmakers known for their painterly eye. Perhaps influenced by Varda, she has an ability to make 'unreal', or poetic, objects that would otherwise seem everyday and banal. Jean Louis Ughetto (sound) and Jean Pol Fargeau (adaptation) have had similarly long associations with Denis.

Her personal biography is also relevant to the places of *L'Intrus*. Born in 1948, she spent much of her childhood in West Africa where her father was an administrator in the French colonial services. She, therefore, experienced at first hand the colonial life and the disappearance of empire. She returned to France at 14, a country of which she was a national but which she did not know. Therefore, it is possible to trace and understand her passionate interest in identity and how certainty about it has been undermined by the social and cultural changes of the last century. Denis is vociferous in her rejection of a nostalgic lens for viewing these past places; for her, it is the dramas taking place in the present there that she wants to explore. In particular, her characters suffer from the difference between their known colonial and the new, post-colonial world that has moved on without them.

L'Intrus does not visit Denis' colonial childhood as directly as *Chocolat* did, but it does have biographical resonances. The French-Swiss borderlands are familiar to her from her childhood, but her intention is to create a resonance for all the audience about childhood nightmares and fears. The scenes shot in Tahiti, again raise the ghost of French colonialism and its legacy. Beneath the beauty of the exterior, and the purple light that Gauguin painted (that Denis says is real), there is something *dangerously* real to be reckoned in the relationships re-found.

Melodrama to Art Cinema

This may be cinema you love or hate. On the DVD of *L'Intrus*, Denis explains that the book affected her deeply; the experience of reading was 'penetrating' and physical. The images reflect this by revolving around physicality – sensuous experience – through Godard's intense compositions. Denis and Godard also allow us to experience more dreamlike spaces, to match the dark, dreamlike space we are sitting in together. We can look more closely at the images, because we are not being rushed through to a (more obvious) narrative conclusion. We might reflect that Denis is expecting, or allowing, us to be part of making the film and its interpretation. As one critic comments, it is a film that will have a different interpretation depending on who is

speaking.

She recognises that this could be regarded as a very 'masculine' film. Her instinct to recast the main protagonist as a woman could not be accomplished, she felt, from the entirely different physical symbolism of a woman's heart and breast. Therefore, unlike our previous films we do not have the central female protagonist. However, in the intensity of the emotions and in the relationship between fathers and sons that is explored throughout, it is interesting to consider how far we have really come from the family saga or the melodrama.

Discussion Questions for Week 6

1. Does the focus on the male protagonist move this film, by a woman director, away from the genres of melodrama and family saga discussed earlier?
2. How do you, personally, respond to the use of a fragmented narrative?
3. Do you think Trebor is offered as a representation of men and masculinity? Are other kinds of masculinities explored in this film? How, overall, did you respond to the representation of the protagonist?
4. Is it possible to attribute a 'female gaze' to the use of form and content in this film? Can we tell that this is a film made by a woman?

The Final Word

L'Intrus begins and I am riveted, baffled, and blown away . . . The movie burns itself into my brain. Back into daylight, I run into a colleague. "How was it?" he asks. "Impenetrable," I say. "I loved it." (Tom Hall: <http://blogs.indiewire.com/twhalliii/archives/010882.html>)



Claire Denis

Rona Murray and Roy Stafford 21/10/07