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Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics

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Film Interrupted: Denis, Nancy and an Ethics of Sense

A student (Ana Samardzija) and an older man sit across from each other in a train carriage in Claire Denis's short film *Vers Nancy*. We catch them in mid-conversation, while outside the window the countryside zooms past, too quickly for the eye to get a good hold on (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). The student – whose name indicates Yugoslav heritage and who is therefore probably no stranger to the violence of borders – discusses her foreign status in France. The conversation carries over periodical intercuts to an empty corridor – a liminal space of passage that suggests the possibility of intrusion onto the conversation, and also serves to remind the viewer of the limits of what the image exposes. As the conversation continues, the elderly gentleman initially dominates. He is concerned with the idea of normalising immigrants, insisting rather that something within a foreigner must remain foreign – she must remain an intruder. The student asks who he is addressing – the host or the foreigner?

As they proceed to discuss the state of borders both European and, more specifically, French, the film cuts back to the hallway. A man (Alex Descas, a French-African actor and Denis regular) stands in the previously empty corridor and smokes a cigarette (Figure 2.3). His status is unclear. Is he one of the foreigners the film has been discussing, or is he one of the many formerly colonised subjects who are born and raised in France? Or is he foreign either way, his blackness rendering him forever *other* to an abstract Frenchness that is implicitly white?¹ His image *visually* raises the point that the older man has just articulated verbally – even if he is French, this unknown man remains other: ‘the demand to welcome foreigners in a normalising way means we end up ignoring their foreignness. It’s like pretending that a black person isn’t black.’

When we return to the train carriage, we begin to see closer frames of the faces and hands of the two interlocutors as they talk and listen (Figures 2.4 and 2.5). While the man continues, the student becomes increasingly animated



Figure 2.1 The student discusses her foreign status in France.



Figure 2.2 The elderly gentleman initially dominates.

and less self-conscious. As the two characters feel out the parameters of their conversation and get a sense of their own positions with respect to the topic and to each other, we get a better visual sense of where they ‘stand’ (or sit, in this case) on the train (Figure 2.6). All the while the train keeps moving forward, belying a sense of true stability or hypostasis. We are intruders on their conversation just as the train intrudes on the landscape it traverses. The man claims that the intruder is always threatening. He comments on the alterity that we experience within ourselves,



Figure 2.3 His status is unclear.



Figure 2.4 Closer frames of the faces of the two interlocutors as they talk and listen.

what occurs at the same time in a pathological manner is also the same as something . . . that can be perceived as a strangeness within myself. Not necessarily the presence of the other but its existence. That's not at all pathological. It's what you can't identify . . . and if conceiving means identifying it, then we cannot conceive it. That's the limit of identity, but identity can only be found . . . by accepting some elements of this intrusion. Because an identity that is complete and well-founded . . . and incapable of accepting intrusion . . . is as stupid, closed, sealed . . . like a stone.



Figure 2.5 The man claims that the intruder is always threatening.



Figure 2.6 ‘We’re unsettled, but something occurs that allows us to change.’

The conversation turns to the theme of surprise as the student offers, ‘For it [the intrusion] to be a surprise, I must not expect to be surprised . . . we’re unsettled, but something occurs that allows us to change.’ To which the teacher offers, ‘It’s a little like everyday life. I’m always struck by the fact that all the important events, the things that have proved determinant in my life occurred without me foreseeing them. I never foresaw anything, not even the job I do now . . . It’s always from somewhere else.’ The conversation has gained momentum and developed a verbal rhythm that the camera has echoed

visually. Just as we begin to sense an increasingly spontaneous and flowing discussion between student and teacher, they are interrupted as the man from the corridor enters the carriage and sits next to the student. A slight shuffling occurs as the space is recalibrated to the new distribution of bodies and the tensions amongst them. ‘When do we get there?’ asks the intruder. ‘Ten minutes,’ answers the older man. ‘Already? Very quick and pleasant,’ he says back. To which the man replies, ‘Yes, a bit long though, no?’ This last statement is a playful commentary on the film itself, which was made by Denis for a television series in which directors were asked to make ten-minute films that address the passage of time. The series (*Ten Minutes Older*) included directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Aki Kaurismäki, Spike Lee and Volker Schlöndorff. Denis’s film, *Vers Nancy (Towards Nancy)*, runs slightly over ten minutes – thus ‘a bit long, no?’

Perhaps the two travellers are heading for (*vers*) the town of Nancy, but the title also applies to the older man of the pair – the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. The film moves towards (*vers*) him, but makes no attempt to summarise his body of work or his biography, or to stage an encounter of heightened emotional intensity. Rather it is an exposure, literally and metaphorically, opening onto his singularity at a specific, mundane and fleeting moment in time – the conversation keeps moving, as does the film, as does the train. But it is not only towards Nancy that the film moves, as if it were possible to touch on someone apart from who they are in relation to others – students or strangers on the train. Fundamentally the film reveals a constellation of singularities, which unfold through their interactions – a landscape, a locomotive, a student, a professor and a stranger. These singularities are in motion, their selfhood altering through time, rather than remaining static. What could be more banal than a slightly abstract conversation on a train, a man who smokes to pass the time, or a relatively unspectacular landscape? Yet Denis, in this film as in all of her work, invites a curiosity towards them – here, through her slow revelation of the space and characters and by withholding conventional indicators of who the characters are or what they are doing. The frame of the film places their relations in a heightened context, asking us to look more closely at what we may overlook in our everyday being-in-the-world.

Film can invite us to be curious about the world. This renewed curiosity cultivates an openness to the surprise of intrusion – and this thematic of intrusion is central to ethics as read through the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy and the filmmaking of Claire Denis. Denis’s work shows that when film engages in opening up a world rather than seeking comprehension and closure, it conducts itself ethically and facilitates a kind of ethical contact in its viewer. This is what I call an ethics of sense and is the focus of what follows. *Vers Nancy* stages an encounter between two figures as they work together to make sense. In that manner the film is a metaphor for this book, which extends

a conversation between philosophy and film. *Vers Nancy* exposes the tensions between concepts as they develop in language, and the power of film to evoke what is difficult to articulate. As an encounter between spectator and image, the film effectively produces, in all its bodily and affective power, the reality of an intrusion – how an unknown other makes us *feel*.² When Descas steps into the carriage, we sense the complex nature of the intruder on a much more personal and affective level than the dialogue has lingered on. While Samardzija and Nancy have referenced larger geopolitical and cultural issues in France and Europe today, the issues of intrusion and difference permeate Nancy's thought from the smaller level of the body and identity, to the larger themes of community and myth. Denis's work often explores intrusions that resonate at a bodily and interpersonal level and touch on larger histories of colonial violence. This raises a central point of difference between Nancy and Denis. While Nancy wants to talk about real politics and a real historical moment, his writing must reckon with the language and the history of philosophy, such that his account tends to remain on the level of meta-analysis and abstract. By contrast, Denis is able to give similar problems a pulse, to make images resonate with the weight of history and geographical borders, and to invite the viewer to share in this material *sense*. In this way, film is able to articulate *different* differences, as they affect *different* bodies in *different* ways. This is perhaps well illustrated by the difference between Descas's body and Samardzija's. His blackness registers immediately as a greater barrier to inclusion, versus Samardzija's whiteness, which may mean that her alterity is more easily camouflaged. *Vers Nancy* raises the question of materially significant differences in the conversation itself. The Frenchman demands that something in the foreigner must remain so, but does so to a young woman who herself may be a refugee, and who has already emphasised her desire to be invisible in French society, to not be rejected or deported. While both Nancy and Samardzija are undoubtedly, if we follow Nancy's account, constituted in and through alterity, the everyday reality of these differences positions them variously according to gender, age, education and ethnicity, even if they sit across from each other, equals in the film's frame. The beauty of Denis's cinema lies in part in the fact that although she exposes the material reality of difference, we can never know in advance what that difference will *mean*, that is, identity categories never tell us in advance who someone is or what will be important, although they probably inflect their being-in-the-world.

The arrival of the stranger from the corridor is of course a disruption, yet it also offers all the possibilities contained in a new encounter. He is a surprise – a surprise being that which comes from without and undermines the agency and mastery of the subject. Surprise emphasises the limits of our autonomous self-determination in the world. In Nancean language, the other is a new point of access to the origin of the world – an origin that is never truly an origin,

never a foundation or essence, but is always multiple, relational and constantly renewed with each new birth, with each new encounter, each time and every day. Film can provide an opportunity to listen rather than understand, to wonder at the birth of the new, at the strangeness of the other, and to become aware of the plurality in which we are constituted and which singularises us in and across time. It can be an intrusion that surprises, disrupts and interrupts our habitual ways of seeing. To focus the discussion, I read Nancy alongside Denis's films *Vers Nancy* and *Nénette and Boni*. *Nénette and Boni* centres the theme of natality that I build on, through its plot of an unwanted pregnancy, and also challenges the notion that all aspects of a film should work towards building a coherent and referentially meaningful text. Its use of dreamy visual- and audioscapes, lack of explanatory dialogue, and inclusion of scenes that do not work to further the plot in any traditional sense make it ideal for exploring an ethics of sense in contrast to conventional film language. *Vers Nancy* displays nicely the complex sharing of concerns between the philosopher and the filmmaker, while also highlighting the ways in which Denis pushes Nancy further.

Intrusion is an apt metaphor for the ongoing relationship between Denis and Nancy, who have participated in a dialogue that has involved films (*Vers Nancy*), texts (Nancy has written essays on three of Denis's films, *Beau travail*, *The Intruder* and *Trouble Every Day*) and adaptation (Denis's film *The Intruder* is based on an essay by Nancy of the same name). They have also intersected in the field of dance, collaborating in writing and on film with the choreographer Mathilde Monnier.³ Denis's film on the choreographer shares its titular preposition with the short Nancy film: it is entitled *Vers Mathilde* (2005), again reinforcing Denis's concern with movement and with approaching (as opposed to capturing) bodies/selves on film. This moving *towards* touches on a key element of the ethics discussed in this chapter – a filmic ethics of sense (*sens*). In French, sense (*sens*) indicates direction and manner, rendering meaning dynamic and relational rather than fixed or closed, possessable or masterable. It moves towards (*vers*) rather than referring indexically *to*.

Sense signifies in a way other than that of language – it evokes the role of the sensory in approaching the other and it is more aleatory than static. This notion of sense applies equally to Nancean ethics and to Denis's ethical filmmaking. Thinking intrusion as a practice of interruption, I continue their intellectual sharing by interrupting my analysis of Denis's work with Nancy's philosophy and vice versa. Denis's films are noted for their sensory qualities and their privileging of affective encounters over explanatory narrative. They gesture towards the other, rather than fixing or positioning her, and their signification touches on the limits of the articulable, thus stepping in where philosophy opens onto its limit. The concept of sense (*sens*) is central to Nancy's thought on the body, the 'subject' and the world precisely because it carries

these multiple valences of meaning. Nancy prefers the term ‘sense’ to that of ‘meaning’, as *sens* connotes that significance is an embodied process, rather than purely cognitive. In this way ‘sense’ connects meaning to the materiality of worldly existence. Sense cannot find its grounding in something outside our world. Rather than basing significance in something beyond the ontological, Nancy will argue that we beings *are* sense and the only possibility for sense.

To approach film through an ethics of sense I frame it as ‘literature’, after Nancy’s writing on literature in relation to myth.⁴ Myth, at the larger cultural level, represents the desire for a foundational discourse, turning the people into one unified Subject with all of the fascistic implications it suggests. Myth strives to give absolute and all-encompassing meaning. As B. C. Hutchens writes, ‘Myth is the mimetic instrument *par excellence*; it is the primary means of identification whereby “guiding myths” achieve totalitarian power. Mythic power brings people together and projects an image by which personal and social identity is possible.’⁵ Its interruption thus has political as well as ethical implications and its reach extends from society to the individual. In Nancy’s work, myth is linked to the desire for a total and comprehensive understanding of the world. This would entail a notion of communion, of the community as sharing a singular essence, producing something in common, or having a unified origin and destiny. The quest for self-presence and knowledge is interrupted by singular plurality, or what Nancy terms ‘literature’ and which I am extending here to film. Nancy contrasts myth with literature in the following way:

But literature’s revelation, unlike myth’s, does not reveal a completed reality, nor the reality of a completion. It does not reveal, in a general way, *some thing* – it reveals rather the unrevealable: namely, that it is itself, as a work that reveals and gives access to a vision and to the communion of a vision, essentially interrupted.⁶

The literary *is* the exposure to finitude, to the limits of comprehension and totalisation. Myth and literature are not mutually exclusive categories, where myth is that which first exists and is then interrupted by literature. Rather, the two are always present in any discourse: ‘The text interrupts itself at the point where it shares itself out.’⁷ One can imagine the telling of a communal narrative where the unique timbre and ephemerality of the teller’s voice breaks through, giving a rhythm and inflection to the language that will never be heard again, announcing finitude and historicisation in the midst of a story that attempts an ahistorical and immutable account of the world. Where there is a story being told, no matter how mythic, there is always a unique voice that shares it out, belying the notion of an immutable and unified essence.

Moving away from the terminology of literature and its connotations of a

certain calibre of *written* text, we can substitute ‘sense’ for that which interrupts myth.⁸ Sense (or ‘the literary’) exposes a singularity or a new meaning that myth cannot account for or anticipate. Nancy himself admits that ‘literature’ is an unsuitable word for that which interrupts myth. In fact, he says ‘no name is suitable here’, presumably because language would limit and contain the singularity and sharing that interruption indicates.⁹ Nancy does not mention film explicitly in this text; however, he opens up the possibility for reading many forms and practices as having the function he ascribes to literature, which interrupts myth or prevents immanence by the exposure of a new singularity or another origin, continually reopening the world to a meaning that it *is* but that it cannot master. Film, then, like art, dance and the other instances of ‘literature’ mentioned by Nancy, is a fruitful domain within which to examine how Denis’s counter cinema, both formally and narratively, presents a contrast to classical film language’s tendency toward mythologisation. When film is ‘literature’ or when it participates in an ethics of sense, it is interruptive, it refuses normativity, it privileges listening over understanding, and, finally, it opens us up to the wonder of being exposed to and with one another.

Formally, Denis’s films are interruptive or ‘literature’ in that they privilege fragmentariness in content and form, refusing wholeness and closure, having neither a definitive origin nor an endpoint, and continually expose their own limit/frame. It is a non-normative ethics in the sense that the film disallows any propositional morality or knowledge to arise from its plot. Instead, the ethics of Denis’s cinema entail an exposure to the world that keeps meaning open, raising questions and cultivating an attentiveness towards others. This connects to the aspect of an ethics of sense that foregrounds wonder. I explore wonder in part by connecting it with birth – instead of death, a focus on natality reveals the generative potential in thinking of a world of with-ness, in which the unravelling of the subject is not a cause for despair but rather a source of joy and productive, creative potential. The notion of birth becomes pivotal in understanding the way Nancy conceives co-existence and world, and therefore ethics. Birth is our origin in a moment that we cannot know or master, and reveals our originary relationality (we have our start both in the body of another and in a web of relations that exceeds and precedes any proper origin). While Nancy’s philosophy opens up the space for thinking about our being-here-with in terms of natal newness, *Nénette and Boni* simultaneously introduces and probes these ideas, posing difficult questions about maternity, gender and identity (beyond any romanticisation of childbirth/motherhood). Again, the film gives flesh to an abstract concept and in so doing challenges it to address the materiality of difference. Denis invites us to think about sexuality and reproduction beyond normative categories. In that sense the film makes curious what we may assume to be self-evident – for example, about teen mothers, broken homes and adolescent male sexual fantasies.

As we will see, this openness to the surprise of intrusion ties into the absence of any one foundation. Because each of us is an origin and one that is constantly renewed, and because this origin is one to which we have no access (how can we know or remember the experience of our own origin?), it is inappropriable. Although I do not aim to stake out a privileged place for film amongst the 'arts' in this chapter, film most certainly carries the potential to heighten our awareness of the wonder of the everyday, to hone in on each body, each singularity, and open us up to curiosity about the origin that each of us is – a unique point of access to the world. Conversely, film also has the potential to shut down wonder or to mythologise its content, by clearly demarcating good and evil and giving us the comforts of feeling that we have solved a problem or understood the world at the movie's end. I generalise to some extent about mainstream cinema in order to better highlight the contrast with Denis's filmmaking. *In general*, popular cinema aims towards maximum comprehensibility, catharsis and resolution.¹⁰ This, along with its reliance on generic codes and overused representational conventions, tends to work against the ethics of sense I describe. A counter cinema such as Denis's offers an alternative that itself is a practice and elaboration of the ethics of sense. It is not therefore merely that Denis's films illustrate philosophy. I argue that film and philosophy touch each other at their limits, opening onto meanings that exceed either one in isolation when they are read together. All of these moments of interruption, wonder, birth and listening are intimately connected. They overlap and extend each other to foreground the importance of a particular way of relating to the world – an ethical conduct that is not about a positive platform but rather the refusal of all platforms and their tendency to fix, to exclude and to explain.

Unlike Levinas, who I turn to in the following chapter, Nancy is not primarily thought of as an ethicist. In fact, none of the major books on Nancy in English include 'ethics' as a subheading or chapter organiser – instead they focus on issues of Christianity, community, ontology, body and art, all of which are central themes in his philosophy.¹¹ Nonetheless, when he does talk specifically about ethics (and the two most notable essays in this regard are 'Originary Ethics' and 'The Insufficiency of Values and the Necessity of Sense'), it is in a way that overlaps significantly with his thought in these many other areas. His philosophy could be described as a fugue, with variations on the same themes echoing and 'chasing' each other throughout his voluminous oeuvre. In practice, this means that reading Nancy in any one area strengthens a sense of his perspective in the others. Or, to return to the ideas with which I started this chapter, his ideas move towards each other, regardless of what rubric a specific text may fall under. Furthermore, since for Nancy ethics *is* ontology and his thought is deeply invested in and concerned with how we think ontology, arguably his whole philosophy is an ethics.

Part of my contribution to discussions of Nancy's philosophy in this chapter will be to highlight the ways in which his ethics is relevant for thinking about film. Of course it is Denis's films that make this reading available, through their shared concerns with Nancy. Viewing Nancy's work through the lens of ethics enables a special and useful application to film, offering insight in particular as to why a filmmaker such as Denis resonates with her viewers and commentators as 'ethical'. Although some excellent scholarship has recently been published on Nancy and film, my focus on ethics not only shifts the terms of the analysis but also highlights other themes in his work that are useful for thinking about the cinema, such as natality, wonder, interruption and listening.¹² I am drawn to these particular areas through Denis's work itself. Furthermore, several of these themes allow me to connect cinema to the work of other contemporary philosophers dealing with Nancy outside of cinema, specifically Anne O'Byrne's work on natality and Mary-Jane Rubenstein's writing on wonder.

Nancy's 'originary ethics' requires a dis-position towards the world that is attentive to the sense that we *are*; that refuses the comforts of myth and identity in favour of creative newness, flux and exposure to the unmasterable world. It also necessitates a rethinking of being in terms of the *with*. We are always being towards (*vers*) both others and ourselves, dis-posed and ex-posed, lacking a stable position. In Denis's work, this interruptive ethics of sense is enacted through the use of movement, her selection of shots, the inclusion of marginal scenes and figures, her use of regular actors, and the emphasis on the sensory over the visual. *Vers Nancy* is a small case study of the kind of interruptive practice that Denis is interested in – a conversation whose interlocutors are not clearly positioned: their relation is partly implied by their patterns of speech and body language but they are never named. The man from the corridor has no clear role – his intrusion does nothing to move a plot forward or to increase the viewer's comprehension of what is happening on screen. In the earlier shots of him smoking, the film is cut such that we are not clear whether he hears the conversation or not. The goal of both image and sound is not to provide greater clarity. The strangers are on a train without clear destination. Beginning *in media res*, the film emphasises process, rather than endpoint. We could keep riding with the passengers, keep moving, and keep listening, but the camera forces us to get off. In that sense we are sternly reminded of the limits of what we can see or know (much as the corridor shots seem to function to remind us that life keeps happening outside of the frame). These strategies are also present in *Nénette and Boni*, which privileges an interruptive ethics of sense.

NÉNETTE, BONI AND AN ETHICS OF SENSE

Denis's fourth feature film *Nénette and Boni* moves further away from narrative than any of her previous work and towards a cinema that privileges the sensory over the cognitive. It tells the story of a teenage girl, Nénette (Alice Houri), who runs away from her boarding school to her brother Boni's (Grégoire Colin) home in Marseille.¹³ Boni, himself only nineteen, has inherited their dead mother's apartment and lives there with a group of friends and his pet rabbit. The kitchen is messy with a barren fridge and the apartment feels transitory and uncared for. Boni sells pizza from a truck with his roommate and also dabbles in the black market. In one scene he is shown selling curtain rods from Taiwan under the table to a man who owns a small hardware store. Boni chooses a coffee maker as a bonus, a modern American-style drip machine with built-in clock, which he will keep next to his bed. This coffee maker suggests a certain Americanisation of French youth culture (the hardware shop owner recommends the traditional Italian stovetop, calling the coffee produced by the machine Boni wants 'American donkey piss'). It also ironically contrasts the reality of Boni's orphaned existence with the machine's connotations of an affluent domestic life of modernised commercial conveniences and comforts. That the machine sits by his bed rather than in the kitchen implies a certain out-of-orderness about his life, and points as well to the transient moment at which we encounter him.

Fantasies of domestic bliss are both projected onto and violated through the figure of the baker's wife or boulangère (Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi). Boni spends much of the film narrating his aggressive sexual fantasies towards this woman, sometimes with dream-like visual accompaniment spliced in. Nénette, for her part, seems indifferent to sex, despite the revelation that she is pregnant. At times, the film implies that the child's father may be Nénette's own. Boni is estranged from their father (Jacques Nolot), who is linked throughout the film to a criminal underworld and is eventually shot. The film elliptically tracks the siblings' relationship, culminating in the birth of the child 'under x' – Nénette has chosen to give her child up anonymously once it is born. Ultimately, Boni takes the child from the hospital at gunpoint, presumably to raise it himself. While the various plot elements such as teen pregnancy, murder, criminality and kidnapping may seem to suggest a highly dramatic film, the portrayal of events is muted and unmelodramatic. The film creates, through music, editing and camerawork, a flowing oneiric quality that floats between characters and scenes, privileging smells, colours, sounds and feelings over linear narrative and dialogue. Dialogue is sparse and becomes almost part of the soundtrack, and the *mise-en-scène* is dominated by close-ups shot with often shaky handheld cameras, and frequent slow pans over faces, bodies and spaces.

This drifting applies to the feel of the film as well as the ways in which both

siblings are adrift in the world and in which their relations with those around them alter them and undo any notion of stable identity.¹⁴ The first image of N nette shows her floating through the water, impassive and ephemeral. This is followed by a scene of Boni and his friend driving wildly through the streets of Marseille, eventually passing the boulang re and shouting vulgarities at her. We keep moving from beginning to end, exploring an origin at once multiple and impossible to grasp. It is multiple because one character is never *the* Origin – we are continually exposed to yet another face or sensation, cultivating a plurality that undoes any notion of a single foundation. We tend towards it, approach it, but never arrive. The origin of the child who is born into a web of relations that precede and exceed him is as intangible as N nette and Boni’s own mother whose absence permeates the apartment. In its sensual drift the film explores existence *as* meaning rather than as *having* meaning. The elliptical editing and multisensory non-causal movement between scenes encourage the spectator to experience the film outside of modes of cognition or understanding, exposing her to being rather than looking for a greater significance. It participates in an ethics of sense that keeps our co-existence an open question. Keeping things adrift is one way of framing an ethics that does not rely on foundational principles or maxims. Ethics must not become a fascism of sorts or a terrain marked with borders.¹⁵ Rather than securing foundations it must work to keep things moving, to emphasise the *with* of existence rather than the ‘I’, or to be *sense* rather than have meaning. Both Nancy and Denis share this orientation onto the world, and I extend this tendency by moving Denis’s filmic strategies towards (*vers*) Nancean ethics and vice versa.

Questions of sense, of humans as those beings whose being is a fundamental question for them, are the basis of Nancy’s ‘Originary Ethics’. It is in this text that Nancy most explicitly articulates his ethical philosophy. The essay builds on Heidegger’s ‘Letter on Humanism’, exploring the earlier philosopher’s claim that fundamental ontology is inseparable from an ethics. As is the case with Nancy’s singular plural ontology, which pushes Heidegger’s description of being as always being-with further along the path it suggests but fails to fully bear out, this essay also edges forward the promising ethical implications of Heidegger’s thought. Nancy argues that “‘Originary ethics’ is a more appropriate name for “‘fundamental ontology.’” Ethics *is* what is fundamental about fundamental ontology.¹⁶ Ethics is originary in the sense that it cannot be thought outside the coming into *Being*; ‘There is not first a brute fact (the being of beings, the “there is”), *then* a desire for sense (for this being). If this *were* the case, sense, action, and ethics would have to come after and from somewhere other than the fact of being.’¹⁷ Put differently, there is no essence that we are born with which *then* receives its meaning from a transcendent outside. Rather, our lack of essence and our fundamental ‘co’-existence makes the ontological condition that we *share* and *are* (that we *are* because we *share*

it) part and parcel of the ethical project of making sense. The meaning of our being here is precisely undecided and undecidable. ‘Making sense’ is a matter of conducting oneself so as to maintain and heed that responsibility. But conduct as a kind of ethics must be understood in a much more passive form than it may seem to imply. Here it is a question of living with the question, refusing to stabilise its meaning or fix an answer, but maintaining that question in all of its messiness as it impacts the way we are in the world. In fact, Nancy is careful to distinguish conduct from production, making ethics unproductive or *désouvrée* (like his community).¹⁸ Rather than constructing or codifying, ethics unworks. This idea of unworking is akin to the notion of interruption, discussed below in relation to film form and Denis’s aesthetic practices.

For both Denis and Nancy, ethics and ontology are virtually inseparable in terms of how they are thought and practised.¹⁹ Nancy writes, ‘There is no difference between the ethical and the ontological: the “ethical” exposes what the “ontological” disposes.’²⁰ In her films, Denis exposes precisely this disposition that existence is, always relational and shifting. This is a practice that we view on screen but that is also induced in the spectator who experiences a relational exposure to the film. This is not a solitary speculative project but, rather, ‘The opening of making-sense is utterly impossible in a solipsistic mode.’²¹ Underlying this ethics is a notion of an originary difference that prevents immanence or the ontological from being a totality, or a closed and static thing. As Nancy says in *Vers Nancy*, ‘Because an identity that is complete and well-founded . . . and incapable of accepting intrusion . . . is as stupid, closed, sealed . . . like a stone.’ The stupidity of full immanence applies to the community and the world as much as to the individual. Significantly, in the short film this conclusion comes about as a result of Samardzija’s intervention – listening to Nancy as he plods forward with his analysis, she interrupts with the suggestion ‘a stone-like identity’, which Nancy accepts as the fitting metaphor. They make sense *together*. Their speech is only meaningful because unlike a self-enclosed stone their existence is shared, and continues to share out through the interruption of others – landscapes, faces, stray cats and flowers.²² The myth of a stone-like identity must be interrupted; difference must be integral to how we think being-with.

For both Denis and Nancy, difference is not only that which comes from the outside, but is there at the origin of the subject, making her own self-identity a myth. Nancy writes in *The Inoperative Community*,

We are alike because each one of us is exposed to the outside that *we* are *for ourselves* . . . I do not rediscover *myself*, nor do I recognize *myself* in the other: I experience the other’s alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that ‘in me’ sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits it.²³

Otherness is already present at the origin of the subject, but not because of a relation that would be outside of or prior to the ontological. There is no essence to the subject that precedes and defines it. In his essay 'L'Intrus', Nancy develops these considerations starting from his own experience of undergoing a heart transplant and the subsequent need to suppress his auto-immune system, due to his body's rejection of the foreign heart. These events spur reflection on the ways in which our bodies are always already other to us, from the moment of our birth. It is not the intrusion of a foreign heart that begins the process of self-alteration, but rather the body has always been porous, at risk, and imbued with a strangeness such that it was never properly bounded to begin with. Similarly, I am in relation even before my birth and my involvement with others extends beyond my death. I am already other from the moment of coming into the world, and my involvement with others is such that it alters me in the process, revealing that I am singularly plural. Difference finds itself within being, rather than any beyond.

This notion of difference is one based on sharing and division. The French word for sharing (*partager*) connotes both dividing up and sharing out. To share (out) is always also to divide; to be with is to be divided. Only by being shared can being have meaning; otherwise it would be pure presence, a self-enclosed *thing* unable to be a *part* of a shared world ('like a stone'). If being is being-with it must involve division, spacing and giving outward. We can only share because there is space or division between and within us. Difference thought this way introduces a persistent fragmentation, which is always also a pluralisation, into the ontological. Because Nancy and, I would argue, Denis do not look to any transcendent realm or beyond to give meaning to the world, they must find a way to address the difference that is always at play within it. This play of differences is not reducible to a fixed relation between terms because the terms themselves are never fixed but rather constantly shared out, spacing and altering in their course.

Denis draws on cinematic means for displaying this difference that interrupts all identity. She introduces a fragmentation into the ontological through the way in which she shifts from character to character, scene to scene, keeping things adrift and in constant motion. Difference also permeates the ontological through her use of fantasy and dream sequences. Scenes that collapse dream and reality or fantasy and memory punctuate *Nénette and Boni*. This is typical of Denis's work and is notable in other films such as *The Intruder* and *Friday Night*; and *35 Shots of Rum* (2008), while a fairly 'realistic' film, includes an improbable dream-like sequence in which daughter and father ride on horseback (a reference to Goethe's *Erlkönig*). It is often unclear whose dreams we are seeing in Denis's films (a character's? the camera's?), or whether an image is a memory or fantasy. These impressions are not meant to explain causality or psychology but to float across the screen, filling it with scents, textures,

colours and affects. At the same time they splinter the world of the film, inserting an unmasterable difference into the diegesis. In one scene Boni wakes up to a trail of brioche leading his way down the hall. As Boni's world has often been intruded on by fantasy images (particularly related to the boulangère who sells said brioche), we assume this is going to lead to an erotic scenario. Boni picks up a brioche and gently caresses it, with a 'Bonjour', after which we see him bite into the pastry on his patio. We then cut to Boni, back inside and sitting next to his coffee maker, which gurgles and exhales sensually (this machine comprises a very haptic and erotic aspect of the soundtrack) behind a small mountain of brioche, one of which he squeezes rhythmically. It is possible that Nénette has purchased and arranged the baked goods, after reading Boni's diary in which he narrates his bakery-related fantasies; however, the film leaves this unclear. Boni's immediate acceptance of the existence of the buns is puzzling if they are not an element of his fantasy life. (It is impossible that the boulangère has entered his apartment since she doesn't even know his name, much less his address.) There is a surreal blurring of dream and reality here that the film's general tone encourages us to accept and float with. It works against direct narrative meaning as it privileges a sensory drift over viewer comprehension, again inserting otherness into the diegesis.

It is much easier for us to recognise Denis's characters' opacity both to us as spectators and to each other than it is to recognise their own opacity to themselves, or the difference that they experience at the heart of their own being and embodiment (and this difficulty to 'know' is precisely because of their opacity to us). Perhaps the clearest that Denis comes to illustrating this is in the film *The Intruder*, fittingly based on Nancy's essay 'L'Intrus'. The main character, Louis Trebor, possesses multiple passports, and crosses many borders in search of a heart and his son. The film also consistently collapses states of dream and waking. Trebor's insistence that he not be implanted with the heart of a woman gestures towards the instability of his sense of self and the murky boundaries of identity. Another example of the alterity within is illustrated through the character of Shane Brown in *Trouble Every Day*. Plagued by a murderous sexual disease that makes him both surprised by and afraid of himself, he recognises his own lack of mastery over the difference inside him. Finally, Boni is unable to anticipate his own reaction to the birth of his nephew. Nor can his imaginary performance of sexual dominance and entitlement prepare him for a real interaction with the baker's wife in the mall, which renders him mesmerised and speechless (a scene which I will return to further on). Difference from within is as much a surprise as that which we encounter 'outside' of ourselves.

This ontology of differences, of singular plurality, cannot be mastered by thought. It refuses any fixed or higher meaning. With Nancy, if we can speak of transcendence, it is not in opposition to or outside of immanence, but rather

that which prevents us from stabilising what is constantly shifting in the world. In Nancy's writing on ethics, the complex neither/nor of transcendence and immanence is attended to:

There is, in principle, neither a simple transcendence nor a simple immanence. If it is entirely legitimate and not simply verbal acrobatics to say that the sense of being is the being of sense, this means that sense (the sense of human existence, but also, and along with it, the sense of the world) is in principle nothing other than action, or conduct. Conduct is thus the proper transcendence of the immanence that is.²⁴

Transcendence as conduct is something at play within the realm of ontology rather than leading us to a realm beyond our being-here together. It is borne out in the process of life, through action rather than being a stable state or essence. This ethics is non-normative, in that it cannot be translated into propositional language or given a fixed referential meaning. Normative ethics tends to presuppose a self-identical rational subject that cultivates virtues or acts according to various maxims or principles. Norms also fix things into language, that is, the maxims and principles just referred to, creating a fixity which is precisely the danger that Nancy wants us to avoid. While on a practical and political level we may need certain norms and categories, the ontological level reminds us to keep these foundations mobile and contingent.²⁵

Nancy discusses the possibility of ordinary ethics being based on the maxim or law to 'respect life' but reassures his reader that this freezing of the content of ethics into a phrase would in fact be a reopening, since we have no immutable idea of what life is or what it might mean to respect it. Life itself is a category that must remain open to further revisions and inclusions and to respect it implies a conduct that is also open to broadening and redefinition.²⁶ Nancy's rejection of any law- or principle-based ethics is evident when he writes that, 'In principle, the ethics thus announced refers to nothing other than existence. No "value," no "ideal" floating above concrete and everyday existence provides it in advance with a norm and a signification. But this everyday existence finds itself asked to make sense.'²⁷ Perhaps the refusal of normative ethics is illustrated most clearly in what *Nénette and Boni* does not do – namely it refuses to make itself a didactic social issue film. Although it deals with broken familial ties and a teen pregnancy, it never judges or moralises its characters. Its look is curious rather than categorical. As *Nénette* herself says to the nurse as she goes into labour, 'Don't moralise me!' This does not mean that it lacks a politics per se, but rather that it does not aim to give the viewer a set of maxims or truths that she can walk away from the film feeling self-content about having reaffirmed or gained. The film lacks any moral judgement about *Nénette's* pregnancy or her attitude towards it – she wants

to abort the child but is told that she is too far along. She attempts to abort the baby herself by bathing in a tub of mustard – an exercise in which Boni intervenes. She shows no positive emotion towards the child, remaining indifferent to it during ultrasounds, calling the technician a ‘dumb bitch’ and refusing to look at or touch the baby once it is born. Her labour is experienced as an unbearable suffering and Denis does not turn the child’s birth into a moment of melodramatic maternal awakening in *Nénette*. In many ways she refuses our pity, as much as she obfuscates any understanding. The film encourages an openness to her singularity that must remain sensed rather than cognised. She *exists* before being subsumed under any meaning-giving label, be it that of teenager, girl or mother.

Boni similarly refuses condemnation or redemption. He is shown engaging in contraband sales, and having aggressive and non-consensual sexual fantasies about the boulangère and other women. (His language is peppered by such colourful imperatives as ‘Come here you bitches. Come and eat daddy.’) His dreams move into the realm of the real when he approaches the bakery counter and asks the boulangère for a ‘long French stick’. Visibly uncomfortable with the interaction, she calls out for her husband to replenish the baked goods. One could easily assume that a role such as Boni with his misogynist rants and repressed emotional rage would be a fairly unsympathetic character in front of a female director’s lens. Yet, Denis has expressed her obsession with Boni in interviews and her manner of filming him suggests that his character fascinated rather than repulsed her. He is given full human complexity and not simply dismissed as a category or type. This treatment works to demystify constructs of masculinity and refuses to only shed light on characters we assume self-evidently to be worthy of our gaze. For, ultimately, Boni too occupies a position on the margin from which he struggles to survive. In one interview Denis even compares her filmmaking process to Boni in a scene where he frenetically works the pizza dough amidst orgasmic shrieks, demanding, ‘You like that don’t you? Yeah, you sure do. It’s so good. Yeah, it’s good? Don’t move. I’m kneading you hard.’ The scene ends with Boni immersing his face in the dough, almost crying, suddenly vulnerable and soft.

Without analysing Denis’s own relationship to her trade here, I am interested in the solidarity she feels with her characters. As she says in an interview, ‘I think to make a film the minimum is to be *solidaire* . . . In solidarity with the people you film. I mean the character that you imagine and you create with the actors.’²⁸ The characters are not problems to be analysed or solved, nor are they easily categorisable into good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Thus *Nénette and Boni* refuses a normative ethics. Janet Bergstrom notes something related apropos the role of race in the film when she points out that the film uses characters of mixed race in a racially mixed setting, but, unlike many contemporary French social problem genre films, it never makes race a theme

or a problem.²⁹ Perhaps this is because Denis realises that race is a category based on (mis)recognition – we may think we *see* race, and undoubtedly it informs her characters' lives, but race does not define who they are. Nor does race demand a melodramatic treatment, simply because the cast is not white. Denis's work in general cannot be read in terms of ethics as normative principles that can be pulled from narrative content. Ethics occurs narratively and formally in terms of what the films *do not* say or try to make visible, in the attitude they show towards their characters and that they cultivate between spectator and film. They expose rather than represent the other – offering a glimpse rather than capturing an essence. Or, in other words, they make *sense*, rather than moralise.

This making-sense is a never finished work, a *désouvrement*, which defines us in our being-here-with-others. In "The Insufficiency of "Values" and the Necessity of "Sense" Nancy writes,

To bring into view that which we cannot 'see' – that which conceals itself as the origin of the other, in the other – and to bring 'into view' the fact that we cannot 'see' it: that is what today makes an 'ethical' demand, without which any moral standpoint, any normative or prescriptive assurance, is only the application of a recipe, with eyes closed, sleepwalking . . .³⁰

This description begs for a consideration in relation to the medium of film – what does it mean to bring into view the fact that we *cannot* see? This suggests the ethical necessity of a kind of representational failure, to make visible the impossibility of making visible – a discussion that will resurface in the next chapter's discussion of Levinas and Denis. The notions of representational failure and ethics as an unworking are closely linked with the concept of literature as that which interrupts myth. I elaborate on some of the specific ways in which this occurs in film in the next section. Refusing mastery and myth, Denis's films move towards sense and literature.

INTERRUPTION AS SENSE

Nénette and Boni participates in the ethics outlined through its revelation of life as ungraspable motion, as sense over myth, and cinema as a practice of interruption. These interruptive ethics are evident in the film's emphasis on movement, the selection of shots, the inclusion of marginal scenes and figures, the use of recurring actors, and in the prioritising of the sensory over the visual.

The application of myth to the cinema is hardly a stretch. The classical

style, which developed out of Hollywood and has shaped mainstream film today, was based on the perpetuation of American ideological myths and the illusion of the viewing subject's narrative mastery with respect to the film. In his book on Hollywood cinema, Robert B. Ray emphasises the classical paradigm as functioning to conceal the multitude of choices that in fact compose every finished film. Choice is made invisible largely through 'the systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie's narrative'.³¹ Furthermore, 'The American Cinema's habitual subordination of style to story encouraged the audience to assume the existence of an implied contract: at any moment in a movie, the audience was to be given the optimum vantage point on what was occurring on screen. Anything important would not only be shown, but shown from the best angle.'³² In this way, we can see how the subordination of all technical and stylistic elements to narrative also privileges sight as the sense of knowledge and comprehension.

Conversely, film can act as literature or privilege sense: it has the potential to disrupt its own mythologising tendencies when it does not subordinate difference and the sensory to narrative clarity. This interruption, which exposes singularities rather than represents identities, is key to what I am terming an ethics of sense as it relates to Denis's films. Film *conducts* itself ethically, to play with Nancy's language, when it interrupts itself, be it through characters' own difference to themselves (as discussed above), or through the inclusion of peripheral scenes and characters in unexpected ways, which open the film up rather than containing it.³³ Time-based arts, such as film, have a unique potential to enact an interruptive alterity, because our singular plurality is revealed in existence as a process, rather than a thing. In tandem with movement, time becomes a crucial element of being and ethics thought in terms of sense. As Nancy says in *Being Singular Plural*, 'We do not have access to a thing or a state, but only to a coming.'³⁴ Film as 'literature', with its temporal trajectory, is a coming. Films that contain many low-action long takes (the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Alexander Sokurov come to mind here) heighten the emphasis on duration that film offers, often encouraging the viewer to meditate on her own altering mental states during particularly contemplative shots. The train in *Vers Nancy* never arrives at a destination, nor does it stop to fix the characters in a state of permanence. Their relations shift and continue becoming from start to finish.³⁵ Likewise, in *Nénette and Boni* we begin the film in a room of strangers, who will remain unknown, and we end at an ambiguous moment. In the penultimate scene we see Boni holding the newborn child. He looks at it lovingly, but has no skills or means to feed or care for him, nor is his own legal future certain, having stolen the infant at gunpoint. The final shot shows Nénette, adrift again, picking through an ashtray to find a smokeable butt, her face and future opaque. The film lacks any clear narrative resolution and the final scenes could just as easily constitute the middle of the film as the

end. This emphasises the ongoing and unfinishable process of making sense. It makes the film literary rather than mythic. This facet of a non-normative ethics asks us to consider rather than understand.

The notion of movement without clear origin or *telos* applies to the subject herself, which extends to thinking about the film's approach to its characters and the relation it facilitates between spectator and film. In 'Who Comes After the Subject?' Nancy writes that rather than a return to the subject, what is needed is a 'move forward toward someone – *some one* – else in its place', that is, 'a punctuality, a singularity or a hereness (*haecceitas*) as place of emission, reception, or transition'.³⁶ This would not be a subject but a 'presence-to' or toward that which is not itself. This is echoed in Denis's own use of the preposition *vers* in two films that are portraits of sorts (*Vers Nancy* and *Vers Mathilde*). Both works approach a personage without employing any traditional biographical or documentary conditions (in the sense of back story, a sense of chronology, or an attempt to give an overview of major contributions). The films are more interested in the impression of the other, in exposing their sense as singularity rather than offering a total narrative of their lives. *Vers* reinforces the directional connotations of *sens*. Again, this movement across time may have a privileged space in the medium of film, which points us towards the other, touches on the other as origin, and in which that exposure between viewer and film and between characters on screen *is* sense and *is* the world that we are.

The movement away from myth and towards sense is further evident in the choice of shots and settings. *Nénette and Boni*, typical of Denis's work, avoids the conventional use of establishing shots, which traditionally help spectators to locate the characters in a specific place and time, maximising narrative clarity. Although the film is shot in Marseille, iconic city shots are absent from the film. As Denis herself says, 'Marseille is a city I really like to photograph, but because I was so into Boni there was no space for it in the film. I told Agnès [Godard, director of photography] that we were not going to illustrate Marseille at the expense of Nénette and Boni's story'.³⁷ Godard further adds that 'the main landscapes were the faces of the actors, and these were *infinite* landscapes'.³⁸ In fact the film favours close-ups, intimate explorations of bodies and skin, shot with a long lens and handheld camera. The choice of handheld camera also means that movement is present *within* most of the shots composing the film. As Martine Beugnet writes in her book on *Cinema and Sensation*, 'In contrast with the body caught in action in medium or long shot, filming in close-up makes it possible to evoke a body that is temporarily freed from its function as social, cultural and even gender signifier – a body that escapes the conventional order of male/female dualism'.³⁹ Privileging sensation over form, the close-up can also *interrupt* the myth of identity based on categories such as gender. This opens up an important intersection with

feminist concerns about representation and identity – what would it mean to rethink cinema in terms of an exposure that shows the limits of any identity-based categories for making sense of the other’s singularity? While it is and has been no doubt crucial to insist on positive female, lesbian, differently abled, racialised and ageing (to name a few categories) representations of subjectivity, it is equally important to disrupt the notion that identity categories signify a fixed referent or that they define individuals in advance.⁴⁰ In practice these two impulses often work hand in hand, insisting on more complex representations of those bodies that are typically relegated to minor characters. At a formal level, the use of the close-up and the move towards less sharply defined forms are strategies that can work to interrupt the body’s identitarian or referential status.

In Beugnet’s notion of a cinema of sensation, in which she includes Denis’s work, the body in close-up can neither be objectified nor act as a stable anchor of subjectivity (as it typically functions in dominant film language).⁴¹ Rather, ‘Metamorphosing or deformed beyond recognition, the body in close-up evokes a subjectivity in a state of flux – a subjectivity in the making or in the process of dissolution.’⁴² Whereas Beugnet’s reading draws on Deleuze, this processual, constantly altering and sharing-out ‘subject’ can also be read as demonstrating a sense that interrupts myth, a reading which is sympathetic if parallel to Beugnet’s work. If anything, Beugnet’s focus on decomposition, formlessness and the unnameable moves to a different affective register when we read the shifting, relational and never complete subject through Nancy. There is a sense of creative warmth in the Nancean idea that the co-implication of the human and technological, human and animal, human and mineral *is* the human condition. The human *is* that which never forms, never solidifies, keeps turning, meshing, touching and pulling off, being wounded and feeling ecstatic, unable to stand still and become a stable form. Through this lens the close-up (in Denis) works neither to decompose the character into a realm of pure sense, nor to individuate or give psychological legibility to the character. Rather, it is a mode of sensual, interruptive exposure to the other, which moves towards the other without fixing her in a stable location or frame.

The face as landscape is also interesting to consider in *Vers Nancy*, where faces and hands are given precedence over a clear time and space. We see mostly blurred landscape through the windows and are never given an external shot of the train riding through the countryside, or a legible road sign to orient us. While the train approaches an unknown destination, we approach the bodies on screen and gain access to them at this specific and fleeting moment as they are with each other. Along the same lines, the opening sequence in *Nénette and Boni* can be read as an (anti)establishing shot that privileges sense over fixed meaning (i.e. clear location in time and space). Counter to dominant filmmaking practice, the first images of the film are not successive views

of the city or even the outside of the building in which we find ourselves. Rather, we begin in a congested room, where a man sells bootleg telephone cards to a group of African immigrants. Women and men sit crowded on the floor as the salesman assures them of the legitimacy of the phonecards, despite their vocal scepticism. It could be argued that the scene illustrates the ethnic diversity of Marseille, as well as foregrounding its shadier criminal underside in the French imaginary and French cinema.⁴³ However, it never explains where we are, nor does it obviously introduce a major theme or any significant characters. It establishes very little. This scene is an example of another facet of Denis's interruptive cinema, her inclusion of marginal narratives or unconnected scenes.

Often these marginal scenes have the last word in Denis's films, refusing the viewer a sense of tidy plot completion by reminding her that any narrative finality must be interrupted by the ongoing movement of life as sense, without finality or *telos*.⁴⁴ The opening scene of *Nénette and Boni* exemplifies this practice of interruption or marginal narrative inclusion, and it continues to intrude at various points throughout the film. This story is so marginal that it can hardly be called a subplot. We never see these characters again, except for the salesman whom we later view (notably only after we have completely forgotten the seemingly random opening scene) asking a man at a payphone if he can photograph his phonecard, since his 'daughter collects them'. At a later point in the film the camera drifts away from the main scene to someone speaking in Vietnamese on a payphone. A meeting between Nénette and her pre-natal counsellor is interrupted when the counsellor answers the phone. We listen to her complain of unaccounted for charges on her phone bill to Ho Chi Minh City. This literal interruption, along with the aforementioned visual and narrative interruptions, works to keep a sense of dynamism and difference at play in the film through cinematic means. This sub-narrative strain of broken communication – frustrated, interrupted or somehow clandestine – highlights the play of difference throughout the film as different bodies cross paths and touch each other without necessarily communicating in a way that implies understanding, fusion or communion. In fact, perhaps here it is useful to think of Bataille's use of the word 'communication' as a kind of contagion, infecting and altering rather than rationally exchanging.⁴⁵ This moves us yet further away from the notion of an autonomous subject and towards a messy togetherness that the film exposes as our ontological condition. The film accomplishes cinematically what Nancy describes in a text released the same year as the film, which relays the need not to interrogate the meaning of being, but instead to 'pay attention to the fact of [being's] exhibition'.⁴⁶ He says,

If 'communication' is for us, today, such an affair – in every sense of the word . . . – if its theories are flourishing, if its technologies are being

proliferated, if the 'mediatization' of the 'media' brings along with it an auto-communicational vertigo, if one plays around with the theme of the indistinctions between the 'message' and the 'medium' out of either a disenchanted or jubilant fascination, then it is because something is exposed or laid bare. In fact, [what is exposed] is the bare and 'content'-less web of 'communication.' One could say it is the bare web of the *com-*. . . ; that it is *our* web or 'us' as web or network, an *us* that is reticulated and spread out, with its extension for an essence and its spacing for a structure.⁴⁷

Rather than the meanings that communication communicates or *has*, Nancy draws our attention to the *with*-ness that is exposed through our increasingly proliferated technological modes of contact. It is there that we can see the meaning we *are*, as beings who are enmeshed with one another in ways that alter us continually. Communication is our mutual contagion before any content. The meaning is in the contact itself rather than interpreted from the content of what is communicated. As a form of media, cinema reveals another valence of this affective encountering of and in the world. Film can enact what philosophy gestures towards, as it pays attention to the exhibition of our singularly plural existence as it happens, each time. The scenes relating to the international phonecard scandal bring again a form of fragmentation or pluralisation into the ontological world of *Nénette and Boni*. Through this Denis exposes the limits of her story, unworking any mythic tendency. We do not come to a real resolution, we do not solve a moral problem, and the film presents us with a world that is constituted by a difference that it does not presume to contain.

Sometimes, these seemingly unimportant scenes also serve to allow an actor that Denis regularly uses to appear briefly in another of her films. One of the ways we can understand Denis's use of the same actors between films is in the sense of an interruption elaborated above. When *Nénette* first arrives in Marseille, she sits outside on a fountain next to an anonymous person, played by Richard Courcet, who stars in Denis's previous film *I Can't Sleep* and will reappear in later works, such as *Beau travail*. *Nénette*, in a personalising gesture, removes her hamburger patty from the bun to eat it. Courcet asks if he can have her bun and she obliges. This brief scene reveals an idiosyncrasy of *Nénette*'s without explaining it or suggesting it implies any deeper truth about her personality. It also allows Denis to incorporate one of her regulars, who, if one has seen Denis's previous film, will be recognised, as he brings these intertextual associations along with him (and this holds also if one has seen later films with the same actor *before* an earlier picture). In a sense Courcet's presence again draws attention to the limits of the frame or the film's world. He is another (recognisable) face that interrupts the film's plenitude. Hour

and Colin (the actors who play the title characters) are themselves recurring actors, having played a brother and sister in their previous Denis production (the made-for-television *US Go Home*, 1994). Their characters are different here, as is their setting and family structure, but we are invited to view the film in relation to this earlier work. It continues an exploration into siblings and the dynamic between the two actors, and probes its own themes even further, from a slightly different angle. One way to read all of Denis's interfilmic character sharing is as a form of 'communication' – a feature of her oeuvre that is often noted but rarely analysed.⁴⁸

In *Nénette and Boni* alone, we also see Jacques Nolot as the father, who plays a bit role in *I Can't Sleep*, and Alex Descas as the gynaecologist, who stars in *No Fear No Die* (1990), *I Can't Sleep*, *Trouble Every Day* and *35 Shots of Rum*. Hourii will reappear briefly, without speaking, on the metro in *Trouble Every Day*, and Colin acts again in *Beau travail*, *The Intruder*, *Friday Night* (in a brief non-speaking cameo), *35 Shots of Rum* and *Bastards* (2013). Vincent Gallo, 'the baker', was also cast in *US Go Home* and stars in *Trouble Every Day*. This use of actors puts Denis's films in direct communication with one another – where again communication is a kind of contagion. Put differently, her films contaminate one another through their sharing of bodies. Rather than a clear referential meaning, the meaning alone seems to consist in the act of the character appearing. A spacing or sharing out is enacted amongst the films, where the world of each film is further stretched open around its already interrupted frame. Denis's repeated use of actors also renders each film, each time, a singular encounter – rewatching a film may expose another face or facet of a face, if other films with that actor have been viewed in the interim.

This intertextuality also applies to Denis's use of music. Six of her films are scored by the British group Tindersticks (or by single members of the group), of which *Nénette and Boni* was the first (in addition to *The Intruder*, *Friday Night*, *Trouble Every Day*, *White Material* (2009) and *Bastards*), and music tends to function as itself a character of sorts in her films. What is relevant here is to imagine how the particular feel of their music, which though different each time, just as an actor plays different roles, can still be read as a sonically recurring personality, something familiar but still undefined. It again asserts itself in a way that draws attention to the film as it exists in relation to Denis's entire oeuvre, an effect that, as with the inclusion of regular actors, tends to interrupt the illusion or plenitude of the film and gesture to the world outside of itself. As Jenny Munro notes, it also introduces an element of time, as we see actors ageing throughout their careers. This recurring cast (which also includes actors such as Béatrice Dalle, Michel Subor, Isaach de Bankolé and the late Yekaterina Golubeva) fragments the world of the film by bringing in extradiegetic connotations. In this way Denis forms a community of shifting presences, each film altering how we read these bodies, depending on the

order in which we screen them. The actors are each time different and their inclusion seems to be sufficient in and of itself to not require narrative or even visual motivation (as in the above scene with Richard Courcet). Their faces literally interrupt the world of the film, creating another opening outside of the diegesis in the potentially mythic film narrative.

This intertextual interruptive practice can be further supported by other moments in Denis's oeuvre. For example, her first film with Michel Subor, *Beau travail*, consciously quoted and even suggested a continuation of a much earlier character that Subor played in Jean-Luc Godard's *Petit Soldat* (1960). In the earlier movie Subor played a soldier name Bruno Forrestier. Some thirty-nine years later, Subor plays another Bruno Forrestier in Denis's film, now an officer in the Foreign Legion with a murky past. Here, Denis consciously invites us to read what is outside of the film into it, or to view the film in relation. She thus undermines our desire for narrative completion or to close the world of the film around the diegesis itself. Similarly, Subor's second picture with Denis, *The Intruder*, includes footage from an unfinished earlier film starring Subor entitled *Le Reflux* (Paul Gégauff, 1965). This grainier footage of a younger Subor sailing through the South Seas is inserted during a scene where the now much older Subor returns to Tahiti to seek out his son. Again, this film intrudes onto Denis's own, grafting itself onto the work, altering it and letting its meaning be altered by it, all the while exposing a limit to the frame.⁴⁹ While it may be argued that almost all films, then, 'interrupt' themselves as they use actors who have appeared in other movies, Denis's repeated use of the same group of actors (and technicians), as well as her conscious insertion of references to cinematic moments outside of the film, itself creates a unique dynamic. They open up the film, again privileging sense over narrative as it moves between and amongst her films and extends to points outside of her own body of work.

Finally, interruption as sense also functions in terms of sense as sensorium. The aforementioned close-ups and pans of bodies and surfaces work to evoke a tactile sensuality. Here I focus on sound and smell as they contribute to sense over meaning. This sensuality permeates *Nénette and Boni*'s drift, which moves across tactile images from fantasy to reality to pure abstraction. The score is characterised by a gentle and floating quality and almost always accompanies transitions between varied images (often seemingly unmotivated or not linked according to any causal logic). In one scene we see Boni's back in chiaroscuro as he writhes in bed narrating one of his boulangerie fantasies aloud. Music comes on the soundtrack. As Boni's back falls into darkness (Figure 2.7) we move to a dream scene in which he walks along an overpass where the baker woman brushes her hair. Almost completely in shadow we are given fleeting glances of a hand in her top, the woman going to her knees and so on, as the score melts away and groaning-like noises come onto the soundtrack. The

scene also melts away, almost literally, becoming a psychedelic kaleidoscope of orange-gold oscillating patterns (Figure 2.8). This is overlaid with a highly haptic gurgling and hissing noise. We see Boni bathed in gold light (Figure 2.9), then cut to him sleeping in bed, in a less rich light (Figure 2.10), all the while the gurgling and hissing dominating the soundtrack. The camera slowly pans to the coffee maker next to Boni's bed (which we come to realise is the source of the sounds), as we see his hand slowly and erotically caressing the machine and pulling it slightly closer (Figure 2.11). My attempt to evoke this scene is hindered by the fact that language falls short of Denis's multisensory montage. This sequence is a sensual glide across physical surfaces, soundscapes, light, shadow, colour, form and formlessness. It is an 'unnecessary' scene, in that Boni's fantasy life has already been well established, along with the high value he assigns to the coffee maker. It is a purely sensual indulgence that works against dominant forms of narrative development and continuity in cinema. Bringing us affectively and haptically closer to Boni, if only to emphasise the distance between us, it suspends meaning in favour of an excess of sense.

Nénette and Boni was Denis's first musical collaboration with Tindersticks, who were present on set during filming, often playing through taping to contribute to the overall feel of the film. Denis listened to their music while constructing her screenplay.⁵⁰ In the editing room, she worked according to their score, even keeping scenes that she normally would have cut, because they fitted with the music.⁵¹ She has said of this partnership, 'Stuart [Staples, of Tindersticks] and his music gave us more courage to be more elliptic,



Figure 2.7 Boni's back in chiaroscuro.



Figure 2.8 The scene melts away, becoming a psychedelic kaleidoscope of orange-gold oscillating patterns.



Figure 2.9 We see Boni bathed in gold light . . .

abstract . . . The music uninhibited me so I could fabricate the film.⁵² In an interview almost a decade later, she states, ‘The only time when I recognize myself in my work, is when I have a very strong rapport with music. Music multiplies itself, it is an ally, a road companion. Sometimes I look to music for what my collaborators cannot give me, for what a project cannot give me on its own. It is like a secret companionship between myself and music.’⁵³ Denis’s approach does not subordinate the sensory and rhythmic aspects of filmmak-

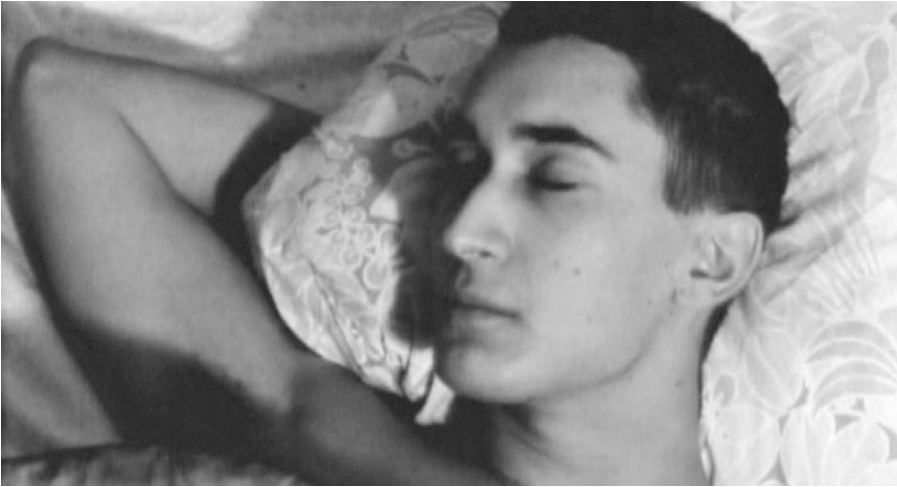


Figure 2.10 . . . then cut to him sleeping in bed, in a less rich light.



Figure 2.11 We see his hand slowly and erotically caressing the machine and pulling it slightly closer.

ing to narrative clarity, as characterises the classical cinema.⁵⁴ Commenting on the traditional film soundtrack, Denis says, ‘What’s called the film score, that intervention after-the-fact . . . is often a way to impose “character psychology” (which horrifies me), and it is completely contrary to my idea of the cinema.’⁵⁵ It is interesting in this regard that perhaps the most dramatic scene of the film, when Boni takes the baby at gunpoint, is shown completely without sound, as though we are watching through soundproof glass. Denis downplays the drama and shoots it more clinically than other more banal moments in the film.

The soundtrack, throughout the abduction, remains silent. In her touchstone work on music in film, Claudia Gorbman emphasises the danger of silence at key narrative moments, noting that when you remove music ‘from a scene whose emotional content is not explicit . . . you risk confronting the audience with an image they might fail to interpret’.⁵⁶ As a counter cinema, *Nénette and Boni* draws on this as a strength, allowing the image to remain unanchored. This allows a less calculated affective engagement to take precedence over cognitive clarity, giving the viewer an emotional freedom to encounter the scene in less manipulative terms.

Denis’s use of sound resonates with Nancy’s distinction between listening as hearing (*écouter*) and listening as comprehending (*entendre*), the former of which places emphasis on the pre-cognitive affective connection with the audible. Listening as a sensible rather than an intelligible mode resonates with the notion of ethics as a call to keep meaning in question rather than locking it down, and with a privileging of exposure and receptivity over the illusion of the body as contained and autonomous. Nancy writes, ‘To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, . . . not, however, as an acoustic phenomenon (or not merely as one) but as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose *sense* is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance.’⁵⁷ Sense thought in terms of listening highlights the vibratory power of sound and sound as a material force that resonates *through* bodies, further touching on the processual, directional component of sense. Here listening functions as a liminal concept. It resonates – a material presence vibrating through the air, a body against other bodies; being meaning, rather than possessing it.

In filmic terms, listening also opens up a discussion of the role of sound in the spectator’s experience. An ethics of sense demands that we ‘tune in’ in every sense of the phrase to the sounds and images before us, exposing ourselves to them such that they ‘play’ us and perhaps offer an encounter that interrupts our illusion of autonomy, altering *our* singularity through the singularities shared on screen. Nancy posits the subject as a ‘diapason-subject’ – a one-of-a-kind tuning fork. ‘Diapason’ suggests the full range of potential of any being, and its singularity, while highlighting the body’s receptivity and sensitivity to the world. We *are* in relation to a world with which we get in tune, as its vibrations traverse the body. Nancy states,

To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a ‘self’ can take place. To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other.⁵⁸

The subject can only be understood in terms of this making-space, this spacing or opening up of a subject-place that happens through time and keeps happening beat after beat, verse after verse, frame after frame. Boni *literally* makes room (clearing the mother's room) for the baby, physically manifesting the space that has opened within him through the arrival of Nénette and the anticipation of new life. We, as spectators, are open to the vibrations of image and sound, making room for new beings and impressions, preparing for an encounter that is spatial as well as temporal.

This works towards a post-phenomenological sensory form of spectatorship. By post-phenomenological I mean to signal a desire to move away from the notion of an autonomous subject who *sees* the world as properly outside of her and then incorporates what appears to her consciousness into a larger horizon of meaning. In listening it is not a matter of *appearing* as full-presence or manifestation. It does not require an intentional consciousness directed towards something, perceiving and assimilating it. Rather it is a receptivity to resonance, to the affective timbre of an animal calling, music playing, or a voice crying out:

The subject of listening or the subject who is listening (but also the one who is 'subject to listening' in the sense that one can be 'subject to' unease, an ailment, or a crisis) is not a phenomenological subject. This means that he is not a philosophical subject, and, finally, he is perhaps no subject at all, except as the place of resonance, of its infinite tension and rebound, the amplitude of sonorous deployment and the slightness of its simultaneous redeployment – by which a voice is modulated in which the singular of a cry, a call, or a song vibrates by retreating from it.⁵⁹

As spectators of multisensory media, we ourselves open as spaces of resonance, receptive to a story or an image that alters us. This reading is important because it foregrounds our vulnerability, our *with*-ness and our non-mastery of the world, all of which challenge the spectator accustomed to the classical American film idiom and, more broadly, lingering notions of a bounded and intentional subject.

One scene in *Nénette and Boni* is particularly striking in regard to listening and the sensory. Dialogue in the film is sparse, so the conversation in which Boni encounters the boulangère outside of her station behind the bakery counter and they have a coffee is notable.⁶⁰ We see her sampling perfume in the mall before we cut to a frontal shot of Boni, looking through a window. While the engrained viewer assumption is that we are seeing a reverse shot here (i.e. that Boni is watching the woman as she runs errands), we realise quickly that we are mistaken when she approaches him at the window and says hello. We are never shown what he has been viewing. Boni accepts her invitation for a

coffee and what follows is a fascinating study in encountering. The conversation occurs in three very long takes that together last around three and a half minutes. We start in close-up on Boni as the boulangère attempts to make conversation with the impenetrable boy. It is impossible to tell what he is thinking (Figure 2.12) – is he awestruck? Dumbfounded? Boni's reticence is further accented by its contrast with his long-winded fantasy scenarios, which are filled with colourful dialogue. The reality of the woman seems to render him speechless, his only two comments during the whole conversation being to state his name when asked and to reply that he doesn't know when the woman asks what her wrists smell like. She herself almost immediately comments that Boni is not a big talker, but quickly applies the comment to herself, explaining that that is what a customer told her earlier. Ironically, she then nervously carries the weight of the interaction with the almost completely silent Boni. After thirty seconds we cut to a medium shot of the woman, who lights a cigarette and introduces the topic of smell, explaining that she prefers not to wear perfume because she's read about a famous molecule that causes a chemical reaction between men and women. The camera rests on her for over two minutes as she continues, still receiving no audible response from Boni. At times she seems visibly uncomfortable and she erupts into pleasing and nervous bursts of laughter as she describes how a similar molecule works on female pigs (Figures 2.13–2.15). As we cut back to Boni (in close-up for another take lasting almost fifty seconds), she turns to the subject of the inequitable distribution of these chemicals amongst humanity and the viewer wonders whether Boni has any pheromones to offer. He remains impassive, except for the brief hint of a smile. We never see the conclusion of the conversation as the next cut transfers us somewhere else.

In this 'dialogue' we listen rather than understand, language giving way to the affects that happen between us – the *sense* of how we impact and touch one another. The woman's description of attraction and repulsion is echoed and exceeded by the image, sound and feeling of the interaction as we experience it. The conversation opens up more than it pins down, sharing out a moment of encounter whose affect is sensed by the viewer. It is not only sound that circulates but, as the boulangère herself has indicated, scents are material chemical particles that travel amongst us, disregarding any bodily boundaries in their passage. In an interview Denis comments,

You know, I've always thought about smell. I've always thought that to be attracted to someone had to have something to do with smell. And there is even a scene in *Nénette et Boni* where Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi speaks at great length with Grégoire Colin, and she's speaking to us about smells. See, there are dialogues in *Nénette et Boni* after all! And that particular dialogue is very good. But smells, you can imagine them



Figure 2.12 It is impossible to tell what he is thinking.



Figure 2.13 She's read about a famous molecule that causes a chemical reaction between men and women.

in the cinema. You can speak of smells in the cinema because you do have bodies present.⁶¹

This sensory materiality, as it relates to smell, is present at other points in the film – Nénette asks her brother if he ever does laundry because all of his clothes stink, she smells her mother's sweater as she rifles through her closet,



Figure 2.14 At times she seems visibly uncomfortable.



Figure 2.15 She erupts into nervous and pleasing laughter.

and we see Boni smell his own odour after waking up (Figures 2.16 and 2.17). This olfactory thread is part of Denis's scriptwriting practice:

When Jean-Pol Fargeau and I write, we write sensations. We even describe odours – the smell of a forest in summer when you're naked in the heat with two dogs. In a script you need to understand the ellipses.



Figure 2.16 ‘You can speak of smells in the cinema because you do have bodies present.’



Figure 2.17 Nénette smells her mother’s sweater as she rifles through her closet.

Sometimes they come later, little by little, but often they impose themselves from the start.⁶²

This quotation suggests that the ellipses, the lack of dialogue and narrative legibility so characteristic of her work, indicate those moments when sensation steps in to be meaning in the absence of semiological or cognitive modes of

comprehension. It is a form of interruption, where we are offered an encounter with smells, tensions and auditory vibrations.

Denis's films contribute to an ethics of sense when they cultivate a form of listening in their viewers, highlighting the tactility of sound (its power to evoke feelings even in the absence of images), its synaesthetic qualities, and also the power of music and voice to touch on what cannot be grasped, to expose and to gesture towards the liminal in human experience. This, in addition to other strategies such as the intertextual uses of actors, the privileging of close-ups, and the inclusion of peripheral scenes, all work to interrupt myth, to make her films literature and to suspend meaning in favour of an ethics of sense. At stake here is a challenge to our habitual ways of orienting ourselves onto the world – in place of the absolutism of myths of nation or subject, we learn to attune ourselves to the singularity or *sense* of the other and to the non-masterability of the world. This relinquishing of the control and power attendant on 'knowledge', in particular, challenges dominant subjectivities who have historically had the privilege of 'knowing' and naming the world. As a move *towards* that which cannot be, properly speaking, known, I now turn to a paradigmatic instance of liminality, focusing on birth as it relates to the ethics elaborated here.

NATALITY AND WONDER

The phonecard thread in *Nénette and Boni* references a larger framework of fragmented communication, which I suggested we might think in terms of communication as contagion (after Bataille). Nancy connects the notion of contagion to the birth into community when he writes, 'Instead of fulfilling itself in a work of death and in the immanence of a subject, community communicates itself through the repetition and the contagion of births: each birth exposes another singularity, a supplementary limit, and therefore another communication.'⁶³ As opposed to the coming into being of a sovereign subjectivity, birth is contagious, a new opening in the flux of the world. The origin is multiple, both in the sense that we are each of us an origin, a point of access to the world, and in the sense that our own origin is never autonomous or discrete. We very literally come out of a bodily space of sharing and are preceded by a web of connections, expectations, fears and joys. Although Nancy does draw on birth in a metaphorical and creative sense, for example, describing art as in each instance the birth of a world, natality as a literal process and stage is also crucial to his thinking of co-ontology.⁶⁴ Birth is a liminal concept, because our own origin *must* be, for us, immemorial. Birth is that which we can never 'know' or 'remember' although we have each experienced it. As an immemorial foundation, then, birth undoes the very notion of a stable or singular origin. We are already in-relation before we take our first breath – our earliest life originating in another body, such that

birth graphically illustrates our *bodily* with-ness, during both gestation and the process of being born. Boni, as much as the baby, highlights this immemoriality vis-à-vis his own deceased mother, whose absence permeates the apartment. His origins are something we as viewers do not have access to and nor does he; they withdraw from the viewer as much as from Boni himself. Denis has said that she wanted to use light sparingly in the interior shots of the apartment because she ‘wanted the house to be like a womb, since there is the mystery of what’s growing in Nénette’s stomach’.⁶⁵ This womb-like environment also suggests Boni and Nénette’s ongoing birth into a shared world, where that sharing is also always a division from the self, revealing the notion of an autonomous subjectivity to be another Western myth.

Nancy turns again to the womb and natality in his account of listening, as discussed already in relation to sense as interruption:

Perhaps we should thus understand the child who is born with his first cry as himself being – his being or his subjectivity – the sudden expansion of an echo chamber, a vault where what tears him away and what summons him resound at once, setting in vibration a column of air, of flesh, which sounds at its apertures: body and soul of some *one* new and unique. Someone who comes to himself by hearing *himself* cry (answering the other? calling him?), or sing, always each time, beneath each word, crying or singing, *exclaiming* as he did by coming into the world.⁶⁶

Here we see again the non-identity of the subject who ‘comes to himself’ and is himself the expansion of a space that both resonates outward and is traversed by vibrations that come from somewhere else, destabilising the distinction between inside and out. In describing the subject as this space of resonance, Nancy describes

The womb[*matrice*]-like constitution of resonance, and the resonant constitution of the womb: What is the belly of a pregnant woman, if not the space or the antrum where a new instrument comes to resound, a new *organon*, which comes to fold in on itself, then to move, receiving from outside only sounds, which, when the day comes, it will begin to echo through its cry? But more generally, more womblike, it is always in the belly that we – man or woman – end up listening, or start listening. The ear opens onto the sonorous cave that we then become.⁶⁷

We start off, then, by listening, sensing rather than understanding, being affected by the world before we act on it and organise it into any cognitive unity.

In Denis’s work, subjects are revealed in their singular plurality (i.e. their constitutionally related existence), in part through relations that alter them

or that reveal a different facet of who they are. The baby's arrival is anticipated with anxiety and eventually love by Boni, with dread and resignation by N nette, and his birth in its turn alters their lives (although counter to gendered stereotypes about motherhood and maternity, the birth is merely a relief to N nette, who wants nothing to do with the child, but nonetheless she has been undoubtedly changed by having to undergo this experience). The child is an event whose origin withdraws from us; this is perhaps most literally illustrated by the silence around the identity of the baby's father. 'He doesn't exist,' says N nette when pressed. While the film raises the themes of maternity and birth, it is undoubtedly through Boni that we *truly* witness the intrusion of the other, or the ways in which the other interrupts our illusion of autonomy. The film is very much about Boni's own alterity to himself, and documents the various intrusions that shape him as an ongoing process through the diegesis, from N nette's arrival, to the conversation with the boulang re (whose reality interrupts his pure fantasy of her), to the baby itself. The struggle within Boni is evident when he asserts his autonomy to his newly arrived sister in telling her, 'I do what I fucking want. Pain in the ass.' This scene is closely followed by one of Boni searching the train station for the sibling he has just rejected. The struggle to accept this new piece of his life is reflected in the oscillations between affection and aggression that Boni shows towards N nette. After insisting that she see a doctor and accompanying her there, Boni throws her out of the van and takes off. He cherishes the ultrasound image, but is nonetheless physically aggressive towards the pregnant N nette. As the film progresses, we see Boni coming to terms with and welcoming the baby's arrival. He clears the mother's room for the child and caresses N nette's belly, excited when he feels it move (Figure 2.18). Boni is becoming other through the anticipation of a new life, but again this is displaced from where we would conventionally expect an alteration to be visible, namely, in the expectant mother herself. Boni's nascent impulses of care unhook nurture from the maternal role. In fact, he reveals that the notion of the 'maternal' is a gendered construct for what is simply a feeling of nurture that any person may or may not evince toward another. The film thus documents Boni's ongoing rebirths. Although Boni is already nineteen, as Nancy writes, 'we never stop being born into community'.⁶⁸

In her work, Anne O'Byrne focuses on birth as a central concept for understanding Nancy's exposition of world, self and sense. Nancy writes in *The Sense of the World* that the world possesses 'an innateness "whose structure is throughout the structure of birth and surprising arrival"'.⁶⁹ O'Byrne develops this strain of Nancy's thought, elaborating that 'Identity is not asserted, but comes to pass and keeps passing in a continual movement within which birth marks a shift rather than a break. It is not yet a shift from the immemorial to experience that will in principle be available to memory – this will come



Figure 2.18 Boni is becoming other through the anticipation of a new life.

later – but a shift to visibility and susceptibility, which is to say, to the state of being exposed.⁷⁰ Just as Denis’s films make visible bodies that we may not get a complete picture of, birth is an exposure rather than the establishment of an identity. Birth is always relational, as is being, which ‘finds itself constantly interrupted, stalled, set off-kilter by new arrivals; a shudder runs through it just as the self is trembled-through [*durch-zittert*] by the self of the other individual but also by its difference from itself.’⁷¹ Rather than founding itself in a transcendent outside, birth itself is the opening of the world through the creation of the new, the ongoing flux of the world as sense.⁷² This again highlights the processual and dynamic nature of co-existence. The temporal aspect of birth as an ongoing rather than finished event re-emphasises the idea that time-based media such as film have a special capacity to expose this origin (which is always multiple and never a foundation) of sense.

As a liminal and immemorial experience, natality may suggest a breakdown in representation. But O’Byrne suggests that the immemorial is that which we *tend toward* – it emerges ‘obliquely’: ‘if not in philosophy then certainly in the maelstrom of lived experience and also, Nancy suggests, in painting’.⁷³ Building on this, we can extend Nancy’s suggestion that painting can reach towards the immemorial to the medium of film.⁷⁴ The idea of tending towards (*vers*) a character, an impression, a place at a particular moment in time, or a sound echoes Denis’s own preoccupations. A filmic ethics of sense, then, is particularly interested in the immemorial, the natal and the liminal; it *tends toward* rather than simply captures. It also opens us up to the curiosity of the other as access to an origin.

To think about birth as a starting place for understanding the structure of world, community and ontology is to radically shift the tendency of much Western philosophy to turn to death as an indicator of who we truly are or what our existence might mean.⁷⁵ What *Nénette and Boni* suggests is that we can separate birth from its own mythology, linked as it is to notions of maternal sacrifice. It also asks us to take birth as a starting place for thinking about 'children' of all ages, to open up our curiosity to the *each time* of the gesture of another, to the way that they are altered as they move through their daily activities and to the way this openness alters us as spectators. From a feminist perspective, this focus on natality allows us to learn from maternity and birth, which are either ignored or mythologised in our culture, but without essentialising what that experience means. This provides a way to emphasise an undervalued and often repressed process, that of the literal material reproduction of the species, but at the same time disrupts discourses that attach maternity to femininity or the maternal, or that render motherhood the sole defining state of any woman who has the option to and chooses to give birth (or who does not have the choice, for that matter). Just as sense interrupts myth, the film suspends mainstream representations that mythologise maternity. Because Denis works outside of generic conventions, she avoids altogether the dominant paradigms that Hollywood has used to pigeonhole mothers.⁷⁶ These myths, of the sacrificial mother, the phallic mother or the abject mother, are interrupted in the film by Nénette's singularity. She refuses to be redeemed or to be maternal towards the child, which she adamantly does not want.⁷⁷ The only time we are shown her bare stomach, it appears alien and detached from her body, an orb in space (Figure 2.19).

When Boni touches and listens to her stomach, her face shows her complete dissociation from what is happening (Figure 2.18). To complicate any simple reading of Nénette as a cold person, however, the film does not disallow her caring and nurturing impulses altogether. She cleans her brother's kitchen at one point (for which he very much resents her) and at another point she straddles a crying Boni in bed, feeding him food she has prepared as if he were a child and kissing him tenderly on the forehead. At the end of her book on the subject, E. Ann Kaplan speculates about the future of representations of motherhood. She writes,

... as subjectivities, including female ones, are in general conceived of as dispersed, multiple, unstable, in process, so the concept 'mother' may, in turn, no longer signify such supreme importance. The de-essentializing of subjectivity and, in a related move, of *identity*, should free women and minorities of their simultaneous subordination and fetishization. For women, one of the subordinated *and* fetishized positions has been that of 'mother.' Once this position is opened up as only a part of any specific



Figure 2.19 The only time we are shown her bare stomach, it appears alien and detached from her body, an orb in space.

woman's subjectivity, not the all-consuming entirety of it; once any specific woman is seen to be constituted 'mother' only when interacting with her child; once 'mother' is no longer a fixed, essentialized quality, then women may be freed from the kind of discursive constraints and burdens studied in this book.⁷⁸

While perhaps we have yet to see this kind of shift in Hollywood representations of motherhood, by altering the codified language of narrative cinema Denis makes it possible to read *Nénette* outside of dominant discourses of maternity, even as she carries a child throughout the film. In her analysis of the film, Beugnet raises potential concerns that it effaces the feminine or replaces the mother with the father, via the figure of Boni. Instead she concludes, 'Formally as well as in narrative content, rather than exposing a shift in gender roles, and an appropriation of the feminine by the masculine, the film appears to map out the absence or irrelevance of such models.'⁷⁹ Beugnet's point reinforces Kaplan's argument that the de-essentialisation of female subjectivity multiplies the possible representations of maternity, claiming that the film disregards rather than problematically reinforces dominant discourses. This extends to Boni as much as *Nénette*, both of whom develop in relation to the child in ways that are in tension with hegemonic gender stereotypes. I would add that more generally Denis's work challenges the usefulness of any identity categories for understanding the world or the other (something I discuss in the next chapter in terms of an aesthetic of alterity). Rendering natality an

open-ended process of making sense, rather than an overdetermined signification of femininity, links back to the ethics of sense. Instead of a mythologised representation of maternity we are offered an exposure to the unknown – to new faces and new origins, to wonder and curiosity. As Nancy writes,

‘Strangeness’ refers to the fact that each singularity is another access to the world. At the point where we would expect ‘something,’ a substance or a procedure, a principle or an end, a signification, there is nothing but the manner, the turn of the other access, which conceals itself in the very gesture wherein it offers itself to us – and whose concealing *is* the turning itself. In the singularity that he exposes, each child that is born has already concealed the access that he is ‘for himself’ and in which he will conceal himself ‘within himself,’ just as he will one day hide under the final expression of a dead face. This is why we scrutinize these faces with such curiosity, in search of identification, looking to see whom the child looks like, and to see if death looks like itself. What we are looking for there, like in the photographs, is not an image; it is an access.⁸⁰

To our earlier discussion of the close-up as that which has the potential to make strange and to ‘evoke a body that is temporarily freed from its function as social, cultural and even gender signifier – a body that escapes the conventional order of male/female dualism’⁸¹ we can now add the nearness of the other as a point of access to the origin of the world, regardless of whether they are in the womb or nearing death. Key to this is the cultivation of an attitude of curiosity and wonder in the viewer. Nancy further elaborates, ‘As English [and French] allows us to say, other beings are *curious* (or *bizarre*) to me because they give me access to the origin; they allow me to touch it; they leave me before it, leave me before its turning, which is concealed each time.’⁸² We glimpse this wonder at the origin in Boni’s intimacy with the child and through our own curiosity about the rebirth of Boni himself.

As Laura McMahon points out, in Nancy’s *The Evidence of Film* (his book on Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami) he describes film in language that suggests ‘pregnancy’. McMahon argues that his description of film as “‘something with shape and strength that precedes and promotes a ripened delivery into the world [. . .]’”⁸³ calls to mind ‘Merleau-Ponty’s “empirical pregnancy”, suggesting, . . . “not experience itself, with its contours and meanings, but the possibility of such experience, astonished exposure at the limit of meaningfulness rather than the presentation of meanings”’.⁸⁴ Here natality again slips into metaphor, referring to an epistemological exposure to the wondrous (astounding) and new – to a surprise that the world can and does exist as it is. This astonished exposure suggests an important ethical role for wonder and also reminds us of the necessity of making visible the impossibility of seeing. Mary-

Jane Rubenstein makes an argument for the epistemological and ethical value of wonder, describing wonder as ‘thinking’s unendured affect’. Relative to my work, Rubenstein draws on both Levinas and Nancy in making an argument for the risk of wonder, in which a commitment to uncertainty is part of what it means to truly think. She writes, ‘Wonder as “philosophy’s virtue” has something, rather, to do with keeping things difficult – with thinking at the limits of thinkability and making sense at the fault lines of sensibility.’⁸⁵ I would argue that this is where film can play an important role. The sensory and sensual ability of image and sound to operate at the limits of the cognised is precisely what makes them effective tools for cultivating a spectatorial position that listens and is open to being astonished without the relief of clear resolutions.

Returning to the language of unworking (*désouvement*), which I earlier discussed as akin to interruption, Rubenstein connects ethics and ontology with a practice that touches on the limits of the intelligible:

In the phenomenon of unworking, we thus see ontology give immediately onto ethics and vice versa; unworking is both ‘our’ existential (de) situation and our responsibility. Again, however, it must be emphasised that, like the much maligned, little understood ‘unworking’ of deconstruction, the task of exposing the failures and interruptions of sense *is first and foremost a way of making sense*, precisely by refusing to assimilate the unthinkable under ready-made categories of thought.⁸⁶

The revelation of the limits to visual mastery, the demand for an affective engagement that offers a physical pre-cognitive relation to the image, the interest in reaching towards the ineffable and revealing in the process our unending birth-to-presence, all inflect the ethics of sense that Denis develops through her work. Rubenstein and O’Byrne, when read together, make an argument for including wonder at the origin – the opening in the world that the other is – into this constellation of ideas.

CONCLUSION

In *Vers Nancy*, Samardzija makes a statement that beautifully characterises an ethical spectator/film relationship when she says of the intruder, ‘We’re unsettled, but something occurs that allows us to change.’ This seems to me a description of what film can do, from an ethical perspective. It unsettles us through the encounters it offers. It touches us in a pre-cognitive and affective way, and in the case of Denis’s work the images are left to linger without their meaning being contained by definitive dialogue or psychologisation. Put differently, where myth settles, sense unsettles.

Denis's work evinces an ethics of sense, where this involves a practice of interruption or suspension of dominant representational conventions in favour of a meaning that drifts, unworking our expectations and unsettling us as spectators. Through thinking about liminal states such as natality and wonder, and the ways in which film can cultivate a practice of listening in the spectator, I have opened an ethical common ground between Denis and Nancy. As noted, ethics is a facet of Nancy's work that is not central in the secondary literature. Films such as *Nénette and Boni* show us, through their deep interest in beings, the necessity of an ethical curiosity or the ways in which our curiosity about being is an ethical position, one that the medium of film has the capacity to cultivate.

For much of the chapter, I have focused on the sympathies and similarities between Denis and Nancy, perhaps at the expense of seeking out major points of divergence. The way in which film, and Denis's practice in particular, emphasises the reality of different differences, material differences that impact the ways in which bodies are read and operate affectively in the world, is missing from Nancy's work. Despite perhaps wanting to do otherwise, Nancy, committed to a philosophical lexicon, tends to flatten out or relativise the degrees or varying intensities of difference with his more abstract ontological language. In a similar vein, where Nancy turns to birth to elucidate the process of the world, Denis links it concretely to sexed bodies, if only to reject any expectations we have of those bodies. We see how birth happens physically through certain bodies and how maternity shapes expectations and limits possibilities for those bodies as they act in the world. The unequal nature of difference is something that it is less easy for Nancy to convey, relying as he does on a less sensory medium and again working with the baggage of philosophical concepts. Here Denis's work lines up with a feminist perspective, in that it seeks to account for material differences while suspending a sense of identity as essential and immutable. Feminism is deeply invested in myth's disruption and has had much to gain from the dismantling of the subject of the Western philosophical tradition, although it has taken on its share of anxiety about what this means for claiming 'woman' as an identity. *Nénette and Boni* offers a representation of maternity that challenges essentialist notions of womanhood and offers a world unmoored by stereotypes of race and gender.

Despite these points of divergence, or at least Denis's better ability and willingness to pay attention to material difference, Denis's and Nancy's work can be read in complementary relation to each other, and not merely because of their documented intellectual and practical engagement. Nancy's own practices suggest, counter to typical philosophical commentary on art, an enactment of his philosophy (i.e. a praxis) where his ideas do not summarise or interpret a work, but rather think *with* the work, rather than about it. There is a thinking-in-common that they share – in theory and in practice – and that I

have tried to think with as well, taking Denis as my starting point for finding an ethics that works outside of normative principles and offers a cinema that is as pleasurable as it is different from the dominant prototype. In the following chapter, I follow a similar practice, this time focusing on Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher with whom Denis does not have any known relation. Centring the discussion on the film *I Can't Sleep*, I further examine the ethics of Denis's counter cinematic practices, this time through the lens of difference, or what I term an aesthetic of alterity.

NOTES

1. For discussion around French identity see Pierre Bourdieu et al., *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Michel Maffesoli, 'Socialité et polythéisme sociétal', *Échos* 78.9 (1996): 12–17; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Pierre-André Taguieff, 'Identité Nationale: un débat français', *Échos* 78.9 (1996): 82–92; Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
2. This encounter will be each time different for each spectator (who brings with her different histories and experiences) and each viewing. A particular mode of encounter is cultivated by the narrative and formal style of Denis's films, but each time affects are produced through the encounter with the film and these will always be singular to the encounter itself.
3. Denis's film on the choreographer *Vers Mathilde* includes Nancy giving a reading, and Denis has contributed to the text *Allitérations: Conversations sur la danse* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), co-authored by Monnier and Nancy.
4. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 43–70.
5. B. C. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 113.
6. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 63.
7. *Ibid.* p. 65.
8. See also Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 200; and Marie-Eve Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 198, on sense and the literary in Nancy.
9. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 63.
10. See Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); 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.
11. See, for example, Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy*, James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, and Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy*.
12. The major work here is Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch*

- in *Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Leeds: Maney, 2011), which focuses primarily on touch, indeed a major concept in Nancy's work.
13. Denis had previously worked with Colin and Hourii in the made-for-television *US Go Home* (1994), in which they also played siblings. She expressed her desire to further explore the sibling dynamic with them, resulting in *Nénette and Boni*.
 14. I also discuss the drifting and movement that characterises her work in the following chapter on *I Can't Sleep*, but there I place it in dialogue with Levinas rather than Nancy.
 15. This is of course a concern shared by Levinas, as well as by thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari in their reformulations of ethics.
 16. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', in *A Finite Thinking*, trans. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 172–95; p. 189.
 17. *Ibid.* p. 176.
 18. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Inoperative Community', in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 1–42.
 19. On Nancy see also Ian James, 'On Interrupted Myth', *Journal for Cultural Research* 9.4 (October 2005): 331–49.
 20. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 99.
 21. Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', p. 181.
 22. To be fair, Nancy would include rocks in his taxonomy of relevant beings with which we share the world, but here the idea of something self-sufficient, bounded and impenetrable – that is, stone-like – is used metaphorically. I suppose that in this sense even stones are not stone-like.
 23. Nancy, 'The Inoperative Community', p. 33.
 24. Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', p. 181.
 25. Here I am referencing the feminist dialogue around foundational categories recorded in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, in particular Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminisms and the Question of "Postmodernism"', in Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3–21, but this tension between the necessity and the danger of norms and categories is 'foundational' itself to feminist theory.
 26. Again, Judith Butler's work is most resonant with this line of thought. See particularly the collection of essays in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
 27. Nancy, 'Originary Ethics', p. 179.
 28. 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).
 29. Janet Bergstrom, 'Opacity in the Films of Claire Denis', in Tyler Edward Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele (eds), *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 69–102.
 30. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Insufficiency of "Values" and the Necessity of "Sense"', *Journal for Cultural Research* 9.4 (2005): 437–41; 441.
 31. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, p. 32.
 32. *Ibid.* p. 33.
 33. This should be differentiated from a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, which aims to spur the viewer on to reflection on the larger social realities the play depicts. Denis does not alienate her audience from the image to facilitate an intellectual process.
 34. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 14.

35. I elaborate on this sense of movement and shifting in Denis's work in the following chapters, discussing it in terms of Levinas's concept of the saying.
36. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Topos: Who Comes After the Subject?', introduction to special issue of *Topoi* 7.2 (1988): 87–92; 90.
37. Andrew O. Thompson, 'Nénette and Boni Exposes Brother-Sister Bond', *American Cinematographer* 78 (September 1997): 16–20; 20.
38. *Ibid.* p. 20.
39. Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 96.
40. While Western cultures undoubtedly rely on these categories, challenging their givenness or explanatory value opens up a different kind of politics than that based on identity.
41. Beugnet is making this argument specifically about what she calls the cinema of sensation and not about classical Hollywood film.
42. Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation*, p. 108.
43. See Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, 'Marseille: Intersection, Fragment, Ruin', in *From Moscow to Madrid: Postmodern Cities, European Cinema* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2003), pp. 73–90, for a larger discussion of Marseille as a location in the film and as it relates to French cinema more generally.
44. I discuss more of these narrative interruptions in the following chapter in terms of Levinas's concept of the saying.
45. Nancy draws on Bataille in his work on community.
46. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 28.
47. *Ibid.* p. 28.
48. A notable exception is the recent article by Jenny Munro, 'Denis, Caven, Fassbinder: Reading Performance Intertextuality in *35 Rhums* (2008)', *Studies in French Cinema* 31.1 (2012): 61–74. That said, the author's focus is on Denis's use of the regular Fassbinder actor Ingrid Caven in *35 Shots of Rum*, as opposed to the intertextual use of actors *within* Denis's own oeuvre.
49. An auditory example of this is present in *I Can't Sleep*. Line Renaud (a popular French actress and singer) is cast as a hotel matron who also teaches self-defence to elderly women. As one of the characters drives into Paris at the film's beginning we hear an old recording of Renaud and Dean Martin singing their hit 'Relax-ay-woo'. This song again consciously gestures to Renaud as a person and entertainer outside of her role in the film.
50. Pauline Reay, *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p. 80.
51. Although he doesn't discuss *Nénette and Boni* specifically, Ian Murphy has recently argued that Denis's films privilege auditory and haptic modes of spectatorship and rhythmic form that create a structure more akin to music than to narrative cinema. See Ian Murphy, 'Feeling and Form in the Films of Claire Denis', *Jump Cut* 54 (Fall 2012), <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc54.2012/IanMurphyDenis/>> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
52. Reay, *Music in Film*, p. 80.
53. Didier Castanet, 'Interview with Claire Denis', *Journal of European Studies* 34.1–2 (March–June 2004): 143–61; 153. Denis's interest in music is also evinced by her early film documentary on the Cameroonian group Les Têtes Brulées (*Man No Run*, 1989) and by her music videos, most notably in the American context her work with Sonic Youth for the songs 'Incinerate' and 'Jams Run Free' (of which there are four versions).
54. See, for example, Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

55. Thierry Jousse, interviewer, part 2, *Autour de la musique: Entretien avec Claire Denis (2me emission). A voix nue: Grands entretiens d'hier et aujourd'hui*, Radio France, France Culture, Paris, 14 May 2002, 25 minutes.
56. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, p. 18.
57. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 7.
58. Ibid. p. 14.
59. Ibid. pp. 21–2.
60. For a detailed analysis of this scene see also Travis Mackenzie Hoover, 'Nenette and Boni: Sidelong Glance', *Reverse Shot* 20.2 (2007), <<http://reverseshot.org/archive/entry/413/nenette-et-boni>> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
61. Aimé Ancian, 'Claire Denis: An Interview', trans. Inge Pruks, *Senses of Cinema* 23 (November–December 2002), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/spotlight-claire-denis/denis_interview/> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
62. Interview with Jonathan Romney, 'Between Dream and Reality', *Sight and Sound* 15.9 (2005): 41–2; 42.
63. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 66.
64. See Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, pp. 14–15 for a description of art as the birth of a world.
65. Thompson, 'Nenette and Boni Exposes Brother–Sister Bond', p. 18.
66. Nancy, *Listening*, pp. 17–18.
67. Ibid. p. 37.
68. Nancy, 'Myth Interrupted', p. 66.
69. Anne O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 121; quotes from Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 155.
70. O'Byrne, *Natality and Finitude*, p. 113.
71. Ibid. p. 113.
72. Ibid. p. 113.
73. Ibid. p. 115.
74. And unlike painting, film's inherent durational aspect, its temporal move onward, makes it particularly suited to highlighting the dynamic and shifting nature of sense as it operates in my account.
75. Perhaps the best reference in this regard is Heidegger, in whose *Being and Time* death is what individuates the subject and is profoundly non-relational, that is to say it is what is *Dasein's* 'ownmost'.
76. I take the following archetypes from two important studies examining maternity, motherhood and genre: Lucy Fischer, *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
77. If anything, Fischer's chapter on *Rosemary's Baby* has the most resonance with Nénette's experience of pregnancy, as a form of unwanted alien growing inside her and compromising her agency.
78. Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, p. 219.
79. Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 161.
80. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 14.
81. Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation*, p. 96.
82. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 20.

83. Quoted from Jean-Luc Nancy, *Abbas Kiarostami: The Evidence of Film* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert, 2001), p. 20; in McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, p. 29.
84. McMahon, *Cinema and Contact*, p. 29. The inner quotation is a reference to Chris Watkins's writing on Merleau-Ponty.
85. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 125.
86. *Ibid.* pp. 118–19.