

Women on the Other Side

Week 6: The many sides of Claire Denis

In analysing and reflecting on our viewing of *L'Intrus* last week, we can bring some of the ideas we have examined in previous weeks to analyse our own personal responses to the film.

How did you respond:

- To the film's style, particularly to its 'atemporal' narrative
- To its main character?

What were some of the thematic concerns you felt it dealt with?

- A family drama, of sons and father
- A study of a certain type of masculinity
- A study of mortality?

Overall, did the style enable or disable you in engaging with the main character?

Do you feel it shares anything in common with the films of the previous weeks?

What is Claire Denis?

Discourses around Claire Denis (and *L'Intrus*)

An intriguing aspect of examining Claire Denis is to examine the discourses that exist around her as a filmmaker. What are the different, available categories we can use as frameworks to discuss her work?

We can think of her as:

- a woman filmmaker making a 'woman's film'
- a post-colonial filmmaker
- an independent, arthouse filmmaker

(All of the above position Denis as an *auteur*).

Or we can think of her as:

- part of a collaborative team, where the look of the film and its style is feminine i.e. the idea of a female gaze on the subject matter.

A Woman Filmmaker and a Woman's Film

The subject matter does recall something of *The Namesake*:

- The focus on relationships between fathers and sons
- The focus on a central protagonist, a male, who is on a journey to resolve family relationships that might lead to self-discovery
- The need to cross continents and boundaries to find the resolution of those issues

It is shot very expressionistically, with the aesthetic style foregrounded, some might argue at the expense of content. However, there are similar tropes that we are familiar with from melodrama i.e.

- The placing of the story in the realm of feeling
- The concentration on the familial and the domestic sphere, despite the film's several locations

A Post-Colonial Filmmaker

L'Intrus shares, with *Chocolat* (1988) and *Beau Travail* (1999), the focus on the disintegration of colonial relationships in the post-colonial era. Trebor, like France, attempts to return to a land where he was a colonial inhabitant, but that ultimately rejects him. Denis's power in staging these topics comes through her biography, remembering that she experienced this displacement and struggle for coherent identity after her childhood in West Africa and subsequent removal 'back' to France.

Differently, in *L'Intrus*, we have the masculine coloniser rather than the feminine 'in-between', in the character France. The narrative explores his attempts to exercise power, however illusory that has become.

In this film, Denis has examined how Histoire interacts with histories i.e. how the bigger narratives of history affects and interacts with these personal stories. As in *Chocolat* and *Beau Travail*, these interactions are dangerous for her protagonists. Godard's cinematography brings out the beauty of these places, but there are treacherous undercurrents. As well as the political tinderbox, her characters exist in the incendiary atmosphere of the family.

Independent, Arthouse Filmmaker

Critics and academic writers on Denis consistently focus on the poetry of her cinematic form, the 'dreamlike' quality of her images, and the refusal of conventional formats of time and space. Her association with independent directors like Wenders and Jarmusch put her squarely in the realm of arthouse and independent cinema. A film such as *L'Intrus* has, intriguingly, generated very positive responses amongst broadsheet and film magazine (male) critics.

For example one critic writes:

"... with the triptych structure, each stage of which corresponds to a different geographical region and atemporal narrative, *L'Intrus* is an allusive memory puzzle of sorts, dreamlike, beguiling and usually poetic."

“Increasingly, since *Beau Travail*, Denis has brought her filmmaking closer to a purely cinematic aesthetic”

This discourse associates Denis more with high art rather than with popular culture cinema. This returns to our previous consideration (in Roy’s session in Week 3) of melodrama being regarded as a ‘lesser’ artistic form, particularly because of its association with the private, emotional sphere. Denis’s earlier association with Wenders and Jarmusch together with her refusal to employ a naturalistic narrative form means that the discussion around her can be different. In addition, the presence of a central male figure that drives the narrative takes the emphasis away from this being a narrative constructed by a woman

A high art form will be something that will be particularly associated with the use of form. Such work will use the conventions of its particular art – painting, photography, cinema – or break them, but might not offer a naturalistic tale of commonly-felt experience.

Female Collaborators

Claire Denis and Agnès Godard

Much of the atmosphere created in *L’Intrus* arises from the quality of Agnès Godard’s cinematography. Denis is very forthright about the importance of the contributions of her various collaborators, and she shares a particular bond with Godard who worked with Wim Wenders, as well as some of the influential French directors of the Nouvelle Vague.

Interestingly, amongst these, she worked with Agnès Varda, whose style was noted for its ability to make the ordinary, the banal look unusual and strange; Godard has certainly developed this as her own signature style. This is visible in all of Denis’s films, particularly *Vendredi Soir* (2002), where the filmic style is impressionistic but works to create an other-worldly state that we, the viewer, are drawn into and exist, for that time, in its internal reality. The meeting of Laure and Jean takes place in a time and place outside of their own reality, where time can be suspended to allow them to explore their fantasy of each other. With Agnès Godard, the visual is used to make us experience textures or depths in a way that makes the watching become sensuous and visceral. We can recognise how these objects would feel to touch, taste even smell, thus heightening our engagement with these fragmented narratives. The world that the characters inhabit has a ‘roundness’ in our physical experience of it. Therefore, whilst Denis and Godard may adopt a method that is highly ‘expressionistic’ the experience for the audience can still be ‘emotionally real’. The communication of tactile, sensory experience can contribute to our “suspension of disbelief.”

In the extract from *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), Agnès Varda demonstrates the techniques we can assume Godard drew on subsequently. As Florence/Cléo waits until she can ring her specialist for her cancer test results, her sense of disassociation and isolation from those around her is captured by Varda’s expressionistic use

of the camera. She is able to be ‘visually emotive’ to help us empathise with Florence/Cléo’s state of mind. The sensation is of a real time narrative, and the way Varda has captured Cléo’s reflections (looking at and into herself) guides us to enter her internal world.

Godard trained as a photographer, and her attention to detail and composition have a photographic quality. It is possible to capture a feeling of momentary stillness in her filmed shots, as if they were photographs.

Godard’s camera work has been identified as being able to bring out the aesthetic and evocative value of ordinary locations and apparently, meaningless, banal objects.” So, the fragmentary visual imagery actually draws on our knowledge and memory of objects, of places and enables us to bring in these associations in building the story for ourselves. Thus, Denis/Godard can be said, even, to include us as part of the collaboration, to contribute to the authorship of her films.

Women in the Canon

Possible effects of Discourses on Women and Film

The way that we talk about Claire Denis is significant and powerful in the way it can position her work artistically. In all forms of creative practice, the notion of a ‘canon’ exists, a list that sets the standard. A question for feminist academics is, persistently, why there are so few women on that list. Much theoretical work has been concentrated on reclaiming a place in artistic canons (for both women and ethnic minority artists), or to reclaim a place for women’s artistic work in gendered practices, like embroidery.

Griselda Pollock, for example, challenges the notion of a ‘canon’ in painting since it excludes women as artist, making them the negative other outside of this mark of quality since they are “not-man”. Her book, *Differencing the Canon*, examines women’s place in the artistic world and whether their representations are different. How can women presence in artistic canons be usefully negotiated when their traditional place is “absent creator and overpresent created.”?

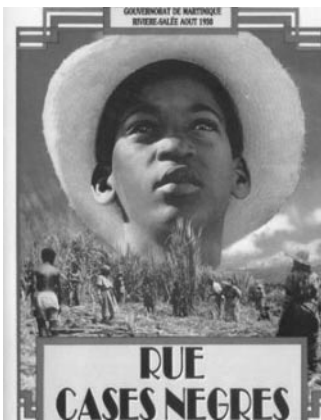
The exclusion of women from the canon has been, as you would imagine, a rich source of material for female artists/writers and critics. Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of My Own* published in 1928, just at the high point of female suffrage, used the fictional character of ‘Judith’ Shakespeare to demonstrate how far women are excluded from artistic expressions.

Pollock warns, however, against perpetuating a simplistic view that sees women authors as outside and excluded since it ignores female artists who are and have been working throughout history. This depressing myth (Woolf onwards) is not helpful.

Although her case studies are drawn from art, and her coverage is extensive and complex (and so I do it great injustice!), I want to include a very few of her contentions that might be interesting for us here:

- women artists are not always helpfully examined as women especially where there is an emphasis on the realism of their depiction of other women;
- instead, it is more helpful to examine the texts for feminine pleasures, even feminine fantasies (i.e. for their female audiences);
- they can include these, but still produce something that is distinctly feminine and transgressing the norms;
- women artists can do this and still work within conventions and art forms that have traditionally been seen as masculine and for male audiences.

These simple points stimulate me to consider that although Claire Denis, Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta etc can have their work from many different points of view, crucially, we can escape the negativity of looking at women as “not-man” but look, positively, at them as “women”!



Rue cases nègres
(Martinique/France 1983)
There have been relatively few feature films from the Caribbean (excluding Cuba) and only a handful that have achieved distribution in the UK. This film, based on an autobiographical novel by Joseph Zobel is one of the few.

Director Euzhan Palcy is a remarkable woman

who deserves to be much better known. *Rue cases nègres* (*Black Shack Alley*) was released when she was still only 25 and in 1989 she became the first Black woman to direct a Hollywood feature film, *The Dry White Season*, set in South Africa. Subsequently, she has worked in both American and French television.

Euzhan Palcy was born in Martinique and gained a scholarship to the Sorbonne. She took a Masters degree and trained as a filmmaker in Paris. *Rue cases nègres* tells the story of young Joseph Hassam, a boy living with his grandmother in the shacks for cane cutters on a sugar plantation Martinique during the 1930s. The boy is bright and his grandmother sacrifices everything to make sure that he gets a scholarship to the grammar school in the capital, Fort-de-France. The boy's close friend is the oldest cane cutter, who tells him about Africa, imbuing pride of race and culture. The boy will eventually win through because of his pride in his identity.

Palcy gets very good performances from her actors (and non-actors) and also with her DoP Dominique Chapuis achieves a look to the film which is at the same time realist and 'magical'. The skin tones (in a film in which skin colour is a sensitive political issue) are very well presented. The reason for showing a clip here (apart from simply because it's a great film) is to remind us that the Claire Denis view, even if it is

informed and committed is still a view from one side of the colonial narrative. *Rue cases nègres* shows us the view from the other side. There is no real sense that we are watching a film by a woman, rather that we are watching a film with a clear cultural and political viewpoint. Much of this comes from the novel, but Palcy brings the story to life.

If we have time, we'll finish tonight's session with an introduction to the next two weeks which will focus on the work of women presenting stories from within Muslim culture.

The Makhmalbaf Film House

Our central focus is on the remarkable Makhmalbaf family from Iran – more about the family later. Here we can see a documentary film directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf in which his daughter Samira (a well-known writer/director herself) attempts to teach a class of Afghan women how to read. The women have been denied education by the Taliban and Samira, an educated and highly talented young woman is, if not a colonial observer, at least an outsider 'looking in' on another country's population. This clip should also lead us into the debate about 'the veil' that appears to intrigue us in the West (and to enrage some groups). But its actual meaning in Iran might be rather different.

Rona Murray and Roy Stafford 5/11/07