PROJECT MUSE®

Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics

Hole, Kristin

Published by Edinburgh University Press

➡ For additional information about this book

https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66757

Otherwise than Hollywood: Denis, Levinas and an Aesthetic of Alterity

My way of making films is tied to desire . . . Not just the physical desire for another person but desire in general. All my films function as a movement toward an unknown other and toward the unknown in relations between people.

Claire Denis[1]

Can we speak of an ethical responsibility towards the memory of a serial killer? What if the killer in question is gay, a black West Indian immigrant, and an HIV-positive drug user? All of these rubrics applied to Thierry Paulin, the so-called granny killer, who confessed to killing twenty-one elderly women in Paris between 1984 and 1987.[2] Controversially, Claire Denis chose to take up this story in her third feature film, *J'ai pas sommeil* (*I Can't Sleep*).[3] Rather than sensationalising her subject matter as a portrait of absolute evil or monstrosity, she explores the ambiguity of human violence through a multi-plot structure and an understated representation of the crimes. Denis has said in interviews that Paulin was described as a sweet and nice person by those who knew him and that she was drawn to the reality of his multiple roles as brother, son and many other things alongside his role as a violent killer.[4] I read her unique approach to her subject matter as ethical when viewed through a Levinasian lens, arguing that his philosophy offers fruitful possibilities for the articulation of a feminist filmmaking practice.

Denis's representational practice is one centred in alterity and ambiguity. The ambiguity present on multiple levels of *I Can't Sleep* is a strategy that evokes what Levinas would term the absolute alterity of the other. Unlike classical narrative cinema, the film refuses character psychologisation, leaving characters unknowable and opaque. I read *I Can't Sleep*'s performance of failure – in the sense of failing to capture the other – as part of this ethical approach.[5] I examine how Denis constructs her narrative to reveal a funda-

mental being-with that resonates with Levinas's concept of the subject as constituted relationally via a call to ethical responsibility to the other. After elaborating on the ethics of absolute alterity and relational subjectivity, I turn to the other spaces in Denis's work that open up a dialogue with Levinas's writing. These include what I term a 'Levinasian Poetics', or Levinas's own writing as a representational model; his concept of the 'saying' which emphasises process and becoming over result and being; and, finally, his notion of the erotic, which returns us to the value of an ambiguity that both brings the other closer, exposing her, while revealing her absolute and unknowable singularity. In the chapter's final section, I turn to the writing of Diane Perpich. Modifying Perpich's argument for a feminist alterity politics based on Levinas, I argue for *I Can't Sleep* as a model of a feminist aesthetic of alterity.

Rather than reading Denis's films through Levinas's philosophy, it is the films that guide us to the places in Levinas that have useful applications to the study of cinema. Denis's work refutes Levinas's often condemnatory position on art, revealing that film has the power to show us the face of the other and to help us in developing an attention to and respect for difference. Her filmmaking steps in at the limits of philosophical language, and is able to evoke and expose relations and knowledges that are difficult to translate into propositional content. In comparison with Nancy, who has written extensively on various arts, including film and painting, Levinas has relatively little to say about art and never takes up cinema as a sustained theme.[6] Despite this, film scholars have begun to use aspects of Levinas's thought to think about a variety of films from documentaries to classical Hollywood to silent features.[7] Scholarship on Levinas and cinema tends to avoid the fraught question of his position on vision and the work of art. His writing on these themes is ambiguous and at times openly hostile. He associates the artwork with an ethical *irresponsibility* and a turning away from the call of the other. I move away from his limited writings on art and aesthetics, which are not useful in helping us to pose important ethical questions about the highly visual world in which we exist and in which our ethical responsibilities are summoned and enacted. Guided by Denis, I look elsewhere in his thought to ask what his conceptualisation of *ethics* has to offer us in thinking about the opportunities for an engagement with alterity that are offered or denied the spectator. *I Can't Sleep* suggests that particular films may aid us in honing an ethical sensibility. Levinas's ethics teach us to resist the lure of full comprehension, to let things lie in the darker spaces, to value ungraspable movement, and to be open to the encounter with what we cannot know. Denis's films similarly invite us to encounter what is unknown in the other rather than assimilating her into a comprehensive framework.

While Denis is often read alongside the philosophy of her collaborator and commentator Jean-Luc Nancy, putting her into conversation with Levinas

opens up another facet of the ethical dimension of her work, while simultaneously making Levinas available to feminist film studies. Placed in proximity to each other, they intrude on one another in productive ways – Denis, at times, pushing Levinas's ideas further through the medium of film. Levinas, unlike Nancy, is concerned first and foremost with ethics. Like Nancy, Levinas defines ethics through a fundamentally relational and non-self-identical subjectivity that entails a sophisticated concept of difference.[8] The ethics under consideration are thus not to be located in the plot per se, nor in the kinds of moral choices that the characters make, but rather in how their alterity is represented to the spectator. While Nancy is an important figure for understanding the ethical in Denis's films, by turning to Levinas we can more fully elaborate this ethical dimension and continue to open up the discussion of feminist representational ethics such that it has implications beyond Denis's oeuvre.

The face-to-face encounter is the definitive image of Levinas's ethics. This encounter with the other is present on multiple levels in Denis's cinema – both amongst the characters on screen and in the relation between spectator and film. By its invitation to encounter the other, the film itself offers an opportunity to view ethically and to develop an ethical sensitivity that extends beyond the timeframe of the film. The film is thus ethical both in its treatment of its subject matter and in the experience it offers its spectator. The potential for this experience to alter the viewer herself reveals that we are fundamentally *with*; our subjectivities are the result of the ongoing process of encountering. *I Can't Sleep* introduces us to several others whose lives intersect in ways that extend beyond their – and our – frame of vision.

I Can't Sleep is said by Denis to be the final instalment of a trilogy that deals with colonialism and the postcolonial.[9] The spectre of colonialism is most visibly present in the characters of Théo and Camille, brothers from the West Indies with different relationships to France and to Martinique, their land of origin. Camille (Richard Courcet) is the character loosely based on Paulin – he lives by night, performing a toned-down drag in bars, and dancing in nightclubs. He is shown being fitted for leather gear and fetish photos are strewn about his room. He is both gentle and taciturn in his interactions with others and also violent and dominating towards his white French boyfriend – his partner in both love and murder/robbery. His brother Théo (Alex Descas) works *au noir* doing odd jobs to make ends meet, supporting his young son and saving up for his dream of returning to Martinique, which he sees as a natural paradise in contrast to the difficulties of life in Paris. He is in a stormy marriage with a fiery white French woman, Mona (Béatrice Dalle). He is a difficult, disgruntled and surly man, who several times over the course of the film denies his brother an intimacy that Camille desires.

Denis uses another marginalised character as a way into the complex web

of the city and the narrative. Daïga (the late Yekaterina Golubeva) is a young Lithuanian woman, whose entry into Paris is the spectator's entry into the film. Able to speak only a small amount of French, but motivated to emigrate by the promise of a role in the theatre from a French director (and, it seems, casual lover) and by a letter from an long-emigrated great-aunt (Mina), Daïga brings us into a world of Russian-speaking French immigrants, whose circuitous paths will pass by and sometimes intrude upon those of Camille. In many ways Daïga's complex depiction parallels that of Camille, avoiding an oversimplified separation of character types that Denis would associate with a typically 'Hollywood-esque' screenplay.

Denis claims she was very wary of making a 'politically correct' film. In one interview she discusses the Hollywood film *Philadelphia* as an example of what she *didn't* want to do, namely, to portray the marginalised as impossibly good or as absolute victims, which functions to erase their humanity just as much as does their representation as monstrous.[10] Denis avoids what we would expect from a conventional narrative film. This would typically include an attitude of fascination and repulsion at the unqualified evil (and therefore difference) of the killer; or, given the various components of Paulin's marginalised identity position, to make a melodramatic thriller that shows how society has created the killer through disregard, racism and homophobia.[11] Perhaps, at face value, the latter option appears the 'ethical' choice.

Instead, I argue that the ethics of the film lies in its complex treatment of all of its major characters and the establishment of narrative parallels that reveal the ambiguous connections between them, such that easy distinctions between good and evil become murky. Through this ambiguity, the characters are allowed to remain opaque and cannot be assimilated into any easy interpretative frameworks about the world. This difference, rather than any notion of the other as monstrous, allows otherness to remain absolute – or unknown – and not merely relational (i.e. not other than myself, or evil as opposed to good, both of which define the other in relation to a known term). The following section highlights how Levinas's notion of radical alterity and its fundamental reworking of relational notions of self and other shed light on the ethics of Denis's portrayal. Denis's approach makes it evident that radical alterity in filmmaking practice requires an other brought close enough that their contours are not so easily discernible.[12] Ethics requires a representational ambiguity.

DIFFERENCE AND THE SUBJECT: DENIS/LEVINAS

Denis's main characters tend not to say much. In fact, almost as if to poke fun at the lack of dialogue in her films, Denis will often have her more voluble

minor characters comment on the quietness of her protagonists.[13] In *I Can't Sleep*, both Théo and Camille are men of few words, and Daïga, even when conversing in her mother tongue, seems amused rather than engaged by verbal communication. In fact, at the time of the film's production, Golubeva did not speak any French. Denis's desire to cast her is symptomatic of the secondary role that dialogue plays in her films. She identifies dialogue as simply a component of her films' soundtracks.[14] Dialogue, normally a central component of character development in mainstream film, is eschewed in favour of character impenetrability.[15]

A telling scene is one in which Camille visits Théo. Théo's mother-in-law is visiting and Camille exchanges brief pleasantries with the family from the door. Théo asks Camille what he wants, but he says nothing. There is clearly tension between them and Camille seems to feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the others, while Théo makes no effort to move their interaction into another space. Camille leaves with his request unstated. After a brief interval, Théo decides to run after him. Finding him on the subway platform, as the doors close Théo hands his brother money, which Camille says was not what he came for. We see him drift away from his brother on the subway, as Théo demands, 'Wait! Where are you going?' to no response. Almost nothing has been said between the two. We don't know Camille's motivation for visiting his brother, nor why Théo decided to go after him. We can speculate, but their inner lives remain exterior to us. As Théo tells the incredulous officer who can't believe that Théo did not notice anything 'odd' about his brother, 'My brother's a stranger to me, just like you.'

A scene near the end of the film further emphasises Camille's 'strangeness'. Here, he confesses to the murders in police custody. The inspector reads through the list of names, dates and locations of each murder, to which Camille responds, without affect, 'Yes' (or, in one case, 'I don't know'). In a film that followed the dominant Hollywood style, one can imagine that the scene of arrest would typically be padded with a cathartic confession (preferably in close-up) or some other scene of clarification into the mystery of the crime. Yet the scene in *I Can't Sleep* adds nothing to our understanding of why Camille committed these acts of violence. He says merely (quoting the 'real' Paulin) 'The world's gone crazy' in response to the inspector's mystified gaze. There is no profound and insightful speech on his part linking the violence of his crimes to his experience of marginalisation or the violence of the colonial past. While the viewer could perhaps construe these acts as the perverse consequence of Camille's assimilation (his world, outside of his family, appears to be completely white), she is given no causal or clarifying explanation to make sense of his crimes.[16]

Denis contributes to this opacity through her choices in terms of the film's narrative structure. Two murders are shown, one directly after the other, but

they do not occur until around an hour and forty-one minutes into the film. In the meantime we have witnessed many other facets of Camille – his charm towards his landlady (he lives with his boyfriend, Raphaël, at the hotel where Daïga has been given a place to stay and a job as a chambermaid), his strained relationship with his brother, his violent behaviour towards his boyfriend, his close community of friends in the gay club scene, and a scene in which he flirtatiously assists the twin maids who make his bed. It is only after these other sides of Camille are depicted that he is revealed as the murderer-at-large.

Additionally, it is *after* the murders occur that we are shown some of the more touching scenes involving Camille. At his mother's birthday party, we see him dance playfully and tenderly with her, a smile on his face. There is even a brief and subtle suggestion – all communicated through body language – that Camille would like to dance with his brother and mother, the three embracing and enjoying the music. This is an invitation that Théo explicitly rejects, pulling away and leaving the dance floor, allowing Camille to cut in. Thus, even after the film has shown us that Camille is in fact the killer, our expectations are immediately complicated. The hands that have strangled and robbed are now affectionately holding another woman of the same age group as the victims, this time his mother. This ambiguity goes hand in hand with the impenetrability of his characterisation. I argue that absolute alterity, which means that the other is not reducible to a category or to being framed as 'like' or 'not-like' me, paradoxically requires a representational ambiguity. This ambiguity brings the other closer only to show the distance between her and my knowledge of her. This highlights the dimension of failure necessary in the attempt to represent the other. Rendering Camille's otherness as absolute means that he eludes any categorical schemas. This inability to know the other is central to Levinas's conception of the ethical relation.

The murders themselves only contribute to Camille's mystery and further emphasise the non-Hollywood approach that the film takes. The first murder is filmed in medium shot, with no editing.[17] There are no close-ups of the victim's tortured face or of either of the men's faces looking, for example, maniacally pleased or perversely violent, as one might expect in classical narrative cinema. In fact, there is almost no emotion in the scene; the overall tone is deadpan and banal. Afterwards, as Raphaël searches the apartment for money, we see Camille absent-mindedly fingering various trinkets in the woman's living room. His face, if any emotion is present at all, seems to express an unacknowledged and general sadness and ennui. The scene is neither sensationalised nor moving. Again, we are denied the thrill of exposure to an evil man or sadistic killer. We are given no sense of his interiority and no psychological explanation.[18] His otherness is in his lack of clear psychological markers, rather than his visible monstrosity. Put differently, otherness is not a psychological category or innate condition. Camille remains as opaque as his

brother or Daïga; we cannot easily assimilate him into our pre-existing notions of good and evil. Rather than moralising about the nature of evil, the film – and this is one of the ways in which Levinas is useful for articulating a filmic ethics – reveals that a notion of absolute difference results in a more ethical, and also more challenging, representation of violence.[19] This approach sheds light on what a Levinasian understanding of alterity looks like in the sphere of film.

Like Nancy's concept of the co-existential analytic, Levinas's turn to ethics is a response to Heidegger's claim that *Dasein* (our individual being, being-there) is *Mitsein* (being-with). Both thinkers see Heidegger's failure to truly shape his fundamental ontology around the 'with' as the impetus for a new approach to our fundamentally related existence.[20] As we have seen, for Nancy this becomes an elaboration of the notion of difference as singular plurality and sharing. Levinas will turn towards a transcendent outside to insert an ineradicable difference into his account of being. The ethical will come before, in every sense of the word, the ontological. This is the notion of ethics as 'first philosophy'.[21] The ethical relationship, in his account, intrudes into the ontological; it is what prevents the realm of being from closing in on itself. The difference of the other interrupts being, it undoes my self-sufficient subjectivity, and it returns infinitely, undermining any sense of immunity.

Levinas's critique responds to the exigency of forging a new way of thinking about our relationship to the other, a framework that would 'find for man another kinship than that which ties him to being, one that will perhaps enable us to conceive of this difference between me and the other, this inequality, in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression'.[22] Critiquing Heidegger in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes,

> To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom . . . In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics.[23]

By situating ethics in a space that is prior to being – or ontology – Levinas also reconfigures relationality such that it undermines what he would argue is the self-sufficient subject of phenomenology.

The primacy of the ethical before the ontological, or the ethical as calling us from outside of or on the hither side of being, requires a conception of difference as radical alterity. Levinas argues that the history of philosophy, with few exceptions, has been unable to truly think difference. Difference has always been understood in such a way that it is related back to the subject in

some form or other. Descartes, for example, put the thinking 'I' at the centre of the ability to know and experience the world, or that which is other to – and object for – the philosophising subject. Hegelian models of subjectivity share some of this Cartesian inheritance. The processes of recognition on which they rely always require relating otherness to the self and difference is sublimated through dialectical progression. The other is always illuminated for the subject by her own understanding of the world. What is other in philosophy is always referred back to the Same (or the perceiving consciousness of the subject of philosophy), and, after Heidegger, it is understood in light of being. Even nothingness or the negative always refers back to the realm of essence or is understood in relation to the latter. For example, to understand Thierry Paulin as a monster or utterly evil may appear to be putting into play a notion of radical difference. Yet this categorisation is precisely what makes him known and therefore only relatively other. He is *not me* (assuming that I don't self-identify as monstrous or evil). His otherness is thus labelled, contained and referred back to the Same. The film makes it evident that to do justice to the other a degree of representational ambiguity is necessary. For her to be absolutely other, she must elude my grasp and evade my labels. She must resist my attempts at interiorisation.

Denis's films are recurring encounters with the absolutely other, both amongst characters on screen and between viewer and viewed. Levinas's privileged examples of alterity are the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Indeed, the films discussed in this project could aptly be called a cinema of strangers. Yet Denis also opens up Levinas's notion of the other, revealing that we need to look in places where we least expect, to see the faces whose difference must remain singularly theirs. Although Camille occupies many categories of otherness – sexually and racially, for example – he is also a serial killer. This takes us far afield from the trinity of orphan, widow and stranger in need of hospitality. Similarly, despite Daïga's foreigner status, which could position her as an underdog that the viewer roots for as she finds her way in a new place, she is neither lovable nor particularly relatable. While it is easy to imagine kind elderly ladies, poor and charming orphans and deserving refugees when reading Levinas, *I Can't Sleep* shows us that ethics doesn't discriminate between faces. In this sense Denis pushes Levinas further, or reveals the ways in which his own attempts to put the other into language work against the force of his argument. To assume we can know who is other in advance, for example, the colonised or the poor, would be to approach the other in the realm of ontology insofar as it categorises according to ability, ethnicity, gender and so forth. Across a spectrum of others, the film makes visible a generalisable radical unknowability, gesturing towards a practice of feminist representational ethics. As I elaborate in the section on alterity aesthetics at this chapter's end, this practice offers an alternative to feminisms that rely on

identity- or recognition-based models of difference and subjectivity. Diane Perpich's use of Levinas to articulate a feminist alterity politics provides a building block for thinking about the implications of this analysis of Denis's work in terms of feminist representational strategies. Alterity creates a fissure in being that works against oppressive ways of approaching the other.

For Levinas the tyranny of being is connected to human conflict and war. Being is always invested in its own presence, fully immanent, synchronised, and concerned with protecting its own interest. To always grasp the other or assign her a meaning within the totality of some larger system is similarly a violence, in that it forces the other into one's own framework for understanding the world, rather than letting her be radically different.[24] The other is singular and I lack any frame of reference that would allow me to comprehend her based on my own experience. The other calls me to ethical responsibility towards her outside of any experience, 'experience' being always already in the realm of the ontological. The other approaches me as a face on the hither side of conscious experience, obsessing me, taking me as a hostage, demanding that I substitute my own life for hers in an encounter that is outside of the logic of history, that occurs in diachronic moments and that is irrecoverable by memory.[25]

This encounter occurs outside of time as we calculate it and quantify it, but also outside of time as we experience it. The other comes from elsewhere and else*when* and continues to intrude, rupturing time and drawing me outside of myself, making a return to the Same impossible. The call to responsibility for the other is ultimately traumatic; it makes the self restless within itself, rendering it homeless. It breaks up the totalising regime of essence and challenges the identity or ego of the subject. Instead of objects disclosing themselves to a transcendental consciousness, the self is exposed to the other, vulnerable in proximity. But rather than posing a threat to or signifying the end of the subjectivity of the subject, it is precisely in this ethical encounter that the subject becomes a subject as such. Levinas writes, 'It is as subject to an irreversible relation that the term of the relation becomes a subject.'[26] Here we have a relation that does not connect two pre-existing terms, but rather the relation itself constitutes the terms of that relation. We *are* relationally. Being is thus always being-*with*; radical alterity entails a radical reconfiguring of self/other relations. *I Can't Sleep* places Camille in a network of relations, an imperfect and fragile community, whose cause-and-effect relationships are rarely visible but nonetheless palpably shape the subjectivities on screen.

This encounter with alterity is what Levinas terms the face-to-face. It exists prior to any thematisation, outside of language and history, and is lost as soon as one tries to represent it or bring it into the realm of ontology. The unrepresentable of the relation is central to understanding Denis's use of ambiguity as a strategy for exposing representation's impossibility. Describing the priority of the face-to-face, Levinas writes,

Reaching the other is not something justified of itself; it is not a matter of shaking me out of my boredom. It is, on the ontological level, the event of the most radical breakup of the very categories of the ego, for it is for me to be somewhere else than my self; it is to be pardoned, to not be a definitive existence.[27]

My subjectivity is the result of the relation with alterity, while the very same relation is what constantly undermines or calls into question my claims to coherent identity. It is this very impossibility of starting from the self that Levinas names ethics: 'We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.'[28] While the faces of Daïga and Camille expose their relationality within the diegesis of the film, they also intrude upon our spontaneity as spectators who are affectively drawn to witness their stories, although we are denied comprehensive mastery. Additionally, the relationality of the characters exceeds any labels we may give to them – Daïga and Camille do not necessarily connect as fellow immigrants, or through a normative mode of heterosexual desire; their connection is ambiguous, operating outside any clear account we might attempt.

However disparate, the characters of *I Can't Sleep* are vulnerable to and deeply *in relation to* one another. Their actions reverberate outwards, often giving meaning to apparently unrelated moments. In one scene Daïga walks alone at night and passes Mona, Théo's wife, who sits smoking at a café table. The instant is brief; shots of Daïga wandering without apparent purpose through the dark city streets are interrupted for a moment by the face of Mona, her visage a dark screen over her inner thoughts. The two will never meet – and Denis's films are always populated by these 'missed connections' – but nonetheless they are together. Despite the appearance of mutual isolation in this scene, the women are revealed as part of the same frame. Their actions are connected by their existence within the shared world of the film, although they themselves never directly experience that connection, almost as though their link exists outside that of experience. As spectators, we are trained to seek out the links between scenes and characters in a movie. *I Can't Sleep* offers the viewer a glimpse of the characters' interrelatedness, at the same time as it resists a clear explanation or causal logic to these relations.

This relationality is perhaps most explicitly articulated in a scene late in the film. Daïga and Camille have never spoken, but have intruded into each other's lives in other ways. She sees erotic photographs of him while cleaning his room and watches through a window as he and his partner share a naked embrace. Even without a traditional shot/reverse shot, it is also implied that Camille has noticed Daïga. For example, in one scene he is shown entering the hotel lobby. The image cuts to Daïga, drinking a beer and watching television in a room visible from the lobby. She turns around to see who has entered.

The scene cuts to Mona, buzzing herself into her sister's apartment. There is never a cut back to Camille, in which the audience would be given confirmation that he has in fact seen Daïga and through which we could register the emotion the scene elicits by his facial expression. The lack of a reverse shot leaves the narrative open. Perhaps they have made eye contact, or it could be that their lives parallel one another in ways that neither of them fully observes. The twinings and perambulations of their journeys finally climax when Daïga follows Camille to a café. She has seen his photo on a 'wanted' sign at the police station and we do not know if she has done anything with this information (although Camille is apprehended shortly after). She orders a coffee at the bar next to Camille and we sense an attraction between the two outsiders, although they haven't yet made eye contact. As he passes her the sugar their hands meet in a charged slow-motion touch (the only time that slow motion is used in the film, formally emphasising its significance). It is a touch that all the events of the film appear to have been building towards – a tactile recognition of the interrelatedness of their paths. Camille pays for her coffee and as he leaves they say goodbye without looking at one another. Their touch seems charged with the multiple relations that lie beyond the scene and outside of the characters' experiences; their lives are revealed as constituted through their relations despite the fact that their faces may not recognise one another. These echoes of a formative encounter, which in a Levinasian sense occurs outside of knowledge and conventional time-space continuums, are traces of the ethical relation. This resituating of ethics at the level of the *with* works against oppressive practices by thinking difference in a way that refuses self/other logics and embraces the unknown.

THE SAYING AND A LEVINASIAN POETICS

As already discussed, the concept of absolute alterity and an understanding of the subject as constituted by and undone through the face-to-face encounter have applications for filmic representation. Denis's films, in their focus on movement, their lack of explanatory dialogue, and their erotic ambiguity, offer us suggestive directives for where else to look in Levinas for elements of a feminist film ethics. Because Denis does not rely on language for meaning, her work steps in where philosophy hits its limits. When words become traps that fix beings into frozen states of semantic meaning, images and sounds can offer argument or explanation by other means. As alluded to above, the reframing of the ethical as prior to the ontological creates problems for representation. Beginning with the notion of the *saying*, these difficulties extend to the very exposition of philosophy itself. These challenges, however, reveal themselves as generative rather than limiting, particularly in relation to Denis's filmic practice.

Levinas often approaches his concepts through several different words or metaphors, each of which reveals another facet of the idea he is trying to convey without pinning it down into clear definitional language. The encounter with the other is figured variously as the face-to-face, a trace, substitution, like being pregnant, as a caress in the dark, and as a saying that always undoes the said. This concept of the face-to-face as *saying* privileges becoming over being and movement over stasis. It is revealing in terms of Levinas's privileging of the auditory in his descriptions of what it means to encounter the other. In fact, the terminology of the face-to-face is misleading, as it suggests a highly visual encounter that belies his profound mistrust of the visual and obfuscates the encounter's haptic nature, as I elaborate in this and the following chapter. Moving towards the language of saying provides another means of approaching what it might mean to talk about film from the perspective of a Levinasian ethics. The saying (*le dire*) denotes a dynamic and fleeting contact with the other that signifies the ethical relation. This is in contrast to the said (*le dit*), a more fixed representation that occurs in the realm of ontology. The face 'speaks' and this speech grounds all signification. It signifies prior to any semiotic system or coherent form of speech. It may groan, weep or whistle, but in each instance the face is *saying* before existing in the realm of the said. Levinas writes, 'saying, saying, saying itself, without thematizing it, but exposing it again. Saying is thus to make signs of this very signifyingness of the exposure.'[29] The language of exposure suggests vulnerability to intrusion by the other. It is not to be confused with literal speech. In 'Language and Proximity', Levinas is careful to distinguish this 'speech' from any articulate linguistic utterance, which would bring the saying into the realm of said:

> The hypothesis that the relationship with an interlocutor would still be a knowing reduces speech to the solitary or impersonal exercise of a thought, whereas already the kerygma which bears its ideality is, in addition, a *proximity* between me and the interlocutor, and not our participation in a transparent universality. Whatever be the message transmitted by speech, the speaking is contact.[30]

What is important in this saying, which may not bear any relation whatsoever to speech proper, is the relation of contact, openness and proximity to the other that it signifies. Contact, exposure and proximity all suggest a tactile and visceral sensation of and vehicle for my responsibility to the other. I will return to this bodily aspect of the saying in the next chapter. Here, I am interested in the saying as that which refuses to let meaning congeal, which encourages movement and interruption over fixity and continuity, in ethics and in film.[31] The dynamic and flowing character of Denis's work performs a kind of saying

that undoes the said. It works against our attempts to fix the characters into one frame or identity.

Denis's cinema is a cinema of movement, of drifters and dancers, who come and go, touch and withdraw. In *I Can't Sleep*, the film starts and ends with Daïga's entry into and exit from the city via the motorway. In both instances she is shown driving, a cigarette hanging from between her lips; she hasn't stood still long enough or said enough for us to have captured her in our gaze. Denis's lack of traditional establishing shots contributes to this effect – we can never firmly fix the characters in a stable location.[32] We are usually moving with them through the belly of the city, with few to no establishing shots to ground their action in clear time and space. For example, we deduce that we are in the 18th arrondissement of Paris because eventually we glimpse Sacre Coeur through the gaps between buildings, but we are never given a general montage of street signs or iconic landmarks to welcome us first to Paris and then to Montmartre. We are inside the spaces the characters inhabit and move with them, ceaselessly. Similarly, point-of-view shots from the driver's seat of a moving train punctuate *35 Shots of Rum*, *No Fear No Die* begins and ends with driving, the protagonist of *The Intruder* moves from the Jura to Switzerland, to Pusan and Tahiti, and shifts between reality and dreamscape, and *Friday Night* ends with Laure running through the streets unburdened and away from the scene of her one-night stand.

Perhaps the most powerful scene that illustrates the movement that characterises Denis's oeuvre is the final scene in *Beau travail*. Although the film's narrative is extremely elliptical, through a series of shots we are led to believe that Galoup, the French legionnaire who narrates the film, is committing suicide. We see him in his room, presumably back in France. Galoup has effectively sentenced Sentain, a younger officer who was the object of his jealousy and desire, to death and it seems that as a result he has also forfeited his own place in the legion's hierarchy and its controlled rhythms, which had sustained him. In the film's penultimate scene, he holds a gun to his undulating stomach and we see a close-up of his tattoo, which bears the legionnaire's motto, 'Serve the good cause and die', a vein throbbing in his muscular bicep. Yet instead of the frozen and static body of a dead legionnaire, in the final scene of the film we are transported to an anonymous discothèque. The wall is mirrored and Galoup stands alone, smoking a cigarette. The dance track 'Rhythm of the Night' comes on and Galoup dances in a bacchanalian burst of self-expression and apparent freedom.[33] Something from the most inaccessible depths of his character is revealed in this moment, while remaining inarticulable and unknowable. He exposes himself before the camera perhaps more so than in any moment that has preceded this scene. Yet in no way does this result in some kind of fixed understanding of who he is. In terms of both characterisation and narrative function, Galoup's ecstatic wordless declaration

of existence refuses any definitional closure. After a partial run of credits we
return to the scene to see an even more rapturous dance in which Galoup is
literally bouncing off the walls, rolling freely on the ground, and reminding us
that his singularity will always be in excess of the film's structure. The credits
cannot manage to contain him. Even when presumably dead, Denis's elusive
characters deny us mastery. They keep moving, dancing and 'saying' instead
of allowing themselves to be 'said'.[34]

The representation of the ethical thus becomes that which depends on 'the
saying without the said' or a said that is constantly undone by the saying.[35]
Like Nancy, who as discussed in the previous chapter argued for the interrup-
tion of myth (myths being narratives of totality, closure and a unified origin
and destiny), the saying's undoing of the said similarly works against grand
narratives. The saying functions structurally akin to the interruption of myth,
emphasising process over completion. By contrast, myth aligns with the said,
suggesting a fixed and totalising account of the world. From a feminist per-
spective, this seems particularly relevant in relation to the need for more fluid
alternatives to representational politics – especially as feminism and queer
theory seek common ground, challenges to the very locatability and represent-
ability of subjectivity remain necessary (as do alternative models, such as that
offered by Denis). Unlike Nancy's, Levinas's interruption – saying – comes
from a transcendent outside to the ontological, rather than occurring within it.
It is the intrusion of the absolutely other, who cannot be known and to whom
we are ethically responsible, that breaks up our pretensions to wholeness. The
other's intrusion prevents us from getting too comfortable, too self-satisfied
and self-sufficient, and from thinking that we know the story once and for all.
The saying is a kind of literature (in Nancy's sense of the word) that prevents
meaning from congealing and keeps us open to the surprise of an unexpected
encounter.[36] To apply this imperative to film suggests that films should allow
for interruptions that prevent narrative closure, that reach toward the impres-
sion or sensation of the other, rather than seeking to bring her into the full
light of day.

I Can't Sleep starts on an interruption. Two men fly in a helicopter above
Paris, laughing heartily and unable to stop. Their laughter is unexplained and
we never see them again. Lest one think that this functions as a kind of estab-
lishing shot, instead of a clear view of Paris from the sky, we are faced with a
misty veil between the chopper and what lies below, a network of motorways
that gives us little sense of a stable location. In fact the camera cuts down to
the motorway, comes up behind and then around beside the car of Daïga,
who is driving into Paris for the first time (Figures 3.1–3.3). It is as though
we are suddenly in a car ourselves, changing lanes and moving forward. From
helicopter to car we get a sense of the motion of life, of characters arriving or
passing through, of the inability of the world to stand still so we can grasp it.

Figure 3.1 The camera cuts down to the motorway . . .

Figure 3.2 . . . comes up behind . . .

This is hardly the zombified painting of which Levinas writes. Characters here come and go – they may pass by each other unknowingly, they may even eventually touch, but they are in no way present to each other in the sense of full disclosure.

This scene that starts the movie serves no obvious narrative function and is very typical of Denis's films. In interviews, Denis claims that many scenes in *I Can't Sleep* were cut because of length concerns – often those that would

Figure 3.3 . . . and then around beside Daïga's car.

have added to character development.[37] Instead, she chooses to preserve this brief but opaque moment in the final edit. We never see the helicopter men again. They are only two of the many strangers who appear and dissolve, interrupting any said by exposing us to yet another face. *I Can't Sleep* continually interrupts one narrative thread with another. The camera shuffles between characters, never lingering for too long on any one before a different story intrudes on the narrative. A scene in which Daïga and her landlord Ninon (Line Renaud) dance drunkenly to the song 'A Whiter Shade of Pale' is interrupted by Raphaël's bloody face as he leaves the hotel where we see Camille sitting impassively on the stairs. Our gaze then shifts to a (indefinitely later) post-coital moment between Camille and the doctor, a friend who – it is implied – may be in on the murders. No words are exchanged and we cut to a scene in front of the hotel, where the doctor bums a cigarette from Daïga, followed by a scene of Daïga selling her car. The narrative moves constantly from character to character; scenes seem to interrupt scenes, always guided by tenuous and fragile links.[38]

Denis loves to end on interruptions as much as to start on them – scenes that remain enigmatic and unexplained with respect to the entirety of the film. At the end of her first film, *Chocolat*, the protagonist – who like Denis was raised in Africa – sees three black African men loading cargo onto planes.[39] As the plane leaves Cameroon, the camera's gaze remains on these three anonymous men for several minutes, framing them in long shot as they smoke cigarettes, laugh and talk with one another in the rain. The protagonist flies out of our field of vision, but life continues away from her gaze, life that remains

Figure 3.4 The 'queen of the northern hemisphere', orgasmically riding her dog sled through the wintry forests of the Jura.

outside of the viewer's comprehension and is uncontainable within the diegesis of the film. *The Intruder* ends on one of many scenes that remain enigmatic, even after multiple viewings. The film's final moments show Béatrice Dalle, credited as the 'queen of the northern hemisphere', orgasmically riding her dog sled through the wintry forests of the Jura (Figure 3.4). The character's history is unknown throughout the film and she plays a very marginal role, yet her expression of *jouissance* is the film's final word. Denis always has a way of shifting our gaze to the periphery, to remind us of the limits of what we can see and understand or to interrupt any sense of a said with the saying, another body in movement, another untold story.

It would seem that from a Levinasian perspective, any attempt to represent the other would be in the realm of the said, and thus a betrayal of the ethical relation. I am suggesting that Denis shows us the possibility of a representation that maintains the saying over the said. This sayingness is a direct counter to the ideological fantasy offered by Hollywood cinema, of domination/ knowledge through sight and the illusion of a total and complete world offered on screen to a relatively autonomous spectator subject.

The representational difficulties raised by Levinas also apply to his own philosophical writing. In *Otherwise than Being*, he makes his first attempt to write in such a way that the text enacts the failure of language to fully grasp or comprehend the ethical in a totality. He is constantly trying to unsay the said, to reveal the ethical that ruptures through the ontological, as the space of representation. Of his translation, translator Alphonso Lingis comments,

The very sentences of this book – thematic, synchronic time, systematic language, constantly making the verb *to be* intervene in phrases that profess to express what is antecedent to the work of being – can only be a continual transposition, and dissimulation, of the prethematic alterity, the diachronic time of the contact with the other, the non-presence of one term to another, which these phrases mean to put forth. What they mean to translate into a text is always betrayed, in a translation always unfaithful to the pre-text.[40]

In the original French, Levinas attempts to write his text avoiding the copula altogether, the copula that falsely places our interrelatedness in the realm of being. The problems of translation and betrayal identified by Lingis apply to all of Levinas's work, which arguably *itself* betrays the ethical relation of which it speaks in its very attempt to bring it into the realm of the said, as a philosophical text.[41]

The attempt to remain within the saying is perhaps what gives Levinas's writing its literary quality. Megan Craig notes the very literary style with which Levinas explicates his own ideas, arguing that

Levinas's style is integral to his ethics . . . To confront, rather than evade, the coincidence between trauma and ethics, between *how* Levinas writes and *what* he says, one might begin by focusing on Levinas's distinctive imagery, approaching his texts with an openness typically reserved for a poem or a story that contains enigmatic, recurring motifs which require careful and ongoing analysis.[42]

Craig suggests that the process of reading Levinas's texts, the work that they themselves demand of us as readers, is as much, if not more, a part of his ethics as is translating his writing into a more straightforward propositional content. His poetic and obscure writing style encourages an openness towards the unknown, a willingness to be surprised by what you do not know, and to let what faces you remain enigmatic, closer than before you started reading, but still infinitely otherworldly. I suggest that, similarly, other creative forms of expression, such as film, can aid us in cultivating an attitude of openness to alterity and of evoking wonder at the mystery of the others in our midst, a willingness to unlearn our entrenched ideas and to open up a space for 'knowing' the unknowability of the other. Craig's writing is incredibly helpful for thinking through what we might term a Levinasian poetics. She writes,

Ethics requires an ongoing vigilance and attention to the specificity of particular faces. Reading Levinas's prose forces one to hold one's attention to particularity and acclimate to the absence of ultimate definitions.

His texts are training grounds for hearing residual meanings and for reading in the absence of a definitive plot.[43]

Craig suggests here that we can mine Levinas's style itself for a model of what it might mean to encourage an ethical attitude in a viewer, reader or listener. She writes further, 'Levinas's writing is not simply centered on the serious ethics of response and responsibility. It is also enmeshed in the serious aesthetics of trying to show something unsayable.'[44] Elliptical plots, attention to faces, residual meanings and 'explanation without explanation', to quote Denis, are all crucial to her cinema and the demand it places on the viewer. Her films encourage an attention to detail – one never knows if a face will resurface or disappear completely, or if it will materialise in another film altogether. Her films require the kind of patience and openness that are also necessary for reading Levinas's philosophy, and in this way they point us towards his style itself as a model for film.

THE EROTICS OF AMBIGUITY

In his early writings, Levinas was particularly interested in sexual difference as the prime exemplar of radical alterity, opening up the ethical encounter to the metaphor of the erotic.[45] Many feminists have in fact found a productive point of intersection with Levinas in his early emphasis on sexual difference. While not wanting to completely distance myself from what may be useful in that notion, it is also problematic to *assume* difference based on an ontological category, such as sex, when the whole thrust of Levinasian ethics argues against such ontologically based understandings of otherness. On this point, Levinas's language is in tension with his own philosophy as he attempts to represent what is pre-thematic. Yet his discussion of the erotic as a space of relational ambiguity, when separated from a heterosexual matrix, is a useful place for thinking through the representational ethics I have been articulating. While Levinas maintained an ambivalence about the potential of the erotic as a means of access to, or way of thinking about, the ethical relation, his suggestion that the caress of two lovers might give us an intimation or a privileged example of the face-to-face is useful for thinking about how certain films can offer similar opportunities for something *like* the ethical, if not the ethical itself, to take place.[46] He writes in *Totality and Infinity* that

The possibility of the Other appearing as an object of a need while retaining his alterity, or again, the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse – this position with regard to the interlocutor which at the same time reaches him and

goes beyond him, this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is *the equivocal* par excellence.[47]

Like the erotic, a film that inclines towards the other in its narrative language would try to remain equivocal. It would 'explain without explaining', touch without grasping, be an exposure in darkness, and a revelation that simultaneously preserves the other's mystery. This exposure that is also a withdrawal is precisely what Denis's films bring into play and is also a common motif in Nancy's writing.[48] Films that maintain otherness, for example by refusing to psychologise their characters and not relying on causal logic for narrative continuity, provide training grounds of sorts that teach us to look for the difference, to take on not-knowing as an assumed viewing position, and to expect the encounter to affect us, precisely because we are faced with what we do not have power over. Levinas writes of the erotic,

[Intersubjectivity] is brought about by eros, where in the proximity of another the distance is wholly maintained, a distance whose pathos is made up of this proximity and this duality of beings. What is presented as the failure of communication in love in fact constitutes the positive character of the relationship; this absence of the other is precisely his presence qua other.[49]

Here Levinas explicitly draws our attention to the positive value of failure, prefiguring Butler's advocacy of images that fail. This positive failure opens up a space for a rereading of *I Can't Sleep*. Take for example Martine Beugnet's comment on the film: 'The impossibility of communication lies at the very heart of the film. The characters speak little, and often don't understand each other's language. Dialogue proper (questions and answers, characters exchanging information) and shots/counter-shots are non-existent, and the incessant ringing of the telephone is never answered.'[50] Yet this failure of communication, when read alongside Levinas's description of the erotic, takes on more positive connotations. The film, which very much foregrounds the disappearance of traditional ties and connections in the modern cosmopolitan city, at the same time reveals the ephemeral and often overlooked links between us.

Camille's drag performance brings many of these themes into play. He performs to a song by Jean-Louis Murat, entitled 'Le lien défait' – the undone link or bond. Denis says of the song that it

describes the theme of this film. The lyrics say, 'The link is cut, there's no more connection.' I thought that this was the film's central theme

> because a society and a city work best when the links are tight. For me, life is a story of connections – without them society will self-destruct.[51]

As we have seen, the film is populated with connections in unexpected moments and places. Rather than being simply a film about modern alienation and social malaise (which undoubtedly is part of the story), *I Can't Sleep* encourages us to keep a wakeful eye on the unexpected links that join people on the margins of the social mainstream (although these links are not necessarily between or based on subjectivities). The failure of communication can be read positively as that which prevents us from colonising the other through our gaze and from assuming knowledge of what is presented to us on screen. Failure is thus itself ambiguous – it is confusing, and even scary, while also exposing the unknown that propels us towards the other and incites our desire for her.

In the drag scene this ambiguity is explicitly evoked. Camille, whose name itself is androgynous (as the detective says, 'Camille? That's a girl's name'), neither dons a wig nor pads his chest. His body remains undoubtedly masculine in physique if feminine in adornment and carriage. He wears a tight strapless velvet gown with long gloves and a hair band. His hair is short, he is barefoot, he wears lipstick and nail polish, but his masculine chest and back are visible, his nipples revealed as the dress inches down during his performance. His presentation is subtle, devoid of dramatic gesture and movement. It is completely free of any camp overtones and the audience seems as much the object of the gaze as does Camille. Shots of the audience watching place them in a more fixed position than do the shots of Camille, who seems to control rather than simply absorb the gaze. But the ambiguity of Camille goes beyond his gender, and additionally beyond his *métissage*, to the parallels established with other characters.

Throughout the film parallels between Daïga and Camille are suggested that undermine any easy assessments of good and bad characters. Both are pursued at various points by the police – Daïga is harassed and threatened upon her arrival into Paris because she is a woman and a foreigner. The police keep her under surveillance as they will later Camille, their gaze sutured to ours via a long tracking shot that ends with his arrest. Daïga is, like Camille, an object of sexual desire. She is also prone to violence. In one scene, where her impenetrable detachment is momentarily shattered, she violently rear-ends the car of the French theatre director whose amorous promises of an acting career brought her to France only to be left unfulfilled. In this scene her powerlessness erupts in a spontaneous act of rage. Following the car wreck, it is suggested that Daïga has stolen the vehicle she drove from Lithuania. At the film's end we see her driving another car out of the city, raising the spectre of theft once again. Like Camille, Daïga has no qualms about taking from others.

In fact, in what is the most explicit parallel between the two characters, Daïga is shown stealing Camille's money from his hotel room after he has been taken into custody. She stuffs her pants and shirt full of the money stolen from the dead victims, dirtying her hands with Camille's violent crimes and directly benefiting from them. While this may suggest a lack of morality, I argue instead that this ambiguity is part of the ethics of Denis's cinema. Everyone is given a full and complex humanity and good and evil are less relevant as terms for easy categorisation. In the tabloids, Paulin was referred to as the 'monster of Montmartre'. Denis chooses a more difficult path in this film – Camille is neither pure monster nor a pure victim of, for example, homophobia or racism. Ambiguity ensures that we do not 'other' in such a way that it is 'not us' on the screen, but rather that we see the links that connect our various forms of violence and disregard. Rather than the easy comforts of disidentification, the viewer must wrestle with the messy complexity that she encounters on screen. Denis argues for the ambiguity of shadow when she says that

> Cinema has this incredible way of making us feel what psychology can't explain . . . You can read 15 books about serial killers, but that has nothing to do with the way you may look at people in the subway, or your own brother, or your mother, that mysterious element that makes you sense that what unites us, as human beings, is our opacity for each other. Cinema is made with light and shadow, but the beauty of light is that it delimits shadow. And that element of shadow is the part of cinema I'd like to continue exploring.[52]

This ambiguity proves to work in tandem with a Levinasian notion of absolute alterity – categories fail and the difficult reality of the other remains. Cultivating an acceptance of difficulty, ambiguity and messiness has much larger cultural implications in a historical moment when we too often desire clarity and easy explanations, often as antidotes to the rapid changes, culturally, technologically and otherwise, that are part of the contemporary climate. Films like Denis's offer us a different modality through which to approach the world, one that sees generative potential in the murkiness that lingers when we do justice to the singularity of the other.

The links of ambiguity are also present in other aspects of the film. Théo, rather than being a simple foil to Camille (the 'good' son/brother), is surly and difficult.[53] He hears the woman in the apartment next door crying in what sounds like pain and the suggestion of domestic abuse is present throughout the film. Théo goes next door to intervene and at another point enters the apartment and sees handcuffs on the bed. It is unclear if the violence is part of his neighbours' erotic role-playing or if the woman is in a dangerous situation. Denis never gives us an answer. Yet neither can we read Théo as the functional

and gentle neighbour next door. Théo and his wife Mona are constantly fighting, even coming to blows at one point in the film. She leaves several times, refusing to indulge his plan to move to Martinique, and absconds with their child while Théo is playing in a concert. Just as Camille and Raphaël are in a violent relationship, there is a violence that permeates the links between Théo and his wife. The film disrupts every attempt at a simplistic interpretation – even the 'good brother' who is concerned about domestic violence occupies a place on the continuum of domestic dysfunction.

Another ambiguous continuum is created around the theme of women and ageing. Camille's victims are elderly women and the film makes clear that they are vulnerable because society has abandoned them. The film's first victim is dead for seven days before she is discovered, highlighting the isolation of the elderly. The cleaning lady who discovers her body laments, 'No one cares about these old people.' When Ninon tells her mother to go to bed, her mother speaks the film's titular line. This very minor exchange similarly suggests that society wants its elderly out of sight and out of mind. While Ninon and Daïga drink and dance, her mother is expected to be ready to retire, to stay out of the life that keeps on going around her, even if she wants to keep her eyes open. The victim who survives and is able to describe the perpetrators does so because a delivery boy arrived immediately after she did. This moment of contact was crucial to her survival. Another victim happily welcomes Raphaël into her apartment, offering him coffee, clearly starved for conversation and asking for assistance with a small chore in her apartment because she has no one else. In this way, Denis peppers her film with references to the neglect and loneliness of the elderly. The film becomes as much about the way in which society deserts its elderly as it is about the sensationalist act of killing them. If anything, these women are the film's broken link. Society is outraged about their deaths, but it itself abandons them as they age and lose their presumed aesthetic and reproductive value (as Ninon says, '[Men] still move me you know. It's the way they look at me that's changed'). Denis here asks us to encounter *ourselves* in the film – not only is a neat categorisation of Camille as a monster rendered difficult, but our own complicity with systems of ageism as they intersect with gender is brought face-to-face with the viewer. Here again, Denis pushes beyond Levinas to reveal the ethical implications of ambiguity. There is no reductive portrayal of elderly women as *tout court* sweet and loving victims (although those who fall into the hands of Camille are undoubtedly victims). Daïga's great-aunt Mina is a miser and a (loveable) busybody, who immediately tries to dump the responsibility of Daïga onto other members of the Lithuanian diaspora, despite her ample resources and private apartment. Mina too is allowed both light and shadow.

FEMINISM AND ALTERITY AESTHETICS

Nikolaj Lübecker has argued that *I Can't Sleep* represents a challenge to the Hegelian tradition in French thought that sees subjectivity as the product of the struggle for recognition, particularly in the film's de-dramatisation of violence and the absence of typical intersubjective relations.[54] While Lübecker is mainly concerned with the link between truth and violence that this valorises, his reading of the film as challenging a recognition-based model of subjectivity lays a foundation for my argument here. By turning to Levinas we see what *I Can't Sleep* posits in lieu of a Hegelian recognition-based model. An aesthetic of alterity means that opacity takes precedence over recognition.

   Arguing similarly against a recognition- or identity-based approach, Diane Perpich outlines a feminist politics based in Levinas's account of the other. This would be a feminist *alterity* politics. Both identity politics and a politics of recognition rely on a notion of the subject that posits her in relation to an unmarked subject or, in the Levinasian lexicon, 'the Same'. Identity politics typically defines significant categories of identity relative to the dominant subject group (usually, heterosexual middle-class white males). Similarly a politics of recognition demands recognition as *like* the other, again, typically a dominant subject group conferring recognition on marginalised or under-represented peoples. This latter approach may in fact encourage a downplaying of difference, as difference could be seen as a basis for conflict rather than connection. Both of these strategies fall into the logic of relativising difference, ultimately diminishing the singularity of the other, be it through defining oneself as different in comparison to the other or by demanding recognition as *like* the other. Instead thinking of difference, after Levinas, as absolute alterity may be a more fruitful option for feminist politics. Although my interest here is in representation and ethics, rather than politics, Perpich offers some compelling reasons why feminism should take Levinas seriously.[55] She writes, 'Levinas is surely closest to feminism when he is exposing the ways in which conceptions of the unencumbered, autonomous subject fail to do justice to the ethical significance of human interdependence and to the moral necessity (rather than the mere desirability) of social cooperation in political as well as economic and social contexts.'[56] A deconstructed and relational subject, whose singularity is uncategorisable (after Levinas), counters a politics based on equality or shared universal subjecthood (as in de Beauvoir, for example), which may not be the most productive goal for feminism.

   Perpich is also critical of a politics based on recognition or identity because they rely on systems of representation, which are always open to co-optation. Once in the realm of the said or the ontological, we have little control over the representations we put forth into culture. It is the unrepresentability of the face that in fact allows singularity to emerge. Perpich argues that a feminist

politics of alterity conceives of group recognition in terms of the singularity of each member. She writes, 'Levinas's refusal to represent the other . . . far from causing or necessitating a chauvinistic indifference to particular differences . . . supports a conception of ethics and politics that demands institutional recognition of (or, as appropriate, elimination of) group differences *in the name of* the singularity of each human being.'[57] To modify Perpich, as I have shown above, Denis's filmic argument suggests that there *can* be a representational practice of alterity – one not based on identity or recognition – that respects the very impossibility of capturing the other.

Applying Perpich's claims to the realm of film suggests that singularity must prevail over identity. Denis's films show us that this means that identity categories such as race or gender will never provide a sure footing through which to situate her characters. This is of course counter to the dominant narrative film tradition, which tends to rely on stereotypes or use markers of identity as a shorthand through which we can easily understand character and dialogue. By contrast, Camille's maleness and blackness offer no automatic explanatory framework for his behaviour, nor do they serve to guide viewer expectations. Similarly, Daïga's gender and her vulnerability as linguistic and cultural outsider provide no clues as to how she will behave. She never smiles ingratiatingly or coquettishly, is generally unapologetic for her communicative deficiencies, and doesn't seem particularly grateful for the hospitality of others. She drinks tenants' open bottles of wine while cleaning their rooms and smokes incessantly, never asking her host's permission. The film *35 Shots of Rum* provides a similar example of Denis's refusal to turn identity categories into easy modes of (stereotypical) characterisation. In this more recent film, almost all of the central characters are black, but the story does not turn their racial 'difference' into its focus.[58] The film reveals moments of their lives and relationships, granting them the right to an ordinary existence, just as the overwhelming majority of films about whites do not highlight their whiteness thematically. They are singular and each must be approached without preconceptions about what their race, gender or age means according to dominant cultural constructions. Although Denis's films undoubtedly are concerned with issues of sexual difference and the legacy of colonialism, they expose singularities rather than seek out common identities.

In making her argument for a feminist Levinas, Perpich draws on Hannah Arendt's concepts of *who*ness and *what*ness. Any list of representable *what*ness – or the features or characteristics that describe a person – cannot get at their singular *who*ness. Perpich argues, 'Singularity – *who* one is – is always excessive with respect to *any* characterization of what one is or of the groups with which one identifies or is identified.'[59] Further,

> But nor can my singularity be understood without recourse to socially, politically, and culturally salient facets of my experience. Singularity is

not meant to convey some abstract otherness or merely formal alterity, it is the concreteness of my life, my lived bodily experience.[60]

By way of example, I am not only or just a woman; that fact does not conclusively define or account for who I am. However, (in Perpich's argument) you could not characterise me without including my femaleness or you would miss key aspects of what it means to be me. Similarly, Daïga's femaleness is undeniably part of what she is (her beauty is often remarked upon in the film and cited as a reason she will do all right in Paris), but it never encapsulates or explains *who* she is. As I argue throughout this book, there is always a tension between the historically located categories through which our bodies are read or understood and their inability to account for who one is. Not only are these forms of identity insufficient, but they can also place very real limits on future possibilities. In her careful registering and dismantling of our identity-based assumptions, Denis points the way towards an aesthetic of alterity, as Perpich suggests an alterity politics for feminism.

As Perpich herself points out, Levinas's philosophy in many ways prohibits the representation of the other. This may make an argument for a feminist representational strategy based on absolute alterity seem conceptually problematic. How can the other who cannot be known, whose reality lies outside my frame of vision, be ethically represented? This unrepresentability of the face motivates Judith Butler's discussion of Levinas in *Precarious Life*. Butler argues, 'For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.'[61] Rather than eschewing representation altogether, we should be aware of the necessary failure of our representations to capture the other in her singularity and consciously construct representations that do not seek to hide their own limits.[62] While Denis does not employ more avant-garde strategies of alienation, for example revealing failure by radically divorcing soundtrack from image or creating a self-reflexive voice-over, she shows the limits of representation by her 'failure' to psychologise her characters, her elliptical narrative structures, and her refusal to neatly and tidily define her characters according to available stereotypes and conventions. She shows us the generosity of images that 'fail'.

CONCLUSION

In a way that counters dominant Hollywood tendencies, Denis refuses any categorisation of her characters into good and evil. In this space of ambiguity, we are encouraged to be attentive to difference and to let the unknown remain

so. Denis reveals that ambiguity is the representational correlate of an ethics of absolute alterity. I have argued that Levinasian ethics help us to better understand the complex way in which her films are experienced as ethical. This adds to the more apparent application of Nancy's thinking to her work. But her films also show us the places in Levinas's writing where we can begin to approach a feminist cinematic ethics more broadly. These include a Levinasian poetics – drawn from Levinas's difficult writing style itself; his concept of the saying – as that which undoes the said; and, finally, the ambiguity of the erotic – as that which both exposes and obscures. A willingness to engage with complexity and relinquish mastery, a cinema of interruptions and movement, singularity before identity, and the aforementioned practice of ambiguity are all filmic correlates of these concepts. Levinas, when put into conversation with Denis (and guided by Perpich and Butler), opens up new possibilities for thinking through an ethical feminist representational practice – or, for short, an aesthetic of alterity. An emphasis on radical alterity as what relates us and renders us subjects is enacted in films such as *I Can't Sleep*. The ethics are neither in the plot nor in the choices the characters make, but rather in how their alterity is offered to the spectator. This exposure creates an encounter that alters the viewer, should she accept the film's invitation. Through our desire for their unknown (to return to the epigraph), we are revealed as in relation with them.

This encounter with the other may be present both on screen and in the relation between spectator and film. While the act of viewing is not ethical in an orthodox Levinasian sense, it stands in proximity to the ethical proper, encouraging us to look differently at the others in our midst. If the truth of the ethical cannot be disclosed properly speaking or represented in the sense of giving reason or proof, then the cinema can function as a possible space in which the encounter with alterity could be (re)enacted or intimated. Denis's films stage multiple encounters with alterity, which, like the erotic, bring the other closer to me, while her interiority remains mysterious and unknowable at the film's end. The way in which the viewer both can and cannot express what she has *seen* when she leaves the cinema, the very bodily – while simultaneously intangible – ordeal through which the viewer goes as she sits in her seat, bears traces of the ethical encounter.

The affective and visceral component of the face-to-face is another aspect of Levinasian ethics that is of interest from a feminist perspective. The following chapter turns to the body and bodily existence in Levinas and Nancy, putting their thought into contact with the bodies that move through Denis's work.

NOTES

1. Leslie Camhi, 'A French Director with a Taste for the Gritty and Unglamorous', *New York Times*, 5 October 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/05/movies/a-french-director-with-a-taste-for-the-gritty-and-unglamorous.html> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
2. Paulin died of AIDS in prison before he was convicted.
3. Her impetus was in part Jean Baudrillard's writing on the coverage of the crimes, in which he linked the killer's disappearance from the media upon discovery of his identity with the interstitial identity categories that he occupied. For a problematisation of Baudrillard's argument through detailed archival press research see Deborah S. Reisinger, 'Murder and Banality in the Contemporary Fait Divers', *South Central Review* 17.4 (Winter 2000): 84–99. The Baudrillard interview can be found in 'Cool Killers', *Autrement* 104 (February 1989): 143–5.
4. See, for example, Camhi, 'A French Director with a Taste for the Gritty and Unglamorous', and Tod Lippy, 'Writing and Directing *I Can't Sleep*: A Talk with Claire Denis', *Scenario: The Magazine of Screenwriting Art* 32.2–3 (Summer 1997): 84–7/185–7.
5. By capturing the other, I mean seeming to fully account for or make knowable the other through psychologisation or extensive dialogue; or, put differently, the feeling that the viewer knows the character enough to judge or understand her actions.
6. He treats the artwork most explicitly in some of his earlier writings. The 1948 essay 'Reality and its Shadow' and a small portion of *Existence and Existents* (1947) are devoted to discussing the artwork. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and its Shadow', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp. 1–14, and *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001). See Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) for a nuanced discussion of his position on the work of art in both texts.
7. Most notable in this vein are Sam Girgus, *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Alterity, and the Feminine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and *Clint Eastwood's America* (Cambridge, Oxford and Boston: Polity, 2013); Sarah Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics and French Documentary* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2006); Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); and an issue of the journal *Film-Philosophy* devoted to Levinas, 11.2 (2007).
8. Of course there are also major differences in how the two articulate subjectivity and difference, particularly with respect to the role that transcendence plays in their thought.
9. Including *Chocolat* (1988) and *No Fear No Die* (1990). Additionally, Denis tends to be taken up through this postcolonial lens in the scholarly literature. See, in relation to *I Can't Sleep*, Martine Beugnet's reading of the film in terms of the postcolonial in *Claire Denis* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005) and Katherine Assals, 'The Silent, Black Centre in the Early Features of Claire Denis', *Cineaction* 71 (Winter 2007): 2–8.
10. *Cahiers du cinéma* interview; cited in Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 82.
11. For a discussion of the film's treatment of the serial killer in relation to more classical styles of narration, and in particular Hannibal Lecter, see Todd McGowan, 'Resisting the Lure of Ultimate Enjoyment: Claire Denis' *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994)', *Kinoeye* 3.7 (9 June 2003), <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/07/mcgowan07.php> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
12. Another way of stating this would be to contrast it with the use of the alienation effect. Denis doesn't deny us the ability to know the other by distancing us from them in an

intellectual way. Rather, she brings her characters closer to us. We 'touch' them in a sense, but they remain stubbornly ungraspable despite this. Our exposure to them does not result in knowledge of who they are, but we are affectively altered by them because we are brought closer to them and not alienated from them.

13. For example, the baker's wife comments to Boni that he isn't very talkative in *Nénette and Boni*, and Ingrid Caven's character comments on the conversationally limited nature of Descas and his daughter in *35 Shots of Rum*.

14. Sébastien Lifshitz, *Claire Denis, la vagabonde*. Fémis, 1995. 45 minutes.

15. See also Janet Bergstrom's essay on opacity in Denis's films: 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.

16. For a reading of the film in terms of the perils of conformity see Martine Beugnet, 'Negotiating Conformity: Tales of Ordinary Evil', in Elizabeth Ezra and Sue Harris (eds), *France in Focus: Film and National Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 195–206.

17. Technically, since the woman survives this is not a 'murder' scene.

18. I discuss the representation of the victims further on in the chapter. Paulin himself never gave any explanation for his crimes. For more information on the case and its coverage in the French media, see the excellent article by Reisinger, 'Murder and Banality in the Contemporary Fait Divers'.

19. It may also be useful here to substitute the word 'singularity' for 'absolute difference', as they both gesture towards the ungraspability of the other. If this seems like an attempt on my part to force a connection between Levinas and Nancy, in fact Diane Perpich makes this linguistic modification herself in her book on Levinas, reading the Levinasian notion of alterity as another word for singularity. See Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

20. Levinas is writing much more closely to events of World War II, himself surviving the war in a POW camp and beginning his writing on ethics while imprisoned. Prior to the war, Levinas had been responsible for an early French translation of Husserl, and had also written on Heidegger. The latter's controversial connection to National Socialism and the disputed links between some of his concepts and the Nazi ideology must also be read as a backdrop to Levinas's critique and shift to thinking the other outside of phenomenology.

21. By first philosophy I mean that ethics has a metaphysical priority over ontology, that the ethical comes before and constantly disrupts the ontological. Ethics is the diachronic call to responsibility by virtue of which I become a subject. I further explicate these ideas in what follows.

22. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 177.

23. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 45.

24. Translators of Levinas have capitalised 'other' to distinguish the other of ethics (*Autrui*) from the term *autre*. I leave the other in lower case to maintain consistency with the other thinkers I draw on in my study, as part of my project is to draw attention to points of overlap in the philosophers' work that I take up here.

25. Temporality is a key part of Levinas's description of the encounter with the other. Ethics is always diachronic, happening outside of quantitative or linear time. At different moments in his writing the other is linked both to an anticipated future that gives meaning to individual existence and to an immemorial past, through the language of the trace.

26. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 85.

27. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 85–6.
28. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 43.
29. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 143.
30. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Language and Proximity', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp. 109–26; p. 115.
31. The emphasis on saying carries with it a valorisation of the auditory, which is often paired up in Levinas with the denigration of vision. Apropos speech Levinas writes, 'To put speech at the origin of truth is to abandon the thesis that disclosure, which implies the solitude of vision, is the first work of truth' (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 99). Furthermore, 'Speech cuts across vision. In knowledge or vision the object seen can indeed determine an act, but it is an act that in some way appropriates the "seen" to itself, integrates it into a world by endowing it with a signification, and, in the last analysis, constitutes it' (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 195). Here Levinas draws attention to the mastery and possession that often goes along with a valorisation of seeing as knowing. Ethics challenges the link between sight and truth as it emphasises the auditory – the saying over the said. As we have seen, although Denis is a highly cinematic filmmaker, who aligns herself with image over dialogue, seeing is not knowing, nor does it provide access to a coherent and containable truth in her work. As I elaborate in the following chapter, despite her eschewal of dialogue, Denis places a great degree of importance on soundtrack – music and otherwise – in creating a sensuous *audio*-visual encounter.
32. This is the case with much of Denis's work, as I also discuss in relation to *Nénette and Boni* in Chapter 2. For more on strategies of dislocation in the film see Corrine Oster, 'Decoding Unreadable Spaces: Claire Denis' *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994)', *Kinoeye* 3.7 (9 June 2003), <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/07/oster07.php> (last accessed 20 May 2015).
33. For other readings of this scene see Susan Hayward, 'Claire Denis' Films and the Post-colonial Body – with special reference to *Beau travail* (1999)', *Studies in French Cinema* 1.3 (2001): 159–65; Elena del Río, 'Body Transformations in the Films of Claire Denis: From Ritual to Play', *Studies in French Cinema* 3.3 (2003): 185–97.
34. I return to the role of dance in relation to affect in the next chapter.
35. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 143.
36. For a Deleuze-inflected reading of myth in *Beau travail* see Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Beugnet reads the film in terms of becoming/lines of flight as a resistance to myth's fixity (here the myth of the French Foreign Legion). This suggests more connections between Levinas, Nancy and Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom argue against the fixity of myth and for an interruptive and dynamic practice. On myth in the film see also Martine Beugnet and Jane Sillars, '*Beau travail*: Time, Space and Myths of Identity', *Studies in French Cinema* 1.3 (2001): 166–73.
37. For the most detailed discussion of the scriptwriting process and the filming and editing as they relate to it see Lippy, 'Writing and Directing *I Can't Sleep*'.
38. This style is often compared to Robert Altman's use of multiple parallel or interlocking narrative strains in films like *Short Cuts* (1993).
39. The objects are African art, presumably bought by visiting Europeans to bring back to France.
40. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. xliii.
41. Again, Levinas tries to address this by moving towards more difficult and poetic language in his later work. In the French he attempts to elide the copula, removing 'being' from his account of the ethical. In many ways the representational failures of his project, as I argue with respect to Denis's films, are their successes as attempts at ethics.

42. Megan Craig, *Levinas and James: Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 8.

43. Ibid. p. 135.

44. Ibid. p. 135. This sentiment is echoed in Dominic Michael Rainsford's essay on Levinas and the Russian director Tarkovsky, when he argues that 'Levinas conveys philosophical arguments artistically, in the sense that he goes on reformulating his major concepts, over and over again, finding new words every time, in a process that seems unending: an evasion (as much as this is possible) of fixity and thematisation and (as he puts it above) "the inevitable paralysis of manifestation"'; Dominic Michael Rainsford, 'Tarkovsky and Levinas: Cuts, Mirrors, Triangulations', *Film-Philosophy* 7.2 (2007): 122–43; 125.

45. See Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) for a critique of Levinas's failure to fully see through the implications of sexual difference as radical alterity. Irigaray critiques Levinas for turning the feminine into a stop on the male ethical subject's journey towards enlightenment and for fixing the meaning of fecundity in the encounter to the generation of a male child.

46. See also Lisa Downing's related but different take on Levinas and erotics in the films of Denis and Catherine Breillat. Downing argues for a 'looking with love' that is connected to the caress of the other. Lisa Downing, 'Re-viewing the Sexual Relation: Levinas and Film', *Film-Philosophy* 7.2 (2007): 49–65.

47. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 255.

48. See the following chapter for a larger discussion of this motif in Nancy, and also Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Leeds: Maney, 2011).

49. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 98.

50. Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, p. 91.

51. Mark A. Reid, 'Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations', *Jump Cut* 40 (March 1996): 67–72.

52. Camhi, 'A French Director with a Taste for the Gritty and Unglamorous'.

53. Alex Descas argued for his character to be played this way, apparently himself seeing the value of an ambiguous representation.

54. Nikolaj Lübecker, 'The De-dramatization of Violence in Claire Denis's *I Can't Sleep*', *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 30.2 (2007): 17–32.

55. Of course, the ethical and political are not so easily distinguished.

56. Diane Perpich, 'Levinas, Feminism, and Identity Politics', in Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (eds), *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), pp. 21–40; p. 38.

57. Ibid. p. 43.

58. As do arguably most films by white directors about black people.

59. Perpich, 'Levinas, Feminism, and Identity Politics', p. 33.

60. Ibid. p. 33.

61. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 144.

62. In a similar vein, see Libby Saxon's writing on the ban on representing images in Levinas and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, 'Fragile Faces: Levinas and Lanzmann', *Film-Philosophy* 7.2 (2007): 1–14.