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Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics

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Published by Edinburgh University Press

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Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics: Claire Denis, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

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Encounters, Intrusions: Denis, Levinas, Nancy

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

Claire Denis¹

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

Claire Denis²

INTRUSIONS: ENCOUNTERING ETHICS IN THE FILMS OF CLAIRE DENIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While the two philosophers I discuss in this project, Nancy and Levinas, do not overtly engage with feminism in any meaningful way, Levinas makes sexual difference central to his early theorising on responsibility and Nancy offers accounts of embodiment that are often surprisingly 'queer' in their implications. Part of my project involves mining these thinkers for the elements of their thought that are useful for a feminist cinematic ethics. I am preceded or guided in this respect by Denis but also by several philosophers. Diane Perpich is central to my account of alterity aesthetics as I elaborate in Chapter 3. Her reading of Levinas in terms of a politics of alterity, rather than recognition or identity, makes Levinas available to my analysis. Perpich has also been useful in providing one of the few feminist interpretations of Nancy – her insights have influenced my reading of the Nancean body in terms that are queer and disability-positive (see my elaboration of this in Chapter 4).³² Anne O'Byrne's reading of Nancy through the role of birth in his philosophy is also crucial to my analysis of *Nénette and Boni* in terms of an ethics of sense in Chapter 2.³³ I elaborate on and contribute to these interventions by relating them specifically to film and exploring how Denis challenges and builds on the potential in Levinas and Nancy. I explicitly articulate the ethics of their projects in terms of feminist concerns, as I argue that the aspects of their work that are useful to thinking a feminist cinematic ethics are brought into relief when they are put in conversation with Denis's cinema.

AN INTERRUPTIVE ETHICS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FILM, EMBODIMENT AND SPECTATORSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CINEMA AND ETHICS

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

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

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

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

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

PHILOSOPHY AND FILM

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

Claire Denis⁷⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A FEMINIST CINEMATIC ETHICS: OVERVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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

- Cambridge University Press, 1996); Samuel Pufendorf, *Pufendorf: On the Duty of Man and Citizen according to Natural Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For examples of virtue-based systems see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Claremont: Coyote Canyon Press, 2010); J. A. K. Thomson, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics Translated* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955). For major examples of consequentialist or teleological approaches see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994); John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988).
9. Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2013).
 10. Sarah Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (Transformations) (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 164.
 11. Other workable examples may include the Dardenne brothers, Abbas Kiarostami and Yasujiro Ozu.
 12. My focus is on narrative cinema. However, this is not to dismiss the potential for more experimental cinema to sensitise us to ethical modes of encounter. As I elaborate below, avant-garde strategies of alienation operate in a very different vein from the sensual modes Denis draws on. Nor am I interested in shocks or spectacle as a challenge to conventional ways of seeing, at least for the purposes of this project. Rather, any film, narrative or otherwise, that stages an encounter drawing on the principles I elaborate in this work could potentially speak to a feminist cinematic ethics.
 13. This would apply to a deontological film or a film that emphasised our duty – take *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), for example, where the main character realises that his duty has been to stay in his home town and provide for his community. These types of films would be more moralising than ethical as I define it here.
 14. He writes in *Otherwise than Being* that his framework would 'find for man another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression'. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 177.
 15. Here I refer to bodies of thought on sexual difference, postcolonial studies, queer theory and critical disability studies, all of which concern themselves with representations and difference and are fields in which feminist thinkers have played a central role. See, for example, Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2011); Gisela Bock and Susan James (eds), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007); Barbara Smith, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism', in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 168–85; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), pp. 271–311; Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Street Press, 1992).
 16. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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

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

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

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

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