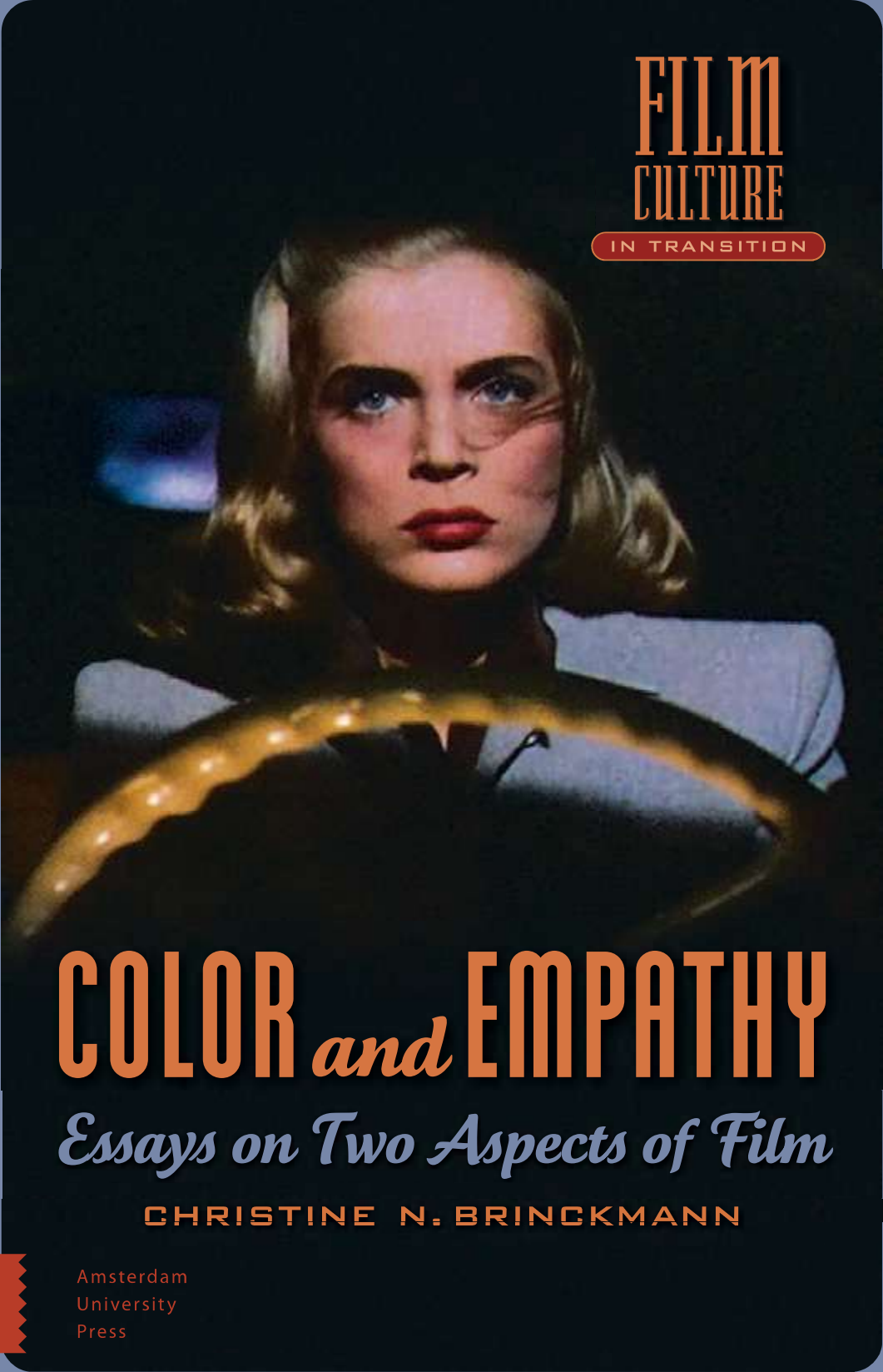




FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

COLOR *and* EMPATHY

Essays on Two Aspects of Film

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Amsterdam
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The Work of the Camera: BEAU TRAVAIL

[2005]

Claire Denis is an auteur who works in close collaboration with an established team. This makes it both difficult and methodologically questionable to break down her films according to elements attributable to individual team members. Camerawoman Agnès Godard, whose work I intend to address here, has of course collaborated with other directors as well, including Agnès Varda and Erick Zonca, so to some extent one could extrapolate her personal style; and she is a highly articulate artist capable of explaining her decisions.¹ Godard has expressly emphasized that with *BEAU TRAVAIL* (FRANCE, 1999), and in other films of Claire Denis, she contributed to the development of the filmic concept almost from the beginning, just as she was present in the cutting room after the conclusion of principal photography. As a cameraperson she is thus integrated into the entire project, even into the work of the actors and the selection of the music. This applies as well to other members of the team, each exerting an influence on the style of the film, such that all of the branches of filmmaking mesh smoothly with one another. In the analysis of a Claire Denis film, this aspect of mutual collaboration has to be kept in mind, and it is especially advisable to approach the camerawork together with the *mise-en-scène* and the montage.

On the other hand – and this does not contradict what has been stated above, as it expresses a very specific way of working – Agnès Godard enjoys a great deal of freedom with Claire Denis. After months of intensive joint preparations for a film,² spontaneity is allowed during the shooting. Improvisation can take place because creative convergence is guaranteed by a deep overall understanding shared among the members of the team.

1 I draw on Agnès Godard's remarks at the Berlinale Talent Campus workshop held on February 17, 2005, as well as in her interview with Françoise Audé and Yann Tobin, "Regarder jusqu'à vouloir toucher," *Positif* 471 (May 2000).

2 In an interview, Claire Denis recounted that she collaborated intensively with the actors for about two months, though without the screenplay (which left a great deal open anyway). The aim was to amalgamate the performers into a collective – akin to real recruits to the Foreign Legion, encouraging them to grow together as bodies, as dancers. To prepare, the performers moved to music from Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, which is also played in the film during the legionnaires' exercises. See "Entretien avec Claire Denis," *Cahiers du cinéma* 545 (2000): 50.

The direction and the camera have a close relationship of trust: “Il y a entre nous une complicité et un rapport passionnel étrange, une intimité dont le centre est le cinéma.”³ Thus Agnès Godard understands herself not as a functional tool carrying out a task but as someone who, within the context of a collaborative project, performs independent work that remains, and should remain, tangible as such.

It is obvious that this way of working affects the relationship between the images and the fictional events – events that are not entirely fixed at the beginning of shooting but take shape in the course of rehearsals. Claire Denis favors scenes to arise ad hoc on the set, without preconceptions.⁴ Moreover, the set is not a studio but a real location in which artificial light is often neither available nor necessary. The work of the camera is thus in many ways intuitive. Agnès Godard does not realize a storyboard that breaks down the plot into visual components but pursues her own spontaneous view of the events, endowing the scenes with a particular perspective. In so doing, she is palpably free to take an interest in aspects that are different from those laid down in the script (to the extent a script exists at all) or demanded by the logic of the plot or the expectation of the actors. At the same time, the photography must help to create the material that will later, in the cutting room, merge into a story.

Although the plot of *BEAU TRAVAIL* comes out with sufficient clarity, the film retains a slightly disturbing quality: something ambiguous, inconclusive, troubling, that oscillates only emotionally and never enters completely into the causal construction of the plot. In this essay I will not argue that the camera alone is responsible for this quality. But I will leave other parameters aside or touch upon them only briefly in order to grasp the specific visual style of the film.

Shadows ahead

Before the opening credits have appeared, we see a dancing, flirtatious North African woman in a disco, then other dark-skinned women and white legionnaires: a short glimpse into everyday life in Djibouti (where the French Foreign Legion is traditionally stationed), loud and colorful. It

3 “There is a complicity and a strange emotional rapport between us, an intimacy whose center is the cinema.” Interview in *Positif* (see note 1), 133.

4 See “Claire Denis Interviewed by Jonathan Romney,” *Guardian Unlimited* (film.guardian.co.uk), June 28, 2000.

is clear at once that two sexes from two different worlds are interacting. On the one hand, there are the women in brightly colored garments – attractive, pleasure-seeking, and self-confident. On the other, there are the immaculately uniformed soldiers – some merry, some gloomy, some potentially in erotic competition and ready for conflict. Those familiar with them may already identify the main actors Denis Lavant (Galoup) and Grégoire Colin (Sentain).

The film does not linger long in the disco, but seems to begin again after the title fades in. Luminous shots in a train car with colorful African garments and blue seat upholstery make for an exotic, opulent picture. Outside, the desert extends as far as the eye can see. Another angle from the window shows the rectangular shadow of the train wandering alongside, including the silhouettes of narrow, amorphous figures who seem to be leaning to the left, in the direction of travel. It is only after a while that one realizes that these are the shadows of passengers riding on the roof. Both the train and the movement to the left recall the beginnings of other films in which a protagonist travels back into the past. Departures into the future generally move from left to right, following the Western direction of reading.⁵

The African populace and the pale brown desert combine with breathtaking beauty: a strange and foreign country. It is not clear whether any legionnaires are present, or whose point of view we are supposed to adopt. At least in principle, this footage could equally well be documentary. More shots follow of the train, then stationary images of military equipment and dry grass in the desert; a shot of the sand, then again long shadows of amorphous figures – the same motif, now in a new context. Again, we are uncertain at first to what or to whom these shadows belong, then a movement of the camera reveals the group of young legionnaires, extending their arms ceremoniously up into the light, as though in prayer: harmonic bodies making powerful, dancer-like gestures (fig. 2a-c), as we hear the solemn, fateful chorus from Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*.⁶ These men do not look like mercenaries, or like our idea of a mercenary.⁷ We still know nothing about them (apart from

5 This symbolism of the direction of camera movement need not always apply. It was a dominant convention in classical Hollywood film which one sought – intuitively or consciously – to uphold. Other filmic traditions may follow different rules.

6 BEAU TRAVAIL is an adaptation of sorts of Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd* (left unfinished at the author's death in 1891); the novella was also the basis of Benjamin Britten's opera of the same name which premiered in 1951.

7 My conception of members of the Foreign Legion has been influenced by Romuald Karmakar's documentary WARHEADS (Germany, 1993), which portrays and interviews authentic mercenaries.

the dancing at the disco). Even now no information is given; there is only a moment in which we are encouraged to register their various physiognomies, muscular torsos and skin colors. The gaze of the camera is admiring, erotic, as though they were being caressed before our eyes. Exposed to our scrutiny the men shut their eyes; they will not return the gaze.

A little later a second traveling shot resumes the direction of the train's progress, moving along a canal and a clothesline with soldiers' laundry hung up to dry, again without offering us a moving or looking subject. And again the shot appears to imply that someone is gliding back into the past, remembering. A slight feeling of tension or confusion arises as the key to understanding is still missing. Does it make sense to look for a remembering or viewing subject, or would that be missing the film's semantic structure?

Agnès Godard's camera and Claire Denis' direction have proceeded in many films according to this enigmatic, elliptical way: showing a great deal, presenting intense images heavy with meaning, but granting no initial explanation. In *BEAU TRAVAIL*, the point of view is almost always outside of the characters and, for the present, no narrative authority can be made out either. Instead, the camera selects whatever fascinates it visually, apparently unconcerned about whether the spectators can catch on to the plot. To a certain extent this is a documentary attitude, of the kind that does not invite empathy, lacking the fictional shift into interior perspective. Yet the camera does not simply record what is taking place in front of it: the images are too precisely composed, with too many nuances of color and too many virtuoso interconnections. They respond to one another as in the two images of shadows, or the two traveling shots, arising independently and seemingly incidentally, but subtly related to one another within the filmic text.

It is symptomatic of the Denis/Godard style that many things, and many different sorts of thing, become visible and strike our eye before their meaning can be discerned. One could call this strategy inconsiderate, ignoring the needs of the audience – if this were not contradicted by the loving composition that pleases us aesthetically, in a sensory, haptic way. Yet a feeling lingers of subjection, distress, and hence inner agitation. An unresolved tension points to what is to come without allowing us to anticipate its content: we know that the events the film is going to narrate will be grim in one way or another. Although at first there are only images of the legionnaires' everyday life and of the beauty of the landscape, with little that is ominous about them, we have grasped that the film will proceed without the reassurances of conventional storytelling. It will follow laws of its own, and what is shown will not necessarily be the same as what drives the plot or offers explanations according to psychological and causal principles.



Fig. 2 a-c: BEAU TRAVAIL

The scarlet tablecloth

The soldiers' everyday life is elaborated across many minutes: maneuvers, physical exercises, swimming, fishing, ironing; occasionally, groups of African women are seen watching the doings of the legionnaires from the periphery.⁸ Throughout, male bodies are at the center, for the most part with the torso nude or in military green against the dull, dusty background of the desert or the glittering blue sea. Sometimes small scenes evolve or there is a cumulative capturing of the characters through close-ups, including the commandant Forestier (Michel Subor) and his adjutant Galoup. Then, after all of the variations of blue, khaki, green, brown, and ash, suddenly a flamboyant scarlet tablecloth is laid on the terrace table with the same meticulous domesticity as the legionnaires show ironing their shirts or shaving their faces. Although there is a tangle of chain-link fencing closing off the terrace, the tablecloth seems curiously unmilitary in color, much too garish and inorganic for this setting, an unexpected foreign object – but pleasing all the same, since it is so effective a contrast to the material world of the military (fig. 3b). Only when watching the film for the second time will one recognize that this color had precedents: for example in the garment of an African woman, and in a plastic washing bowl. And also, slightly shifted in hue, in a powerful explosion along the coast that tints the entire image flaming red. More importantly, there are patches of saturated red during a military funeral and in the details of the parade uniforms: red and green are the traditional colors of the Foreign Legion.

The tablecloth is employed extensively and impressively across multiple shots. Perhaps its function is to keep us on guard – anything can happen in this film, even the improbable. Or perhaps its function is to affix a dramaturgical seal to the first third of the plot – a conventional structuring achieved here in an unconventional way. Or again, perhaps it offers another example of ambiguous statements that astonish and fulfill us visually but remain uncommented upon. On the one hand, the tablecloth is too bright and in disproportionate contrast to the peaceful meal and the birthday cake served on it; on the other hand, it furnishes a high level of appeal, attesting

8 Martine Beugnet terms the perspective of the indigenous population “postcolonial” and speaks of a reversal of the structure of the gaze, since the legionnaires provide the Africans with an exotic spectacle they observe attentively (see Beugnet’s monograph *Claire Denis*, Manchester 2004, 104ff). Anke Zechner also discusses the representation of the African women, for whom she sees a primarily documentary camera that inscribes in the film two different narrative postures; see “Landschaften wie vor dem Auftauchen des Menschen: Zum Filmspezifischen in Claire Denis’ *Beau Travail*,” *Frauen und Film* 46 (2004): 61.



Fig. 3 a-c: BEAU TRAVAIL

to the filmmakers' control over their in fact unpredictable and precarious material. After all, as one knows, or believes oneself to know, the men of the Foreign Legion had good reasons to abandon their former identities and social context to begin a hard new life anonymously, under a false name that masked their crimes. One expects roughness and raw adventurers, but what is emphasized instead is the ersatz familial bond that the Legion gives to its otherwise homeless members ("legio patria nostra") – a bond that is not without its contradictions.⁹

We may also be aware that the film team was predominantly female, thus the choreographed beauty of the young legionnaires, superimposed on the narrated story like a second discourse, gains an appeal of its own. Through the camera – and through the *mise-en-scène* – a discourse is generated that animates and undermines the fiction at the same time. A scarlet tablecloth and dancer-like, smooth legionnaires, gliding like fish through water or slithering like lizards under obstacles (fig. 2b), create attractions, surplus values of tactile, ambivalent eroticism. The martial, very masculine plot is mystified and made unreal by Claire Denis and Agnès Godard in a peculiarly feminine way, narrated festively so that a new, rather unfamiliar masculinity unfolds. The homoeroticism that characterized Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd* is there too, but it is neglected more than put on display.

Memory images

Many things suggest that *BEAU TRAVAIL* is a first-person narrative, a look back into the past, causing us – depending on the variant of this narrative form – to read the filmic images as memory images. After about five minutes of shots unaccompanied by commentary, the glittering sea dissolves into the lines of a diary (fig. 4a), held on the screen for a long time and apparently initiating the subsequent entry of Galoup's voice-over, later to be heard again and again. At times the film seems to endow the diary with a voice, to read aloud from it; at other times it is free-floating over the images like a stream of consciousness. The result is a voice-over so flexible and adaptable that it can be expected, or imagined, anywhere. It can creep into the images to intensify their presence, or can withdraw for a time to permit other ways of seeing. After all, fictional

9 On the contemporary self-portrayal of the Foreign Legion, see the website of the French Embassy, "La France de A à Z," subchapter "La Légion étrangère" (www.ambafrance-us.org/fr/aaz/legion/soldat/asp). It contains many formulations that still derive from the nineteenth century, evoking the romance of the lawless men who find a new family in the Foreign Legion.



Fig. 4 a-c: BEAU TRAVAIL

narration is not bound to follow logical rules: whatever works well within a given context and serves to gratify the audience is acceptable and welcome.

Many images obviously function as memory images, with clear evidence supporting this reading: one need only think of the traveling shots at the outset, or of sudden intensities, such as the red explosion of the helicopter, or the image of the sleeping lover the narrator left behind. Galoup's flashback brought about by his exile in Marseilles can be understood, like so many flashbacks, as a confession, buckling under the weight of guilt, seeking clarity, taking stock of what has happened and of his own actions. And as in so many films with a flashback structure, an interesting question remains as to whether the first-person narrator remembers "right," that is, makes a full confession, or whether he or she presents the story selectively, distorting it subjectively or even retouching and falsifying it. In the case of *BEAU TRAVAIL*, the elliptical structure of the flashback in which the significance of images is often apparent only in retrospect, fits well with the hypothesis that what we have before us are the fragments of obsessive recollection. Also, many insights seem libidinally tinted. This also fits with the associative image constructions that evoke what is currently emotionally relevant without regard for the linear progression of the plot. Sentences like "Now, when none of that exists anymore, when the past plays out in my inner eye [...]," or "What have I seen of the wild dromedaries, of the shepherds who came from who knows where, what have I seen of the women in their shimmering scarves on the stony fields," also point in this direction. In this way the images of the desert take on a hallucinatory quality, since they must replace actual memories and may overcompensate for the scarcity of the teller's own experiences.

Yet perplexingly, these observations seem to miss the essence of the film, as though the question as to subjectivity was posed wrongly. Instead of shunting this question into the foreground, regarding it as the logical backbone of the images and montage – so as to find a truth "behind them," revealing the "correct" course of events – it may be justified to view entirely different formal principles as the dominant ones. Claire Denis has remarked that "for me, cinema is not made to give a psychological explanation, for me cinema is montage, is editing."¹⁰ As already observed, the camerawork in this film is not so much a straight linear presentation of causal events as a second presence alongside the verbally narrated story or the discernible plot, the fabula. The camerawork liberates itself from the task to depict events one to one, or to show them at greater length or with more brevity according to their causal relevance. It rather distills those meanings that fascinate it

10 Interview with Jonathan Romney (see note 4).

at a given moment. And although the result may resemble the subjective coloring of a fictional character, it is motivated in more and different ways. What the camerawork is primarily about is not the individual standpoint of the outcast legionnaire but the camera's own point of view on the events.

These findings are not impeded by the fact that the narrative is enriched both verbally and visually by subjective traces of Galoup. Here a sort of narrative side motif is opened in the hierarchy of motifs which touches upon and clarifies certain things, but is often led astray in favor of attractions located elsewhere: for example, the interest in the elaborate choreography of the legionnaires. The scenes in which the legionnaires train or perform dance-like exercises possess a physical presence that vitally contradicts the nostalgic status of the flashbacks. The fictional narration comes almost to a halt in favor of a more poetic or musical principle directed towards distilling the libidinous essence of the characters – a principle that cannot be reconciled with Galoup's confession of guilt or his coming to terms with his life. This is a discourse that occurs between the camera and the actors, the camera and the landscape, the camera and the music.

The object of jealousy

Sentain, the new recruit, whose spirit of solidarity, amiable nature, beauty, and courage make him universally beloved – causing Galoup's jealousy and with it the catastrophe – is introduced casually, indeed cumulatively. He comes into the picture very early, and reappears now and then, usually being present a bit longer than the other legionnaires. However, one's certainty that the voice-over narration is about this soldier solidifies only gradually. This absence of insistence can also be seen in the way Sentain is treated explicitly in the retrospective diary, although the images do not move in parallel with the text. Thus Sentain's arrival in the camp is reported in the voice-over but is not shown. At the time of our arrival/the arrival of the camera after the train journey, he is already present in the group as though he had always been there.

Although Sentain may be more beautiful and, with his high cheekbones and oddly Asian eyes in an otherwise European face, more mysterious than the other legionnaires, he differs from them much less than Galoup. The latter's pockmarked, irregularly weathered face stands out disquietingly, and he moves more eruptively, almost like a predator (fig. 3a). By contrast, Sentain can disappear into the mass of athletic young men, his head shaved like theirs. The camera likes to capture him together with his comrades, dedicating the same gaze of approval to him that seems neither voyeuristic nor

homoerotic but appropriate in view of these exquisite creatures: “Je ne suis pas voyeuse, mais spectatrice,” as Agnès Godard asserts.¹¹ And the camera captures Sentain’s particular charm once only, when his head is shaved by another soldier who, with a hint of tenderness, runs his fingers over Sentain’s skull. A sudden contented smile, winning and childlike, spreads across Sentain’s face, signifying a moment of well-being (fig. 1, preceding this essay).

Likewise, the attraction that Sentain holds for the commandant Forestier is shown only discreetly. Sometimes the commandant’s pensive gaze seems directed at Sentain (fig. 4b), but this is not verified unambiguously: Forestier could also be looking into the distance, or at other recruits. Exactly those structures of the gaze that would clarify their relationship in another film remain ambiguous. A brief chat between the two – one of the few dialogues in this low-dialogue film – culminates in the commandant acknowledging the young soldier as a “*pretty find*” (in Melville’s novella, he is a foundling). It is a surprising compliment in the disciplined military context, and one with emotional vibration, but it is given no chance to resonate, the camera moving swiftly on as if nothing had happened. As so often, the film plays with expectations and touches on some motifs, only to cut the thread before it might connect the elements.

Landscapes

A characteristic of the camera style of Agnès Godard is that she photographs objects, architecture, and nature with the same attention and aesthetic devotion she applies to people. And a characteristic of the shared style of the Claire Denis films is that shots like these, which in many cases make do without human figures, are often just as relevant to the narrative as the close-ups of faces. These shots are also sometimes held longer than would be necessary in the economy of traditional narratives. The breadth of variation in the orchestration of light and colors and in the pictorial composition of these shots, in particular the landscapes, seems inexhaustible: “Images that make possible a view of things as though for the first time by directing the gaze not at all, or unfamiliarly.”¹² The barren desert with occasional scree slopes, the overexposed salt flats, and the lava rocks in the ocean possess an unforgettable individuality. Times of day with long or short shadows, cooling or hot air,

11 “I am not a voyeur, I am a spectator.” Interview in *Positif* (see note 1), 134.

12 Anke Zechner (see note 7), 64.

zones of dry dust, sunset, back-lighting, and deep darkness give the locations a sensuous structure that acts as a counterbalance to the male bodies.

The landscapes are often complexly graded into multiple foregrounds, middle grounds, and backgrounds (fig. 3c), with the colors differentiating the individual layers in almost supernatural fashion – an aesthetic that could be inspired by the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Large panoramas alternate with precise shots of salt crystals and dry tufts of grass. As Galoup moves alone among the barracks in the dusk, only the ocean and the lava islands glow in the cool light that remains, and he consumes himself in the furor of his hatred and his plans for revenge. As the plot advances towards the catastrophe, the landscapes grow more sublime, hostile, and inhospitable. Similarly, the light becomes more extreme and the characters more strongly integrated into the terrain. Sentain gets more and more encrusted with salt on his march through the desert, until his jacket is so hard that he can stand it up next to his body, and he himself is more akin to an inorganic object made of salt than a human being. The camera emphasizes the centrality of the landscape by attaching more relevance to the pictorial composition than to the narratively “correct” field of vision: the characters are often fragmented or either too far away or too close; or they are captured from an angle outside the range of human vision.

The smooth flow of the montage, in spite of this deviation from the conventions of continuity and spectators’ visual habits, corresponds with the fact that the shots have a high degree of independence. We are being trained in a system in which fracturing of content is a distinct component, and the images’ interlinking satisfies graphical and poetic principles more than the logic of the plot. The result, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has written, is a “poetic rumination that pointedly doesn’t discriminate between major and minor events, intertwining both into a kind of endless magical tapestry.”¹³

The ecstatic dance

The film ends with the protagonist’s wild dance (fig. 4c). The intensity of this at once peculiarly disturbing and euphoric finale is due above all to the strength and energy of Denis Lavant as a dancer. No performer could be more physical. His centered body language, controlled by discipline and eruptive all the same, has acted as a threat throughout the film, a sign of the build-up of immense psychological capacity and suppressed aggression. This build-up

13 Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Unsatisfied Men,” *Chicago Reader*, May 26, 2000.

was discharged once before, when Galoup's jealousy had reached an apex: in a short, violent surge of frustration, he flings his jacket to the ground with a vengeance. Although the other legionnaires appear to be exceptionally physical through their choreographed training, only Galoup has this menacing muscular tension that seems to well up from an embittered, corroded soul.

At the end of the film, Galoup lies motionless on his bed, ritually made according to military rules, his firearm pressed to his bare chest; in his body only the veins pulse. A tattoo can be seen on his skin, and quietly he speaks its words: "Ser la bonne cause et meurs" ("Serve the good cause and die"). Obviously, he has resolved to kill himself. Stock-still, he concentrates and a vision appears, an inner image of his agitated constitution: he is suddenly back at the disco, as before in Djibouti, but now all alone. He stands in front of an expanse of mirrored tiles, doubling him in fragments, as they reflect the lights differently: a recurrence of the mirrorings in the brief disco scenes that punctuate the film and of the motif of the chain-link fence that characterizes the legionnaires' world. Galoup's clothing is black, as it had been at times before; what is unexpected are the professional black-and-white dance shoes, glowing like the paws of an animal. The dance floor is a radiant oily yellow, reminiscent of the streetcars in which Galoup rode to Marseilles. The color yellow was omitted almost entirely in the world of the legionnaires, reserved for the African women and for Galoup's solitude after his expulsion from the military.

The camera creates a sort of stage for the final dance. Galoup/Lavant stands with his back turned to the right corner of the room, as if to block his movement to the right and into a future of any kind. The camera frames him relatively closely, but takes care that whenever possible the entire figure stays visible, down to his tango shoes. The camera remains static, so as not to disturb the performance, neither to add nor omit movement, and thus to allow the tour de force of dance to unfold authentically and without interference. In this last scene of the film, the spectator is totally fused to the character, experiencing a sudden surge of sympathy and emotion, of affective empathy as well as motor mimicry. Galoup not only sets himself free and dances off his own frustrations but simultaneously dispels those of the audience.

Galoup begins hesitantly, dancing in short, abrupt phases. His cigarette seems to involve him more than the dancing. But then he intensifies into ecstatic devotion. His body bounces like a rubber ball. The black-and-white, animal-like shoes underscore his powerful steps and kicks on the floor, on which he ultimately spins, rolls, turns, only to jump back upright again. The open space to the dancer's left is incorporated with increasing vigor, filling the entire frame. Closeness thus contributes to the expression of this

acrobatic burst – Galoup blasts open the boundaries of the real, but hardly the boundaries of the space allotted to him. His explosion is thus at the same time implosive and a moment beyond which there can be no continuation. This degree of vitality can be maintained only for a spell, facing death.

The unreality of this dance, in which a character finds salvation from the repressions, muscular armor, and aggressions of his life, is bolstered further by a caesura dividing the performance into two parts. The film seems to be at an end when the screen goes black and the credits appear, although the Corona song *This is the rhythm of the night, this is the rhythm of my life*, continues to play. Galoup's energy cannot be controlled, however; the credits stop and he appears again, at first with arms hanging at his sides in a brief static moment. Then the dance goes on with undiminished power. He even catapults himself off-screen to the left, but is back at once to surpass the climax, exhaust himself, and finally vanish or melt rapidly into the dark. Only now is the film over.

*

Whereas the primary function of images in conventional narrative cinema is to drive the plot, with other functions serving only as secondary matter, this approach is altogether reversed in the films of Claire Denis. The primary function lies in the image itself, in its visual poetic presence and emotional charge, and it is only later that the involvements, conflicts, and events of the plot emerge or are allowed to shine through. The essential responsibility for this is borne by the work of the camera. The camera expresses such willfulness, aesthetic power, subject-like presence, and erotic attention to whatever it shows as to draw the spectators into the enthrallment of the sensual moment. The result for the characters is that they are compelled not only to obey the fictional hierarchy but also to lead a physical life of their own. As Agnès Godard has formulated her approach to filming:

J'aime autant filmer les hommes que les femmes. C'est regarder jusqu'à vouloir toucher. Je peux observer sans fin les visages, les corps, c'est ce qu'il y a de plus inépuissable au monde. La magie du cinéma est dans cet effet produit.¹⁴

Translated by Ben Letzler

¹⁴ "I love to film men and women alike. It means looking until one wants to touch. I can endlessly watch their faces, their bodies, it is the most inexhaustible spectacle in the world. The magic of cinema lies in producing this effect." Interview in *Positif* (see note 1), 134.