

SPACE, TIME, AND BODIES: THE DIMENSIONS OF DIFFERENCE IN WOMEN'S
CINEMA AND CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines the question of difference, and especially of sexual difference, in women's cinema and continental philosophy. I analyze four movies by three of today's most influential women filmmakers: Jane Campion (*The Piano*, New Zealand), Claire Denis (*Beau Travail* and *Trouble Every Day*, France), and Lucrecia Martel (*La niña santa/The Holy Girl*, Argentina), as well as philosophical texts by Luce Irigaray, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Friedrich Nietzsche. I argue that these films represent difference not only through characterization, but more essentially by emphasizing one of cinema's core devices: space (e.g. camerawork), time (narration and editing), and bodies. Through these, the films articulate relations that go beyond hierarchies of power to portray and enact movements toward others who are acknowledged in their singularity.

Each chapter is devoted to a film, and opens with a close reading of its aesthetics with a focus on space, time, or bodies. My study of the filmic elements is set in a dialogue with analyses of the corresponding concepts in the philosophical texts. In particular, I explore the relevance for cinema studies of the concept of the interval, which is a central, yet until recently often-overlooked notion in Irigaray's work. The interval can be defined as the force of difference as it constitutes two subjects (as opposed to a subject and an object) through the distance that both separates and brings them together. It lends itself well to cinematic analysis for it concerns bodies, and it is at once spatial and temporal. The interval itself is brought to bear on other concepts: Bergson's duration and intuition, Deleuze's interstice, and Nietzsche's theory of violence. Through these theoretical and filmic networks, this dissertation sketches out new perspectives for feminist film criticism.

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Introduction

In the opening pages of *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, Luce Irigaray makes this intriguing yet deeply compelling suggestion about sexual difference: “Pour que cette différence ait lieu d’être pensée et vécue, il faut reconsidérer toute la problématique de *l’espace* et du *temps*” (“For this difference to have grounds to be thought and lived, we must reconsider the whole problem of *space* and *time*”; 15, emphasis in the text). This dissertation investigates how a series of contemporary women filmmakers and continental philosophers seek to transform our relation to the world and to others by reinventing space and time, as well as the relation between the mind and the body (as sexual difference, Irigaray stresses, must be “thought and lived,” partaking of both mental and visceral experiences).

I focus on four films: Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (New Zealand, 1993), Claire Denis’ *Beau Travail* (France, 1999) and *Trouble Every Day* (France, 2001), and Lucrecia Martel’s *La niña santa* (Argentina, 2004). Each of these has been influential, and in spite of their great diversity, all display common aesthetic features: they belong to, or are closely associated with, what Gilles Deleuze has called the cinema of the “time-image” (which corresponds roughly to post-World War II art cinema), and they all favor scarce dialogues, as well as dance and movement. Further, each of these films raises the question of sexual difference (often, as we will see, through that of sexual violence), and with the exception of *Beau Travail*, all portray independent, driven women who must face the intensity of their will or of their desire. The directors themselves are three of the most prominent women making films in the world today: Campion, a successful filmmaker working in English, is well-known across the Western world; Denis is a

towering figure in the notoriously phallogentric milieu of French auteur cinema; and Martel is widely recognized as one of the most important directors in Latin America.

My purpose is to show how these filmmakers express difference, and in particular sexual difference, through cinema's own devices. Rather than starting out from social categories, such as gender, race, and sexuality, to offer a critique of representation, I consider how each director approaches one fundamental aspect of filmmaking: space, time, and bodies. I open each chapter with a narrative summary and a close analysis of the film under scrutiny, focusing on the key film techniques that each director uses to convey her specific understanding of alterity. Then I turn to the works of one or several philosophers who have explored space, time, and embodiment in relation to the question of difference: Luce Irigaray, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and to a lesser extent, Friedrich Nietzsche, whom I also approach through close analyses of selected passages. These theories serve to broaden and deepen our understanding of aesthetics choices, as the filmmakers and the philosophers have reflected on the same themes through the specific means at their disposal: film techniques for the former and concepts for the latter.

The philosophical perspectives that I address are diverse, as I explore Irigaray's theory of sexual difference, Bergson's work on time and intuition, Deleuze's ideas on cinema, and Nietzsche's analysis of violence. Yet, a central conceptual thread runs through this project: Irigaray's notion of the interval, through which she develops her own theory of space and time. The interval, which has been the object of a recent book by Rebecca Hill (*The Interval: Relation and Becoming in Irigaray, Aristotle and Bergson*), refers to the spatial and temporal distance that must separate two individuals in order for them to come together, not as a subject and an object, but as two subjects. In other words,

the interval undoes the hierarchical relationships that sustain phallogentrism (and all other forms of domination) and in this process, allows life to manifest in new, unpredictable forms. It is the foundation of an actualization of lived difference: without an interval of difference, the other's specificity remains absorbed by the impetuous demands of what Irigaray calls "the one," or "sameness," that is, the norms of phallogentrism, which have assimilated all differences to a single, male, standard. Because the interval is, like cinema, grounded in space, time, and bodies, it is particularly useful to make sense of the operation of difference in film.

This turn to Irigaray in the context of film studies may be unexpected, as her name tends to be associated with film scholarship from the 1980s and the 1990s. Yet two books were published these past few years, one by Caroline Bainbridge (2008) and another one by Lucy Bolton (2011), offering approaches to film that are grounded in her philosophy. Surprisingly, Bainbridge and Bolton are in fact the first to produce book-length, fully-fledged Irigarayan cinematics: even at the height of psychoanalytical feminist film criticism, few arguments were entirely based in her work, although she was often referenced. It is for the most part in literary studies that Irigaray's influence was felt at the time, as her disruptions of phallogentric language lend themselves to the study of literary texts. Conversely, her distrust of visuality (at least as it functions in phallogentrism), may have made film scholars reluctant to resort to her work. Further, because her books were mostly read when the critical influence of psychoanalysis was at its strongest, she is often overly associated with the latter. However, while Irigaray has written at length about Freud and Lacan (in *Speculum, de l'autre femme* and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, among others), she has also addressed many other philosophers in great

depth: she has produced extensive studies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and beyond them, she has traced the feminine and its erasure in most of the major figures of the Western philosophical tradition. Her insights on the spatial and temporal dimensions of sexual difference, as well as the great sensuality of her poetic prose, make her an ideal source for a reflection on cinema, and in particular on women's art film. Critics have only begun to explore the rich possibilities for feminist film scholarship that her work offers.

My first chapter, "The Feminist Distance: Space in Jane Campion's *The Piano*," examines spatiality. I focus on the play of nearness and distance in both the film and two texts by Irigaray, and argue that the director and the philosopher have produced a comparable understanding of spatiality. Both have thought the question of woman's integrity in a violent, phallic world through the development of two kinds of spaces: the space of closeness, autonomy, and distance, which woman can use to flourish in her singularity, and the phallocentric space of encroachment, violation, and estrangement, which alienates her. In Campion, the first type of spatiality is rendered through the association of the close-up, itself tied to the character of Ada, and her characterization as an unreachable woman, two devices that produce a space in which intimacy is not defined by intrusion, but by admiration at a distance. This oscillation between the near and the distant resonates with Irigaray's account of the interval, the intimate distance opposed to the destructive power of phallocentrism, which estranges woman from herself and from the needs and interests of her body. But *The Piano* cannot be mapped seamlessly onto Irigaray's work, as Ada displays two sides: she is not only a woman artist, but also one who falls in love with a man who was using his material ascendancy over her to receive sexual favors. An analysis of genre in the film, and in particular of

Campion's closeness to and distance from melodrama, points to the limits of an assimilation of her work to feminism.

In my second chapter, "Claire Denis and the Flow of Time: *Beau Travail*," I consider the question of temporality in relation to Denis' account of difference. Denis said of *Beau Travail* that she wanted to make a film about foreignness: I explore the implications of this declaration not only in terms of narrative, which centers around members of the French *Légion étrangère* settled in Djibouti, but also of film aesthetics, and argue that Denis constructs her film on the basis of a constellation of trajectories. For instance, *Beau Travail* is made of a multiplicity of temporalities: while most scenes occur in the diegetic time of the film, others take place in oneiric or sacral temporal realms. I argue that each of these kinds of time forms a particular trajectory, and relate this reading to Bergson's concept of duration, the indivisible unit of time that corresponds to a single movement. Bergson uses this notion to produce a theory of difference: to each singularity corresponds a particular duration, which cannot be measured against that of others (it is simply of a different kind). *Beau Travail*'s affirmation of difference in duration extends to characterization, as Denis staunchly resists establishing hierarchies between her characters, but rather portrays each one of them as an independent trajectory. This respect for alterity also marks her treatment of sexual difference, and in particular of the gaze that she bestows upon the men that she depicts. I relate Denis' approach to otherness and time to Irigaray's own theory of difference as becoming. Further, I argue that Denis' insistence on a multiplicity of differences can help open up Irigaray's focus on sexual difference: using the open-ended nature of the interval as a model, I contend that Irigaray's

privileging of sexual difference does not preclude an equal attention to other forms of difference.

The third chapter, “Time and Difference: Love in Claire Denis’ *Trouble Every Day*,” analyzes Denis’ subsequent film, again through the angle of temporality. I suggest that this violent, gore movie is in fact a film about love, but love understood as a form of devouring. Paradoxically, the latter remains unfulfilled as the other can in fact never be absorbed: the mystery of her intimate self always remains in excess of any attempt to consume her. Denis constructs a visual universe that reflects this impossibility by often giving the impression of having just missed the other (for instance, through the careful composition of missed eyeline matches). This kind of editing technique is typical of what Deleuze calls “modern cinema,” or the “time-image.” In particular, it is exemplary of his concept of the “interstice,” with which he suggests that modern films work not through natural harmonies and contrasts, but through processes of differentiation between frames. These movies, he argues, stem from the gaps between images and/or between sounds. In *Trouble Every Day*, the interstice serves the central theme of the film, which is the impossibility to reach the other, and thereby forms an interesting echo to Irigaray’s interval. The resemblances between the two concepts are numerous, and they help explain why all the films under consideration in this project partake of the aesthetics of the time-image. However, Denis’ take on love, at once so close and so distant from Irigaray, also leads me to a critique of the latter. Denis is the heir to a Nietzschean view of the world, which places the will-to-power, and therefore violence, at the center of human affects. Irigaray is also largely inspired by Nietzsche, but she disavows the predominance of violence, especially in her later work.

The fourth chapter, “Lucrecia Martel and the Curious Body in *La niña santa*,” an Argentine film that is also representative of Deleuze’s cinema of the time-image. The latter tends to portray characters that cannot be adequately understood through processes of identification. *La niña santa* is a film for whose disturbing narrative we do not have a readymade moral code (a teenage girl is sexually awakened by a male middle-aged harasser and pursues him). This confusion is intensified by the movie’s aesthetics, which emphasize sound and touch, rather than vision as mastery at a distance, thereby reflecting the embodied way in which the main character, Amalia, approaches the world. I argue that rather than appealing to us through identification, *La niña santa* creates an epistemological regime that is akin to what Henri Bergson calls “intuition,” a category of human consciousness that enables one to understand the world from the inside, through an openness to becoming. Although Bergson’s concept is often understood to describe a purely mental experience, a careful reading of his work shows that he deems intuition to be coextensive with a particular attitude of the body, which further underlines its relevance for film theory. Moreover, I argue that intuition is the process through which the interval can emerge, because it is only through intuition that we can seek to approach the other by affirming her/his duration, autonomy and difference.

All the films studied here echo Irigaray’s interval: they enact a form of non-hierarchical difference, and they engage in a movement toward an other recognized as such, whether this transport is inscribed within the film itself, or produced in the relation between the spectator and the characters on the screen. However, the conceptual smoothness of the interval rubs against the coarseness of life as it is depicted in art cinema, that is, in a genre that is deeply suspicious of innocence. Whereas the interval

invites us to a world of fulfillment through lived difference, the films that I study are haunted by melancholy and violence. The movement toward the other that they portray is set in contexts that foreground the ineluctable pain of life, as well as its complexity. Therefore, while this dissertation aims at pointing out ways in which Irigaray's work is relevant for film scholarship, I also remain wary not to overstate the points of convergence between the films and her philosophy. Each chapter, except for the last one, ends either with a study of the limits of this encounter between cinema and theory, or with a critique of Irigaray through the film under consideration.

Chapter 1. The Feminist Distance: Space in Jane Campion's *The Piano*

1.1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen a surge of interest in the topic of spatiality in a wide range of disciplines, such as art history, philosophy, cultural studies, or human geography. This focus has been particularly relevant for film studies, as space is one of the essential elements of cinema. Feminist film critics approaching this question have mainly concentrated on the gendered signification of travel and movement, or of certain locations, such as the city or the home.¹ But what would it mean to define spatiality itself in feminist terms? And how could it be made relevant to an exploration of sexual difference in cinema? As noted in the introduction, Irigaray suggests intriguingly in the opening pages of *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* that we will only move beyond phallocentrism once women have developed a space (and a time) of their own, and she elaborates a compelling theory of spatiality. Grounded in a close analysis of Jane Campion's 1993 movie *The Piano*, this chapter considers the numerous points of convergence between the philosopher and the director, arguing that they both develop a twofold understanding of space as either the condition of woman's self-affirmation or the medium of her disappearance.

The Piano holds a very particular place in the history of cinema, as perhaps the most influential film made by a woman. Not even Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* can rival its combination of high profits and critical acclaim. The movie was a blockbuster and Campion went on to win many awards. Most notably, she was the first

¹ See for instance: Lloyd; Mottahedeh; and Soyoung.

(and so far the *only*) woman to win the *Palme d'or* at the Cannes Film Festival, establishing her as the leading female director of her time². Further, *The Piano* was the subject of considerable academic scrutiny, which, given the film's release in the early 1990s, relied mostly on psychoanalytical and generic perspectives. Yet this dense, complex movie invites a much wider array of interpretations.

In this chapter, I argue that the movie is driven by a formal framework that relies chiefly and consistently on the opposition between nearness and distance. In particular, what interests me is the tension that exists between the film's favorite camera technique, the close-up, and the main trait of Ada's characterization, which is the insurmountable distance that separates her from the spectator and those who share her life in the movie (with the exception, to a certain degree, of her daughter). I argue that both Irigaray and Campion develop a feminist ethics that is grounded in closeness and distance, and the corresponding interplay of intimacy and autonomy. By investigating the philosophical implications of Campion's aesthetic choices for feminism, I suggest that her understanding of space in *The Piano* resonates closely with Irigaray's concept of the interval.

Campion's engagement with the politics of spatiality is inextricably tied to a second question, which complicates and deepens the first, namely: How does this conceptualization of space relate to the great conundrum of the movie, which is its treatment of sexual violence? Campion, in spite of her frequent predilection for romance (for instance her latest film, *Bright Star*), is at heart a filmmaker of violence, a central

² This was in fact Campion's second *Palme d'or*, as she had already received the award in 1986 for her short film *Peel: An Exercise in Discipline*.

theme that dominates most of her work.³ Even though *The Piano* has been hailed as a love story and marketed as such, Campion suggests that sexual violence is at the center of heterosexual erotics, as it pervades Ada's relationships with both her husband and her lover (it even seems to be at the source of her love for the latter).⁴ Like Campion, Irigaray thinks sexual difference in general and heterosexuality in particular through the violence that constitutes it in phallocentrism. In "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un," she suggests that sexual violence is the original force that estranges woman from herself and from the close embrace of the lips that form her sex. It is also the mode in which phallocentric sex occurs, and that in which Ada falls in love with Baines. In sum, two understandings of space are sketched out, both in the film and in the philosophical text: on the one hand, a phallocentric logic of intrusion (sexual violence) and alienation (woman does not know herself; man and woman do not speak to each other because woman has no place). On the other hand, both *The Piano* and Irigaray propose a feminist spatiality that rests upon nearness, intimacy, and the distance that enables autonomy and intimacy.

In the spirit of respecting difference, I will end this essay with a study of the limits of Campion's affinities with Irigaray and with feminism in general. It can be tempting to read Campion as more of a feminist than she actually is: after all, she presents us with a female character who insists on preserving her independence and her

³ In this respect, Kathleen McHugh notes the following: "Campion continues to explore the controversial and edgy themes that have dominated her work from her first student films up to the present: how power and violence permeate sexual and familial relationships, confound women's self-expression, and reify and distort gender roles." (*Campion* 1-2)

⁴ *The Piano* is not the only movie by Campion where this is the case. For instance, *In the Cut*, a 2003 erotic thriller starring Meg Ryan and Mark Ruffalo, likewise relies on the affinities between heterosexual desire and violation. In this movie too, violence morphs into love: in one characteristic sequence, the reconstitution of a mugging scene between the two protagonists turns into a passionate night.

creativity. But Campion also romanticizes a story that finds its source in an eminently unequal power relation between a man and a woman. An analysis of genre in the film, and in particular of her engagement with melodrama, proves to be an interesting point of departure from which to explore the differences between Campion and Irigaray. The filmmaker is at once engaging with many of the conventions of melodrama (while frequently subverting them), and with a discourse that has been largely absent from commercial cinema, one that celebrates a woman's autonomy and even an embrace of death, beyond love and beyond the family. Campion is thus at once close to and distant from the norms of genre.

1.2. Narrative Summary

The character of Ada McGrath is one of the most enigmatic and captivating female characters in the history of film: she is at once so aptly played by Holly Hunter as to appear entirely self-evident, and so mysterious as to remain a complete puzzle throughout the film. In this evocative period film, Ada is a nineteenth-century mute Scotswoman pianist who is forced into marriage to a landowner in New Zealand, named Alistair Stewart (Sam Neill). She is shipped to the island with her young daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), who speaks sign language and serves as her interpreter. Ada further expresses herself through her piano, with which she entertains a fervent relation. She manages to resist her husband's advances, but she soon finds herself faced with an almost impossible bargain: George Baines (Harvey Keitel), another white man on the island has bought the piano from Stewart and he offers to give it back to her in exchange for escalating sexual demands. Ada accepts very reluctantly and soon finds herself lying naked in Baines's

bed: a few keys for a few favors. Her initial displeasure and fear are obvious to the viewer, but Baines remains impervious, until he unexpectedly declares his love for her. In a surprising turn, Ada falls in love with him, and the two start an intense affair. Stewart, who has developed an amorous passion for his wife, finds out about the liaison and, devoured by jealousy, chops off one of her fingers in a horrifying scene. When he realizes that he cannot force upon his wife the kind of loving intimacy that he craves, he tells Baines to take her away. As Baines and Ada are sailing forth to a new life, Ada demands that her piano be thrown overboard, then she lets herself be carried down with it. Once under the water, a force that she herself describes as her “will” chooses to survive, and manages to get her back to the surface. She is then seen having started her new life with Baines and Flora in a pretty white house in Nelson, New Zealand. But *The Piano* has yet another ending: in the very last shot, Ada sees herself, as she sometimes does at night, dead, under the sea, tied to her piano.

1.3. Toward Ada: Camera-Work and Characterization

The play of nearness and distance pervades *The Piano*: for example, early in the film, the camera takes a close-up view of Ada looking at her piano on the distant beach. In the terrifying sequence where Stewart chops off her finger, Ada’s hands are shown in close-up before and after her finger is severed, while Ada’s facial expressions remain unfathomable. Similarly, the intimacy between Ada and her daughter, Flora, the warmth that bathes their affection for each other in their intimate, peaceful moments contrasts with the alienated presence of those who interrupt them. On the one hand, Campion makes recurrent use of the close-up, and on the other, she establishes an insuperable

distance that estranges us, and everyone in the movie, from Ada. The latter is detached from us not only by her muteness and her lack of facial expressions, but also by what can only be described as her grace, the natural elegance that emanates from her and lends her an almost otherworldly quality. The film as a whole stems from the movement between these two opposites: visual proximity and emotional distance.

Ada is one of the most naturally elegant, fluid characters ever seen on the screen: her every move, from the torsion of her hand when she caresses her daughter's head to her flight in the woods when Stewart tries to rape her, is marked by the same ethereal poise. The camera itself, when it comes near her, often engages in "lushly graceful movements... swirling around her, creating complex arabesques" (Polan 29). The film is made in the image of its main character: the simple beauty of the music, the eerie majesty of the bush, the perfection of every object.

The film's last two scenes aptly illustrate the spatial arrangement that underlies Ada's characterization. After she has survived drowning, we see her leading an idyllic existence in Nelson with Flora and Baines. They live in what seems to be a welcoming, bright white house, Baines has fashioned a metal finger for Ada so she can continue to play the piano, and she is learning to speak (she had suddenly stopped as a young child). Flora is even seen doing cartwheels in the garden, in a white dress, in slow-motion. In a voice-over, we hear Ada say that she is ashamed of her difficulty to pronounce words, but this does not prevent Baines from being lovingly devoted to her. She practices speaking with a black scarf on her head, which he tenderly removes, and he kisses her with passion. Her adoring gaze tells the measure of her love for him. Nothing, it seems, could trouble such a blissful tableau. But in the next sequence, the brightness of marital life in

Nelson is replaced by the dark, cloudy sea. The piano is there, at the bottom of the ocean, covered in algae, and Ada, tied to it with a cord, floats above her instrument. The voice says that “At night, I think of my piano in its ocean grave, and sometimes of myself, floating above it. Down there, everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby and so it is. It is mine.” She then recites the following lines by Thomas Hood: “There is a silence where hath been no sound, there is a silence, where no sound may be. In the cold grave, under the deep, deep sea.” The camera moves back from a close-up of the piano to the point where Ada has become a distant dark spot in the gloomy, turbid waters.

The great complexity of this vision contrasts with the simplicity of the scene in Nelson. Ada is learning to speak, thus abandoning what seems to have been her willful ostracism from the community. To see her muteness as deliberate or even liberating may seem counter-intuitive as her silence can be read as a metaphor for women’s oppression in the Victorian era, and as it renders her vulnerable, relying on her young daughter for communication. This dependency has dire consequences, since it is Flora who lets Stewart know of her mother’s enduring love for Baines, thereby unwittingly bringing about Ada’s mutilation. However, the film intimates that Ada’s muteness may be a conscious or unconscious personal decision dating back to her childhood. In the very first scene, we hear her “mind’s voice” recall what follows: “I haven’t spoken since I was six years old. Nobody knows why. Not even me. My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last.” Her father believes that Ada has chosen to be mute, a resolve that not only gives the measure of her extraordinary determination, but also endows her, in his eyes at least, with a fiendish force. That Ada

quotes him suggests that she does not entirely disagree. Her silence can be seen as a form of passive resistance, the weapon of a subject whose powerlessness is matched by a staunch attachment to her sovereignty: she may have been sold into marriage by her father, sent to the other end of the world to live with a man she has never met, but her not engaging in spoken language has given her a measure of protection. Her muteness allows Ada to remain rooted in her inner world, which in turn enables her to thrive as an artist.

Therefore, that Ada would learn to speak in the penultimate scene raises the question of her autonomy in her new life with Baines, and appears to suggest that she become compliant with the expectations imposed on nineteenth-century women. Yet the under-water sequence shows that, even in Nelson, a part of her remains inalienable. Ada has not become completely absorbed into the norms of Victorian femininity but rather keeps that other self in the deep, where she can visit it at will. The final image itself is highly ambivalent, very far from a celebratory embrace of feminine triumph: the old piano is attached to both death (the “coffin,” the “ocean grave”) and sorrow, as it carries the weight of difficult memories. The brightness of the life that she has created in Nelson is replaced by a seemingly self-destructive darkness. But paradoxically, the very permanence of death also marks the immutability of her sense of self: the “weird lullaby,” she insists, is hers. Hence in the last two scenes of the film, Ada appears to be closer to others and to the spectator than she has ever been before (through her middle-class lifestyle and her acquisition of spoken language), at the same time as she resolutely marks a literal, incompressible distantiation in her aquatic world.

Irigaray’s conceptualization of space, in particular through her concept of the interval, can be used productively to analyze these scenes. Her work deserves a brief

introduction: at the heart of Irigaray's thought is the unsettling observation that the feminine does not emerge in the world as we know it: women are defined not on their own terms, according to the specificities of their own bodies, but on the basis of masculine parameters. Phallocentrism, the reduction of all sexual differences to one model that is implicitly male, makes woman become imperceptible, losing herself for the benefit of the male other. This does not mean, however, that the feminine, that which flows from the specificity of women's bodies, is completely absent from women's existence: the feminine does exist, it is real, but only virtually so. It rests within the bodies of women, but does not get actualized, because sexual difference is not experienced as such, but through a reduction of all differences to a male standard.⁵

Therefore, Irigaray's work is neither prescriptive nor essentialist: we simply cannot know the myriad forms that the feminine would take if it could be lived as such. We only know that all women would be able to express their own singularity freely.⁶

Irigaray demonstrates in "Le lieu, l'intervalle" (*Éthique* 41-62) that the operation of phallocentrism is to constitute woman as a space from which man can elaborate his subjectivity. She develops her argument through an analysis of Aristotle's *Physics* and of

⁵ To talk of sexual difference in terms of virtuality and actuality is to frame the question in Bergsonian terms. Henri Bergson argues that each instant is split into two branches: the actual (the material present) and the virtual, which conserves every moment in an ever-growing reservoir that holds the whole of the past. In the virtual are also kept the forces that have not (yet) been actualized and which could generate unexpected events in the future. Both the virtual and the actual are real, but only the actual constitutes our lived experience.

⁶ Although Irigaray limits herself to a discussion of cissexual (that is, non-trans) subjects, her insights into the untapped potentialities of bodies could lend themselves to a conceptualization of all ontologies, including transgender ones.

a straight sexual relation,⁷ and notes that patriarchal sexuality negates woman's place (*le lieu*) and in fact makes her function as a place for man, for at its core lies the conviction that the vagina is a passive receptacle whose purpose is to welcome an active penis.

Further, Irigaray notes that this disappearance of woman in and from the (hetero) sexual act is the result of a doubly impossible movement on man's part formed by a piercing and destructive urge to appropriate her sex, and a regressive, nostalgic, and inexorably failed attempt to be reintegrated within the womb. In this sad masquerade, woman is lost as she becomes territory for an other instead of enjoying the intensity of her own domain.

Irigaray thus insists that it is crucial that woman forge a place for herself and create her own envelope.⁸ However, having a place is not enough to meet the other for two sealed off containers would be unable to produce an encounter, and a threshold is therefore necessary. Irigaray calls it the interval.

The interval forms "l'intermédiaire entre les limites"⁹ ("the intermediary between the limits"; *Éthique* 53), the gap between two envelopes. As the space between the two that enables their relation, the interval is a distance that is both abolished to enable intimacy and maintained to guarantee integrity.¹⁰ It is not a static, motionless entity, but rather a radical openness engaged in a ceaseless movement (Hill, "Interval" 129). The interval can be understood as the force of difference itself, for it is through its activity that the two are constituted as subjects, as autonomous individuals that come in the place

⁷ The fact that Irigaray limits her discussion of the interval to straight sexuality must not necessarily be construed as homophobic as what interests her is a reconfiguration of the encounter between the sexes.

⁸ Irigaray understands the envelope to be the overlap of the actual borders of one's body (the skin) and the lived experience of one's boundaries.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all the translations are mine.

¹⁰ The temporal dimension of the interval will be addressed in chapter 2.

of the subject/object, master and slave dialectic of phallocentrism. Irigaray writes that the interval opens “un passage au muqueux” (“a passage to the mucous”; *Éthique* 53), whereby the creative operation of desire enables lovers to produce a place for each other at the same time as they enjoy their own.

This reference to the mucous makes it possible to place the interval within the evolution of Irigaray's thought: the mucous is already a key concept in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, published seven years before *Éthique*. It points especially (though not only) to the fluid that irrigates the constant touching of the lips that form woman's sex. Irigaray shows that the image of the self-contained, autonomous individual that defines the Western understanding of subjectivity rests on the denial of sexual difference, as it mirrors the unicity of the masculine sex. Woman's morphology, she argues, makes her at odds this arithmetic logic: since her lips do not lend themselves to any easy quantification, “[e]lle n'est ni une ni deux” (“she is neither one nor two”; *Ce sexe* 26), and her self-affection through the mucous suggests a realm of actualization of the feminine beyond phallocentrism. Cathryn Vasseleu captures the personal but elusive nature of the fluid, at once sensible and transcendental, when she writes, “The mucous is an interior which could not be more intimately me, yet which evades my mastery. [...] [It] is a continuation of the body beyond its existence as a phenomenon or an indistinguishable contiguity and porosity of interiority and skin” (*Textures* 67). In *Éthique*, its function becomes expanded:¹¹ not only does the mucous mark woman's own territory, but it also forms the place where the two can meet in a straight sexual relation.

¹¹ For a more detailed reading of the interval as mucous see Hill, *Interval* 70-2.

Arguably, this development comes at a cost: whereas Irigaray's initial understanding of the mucous had figured a feminine subjectivity coming into her own without mediation by a male subject, the interval as it is defined in *Éthique* does imply a heterosexual relationship in which lovers are active in engendering each other. However, this influence is mutual, and Irigaray suggests, in a delightfully subversive interpretation of gender roles in straight coitus, that woman's purported passivity constitutes a disavowal of the vagina's actual activity, as it sculpts man's penis from the inside. It must also be stressed that woman does not serve as territory for man in this encounter, because what transports Irigarayan lovers to each other is precisely the beloved's affirmation of her or his own place. Therefore, the couple that Irigaray examines in *Éthique* remains grounded in her earlier reconceptualization of subjectivity. The mucous has thus become a double threshold: both to self-actualization and to difference.

At first sight, the ending of *The Piano* would seem to suggest that Ada and Baines are enacting the Irigarayan interval by forging an amorous bond grounded in partnership. Campion presents us with the picture of marital bliss: Ada has thrown away her old piano and is starting afresh with a new instrument; Baines is lovingly devoted to her. Further, the penultimate scene appears to redeem him of his disturbing contract with Ada: whatever trace may have lingered on him from what he calls "the arrangement" seems to have been washed away as he unveils Ada, who is practicing speaking with a black scarf on her head, and kisses her passionately, holding her delicate face with his strong hands. His bodily vigor looks like a token of the sincerity of his love as it demonstrates the force of his attachment to her.

Yet a closer look reveals that their sexual interaction remains in line with Baines's sexually abusive behavior earlier in the film: his strength as he holds her face maintains the enactment of a power play as her frailty contrasts with the grip of his robust hands. She surrenders to his force with delight, but this is still an erotics that is endorsing, rather than challenging, the norms of phallogentrism. Further, even though the movie insists that they are set apart from the rest of the community in Nelson, Ada and Baines are more conventional in their new life together than either of them ever was (she is learning to speak, he lives in a neat middle-class house). In sum, the two lovers do not form an original kind of heterosexual alliance emulating the Irigarayan interval, as they live out a (rather banal) patriarchal logic of male redemption and female self-elision.

However, the interval does not necessarily need to be read exclusively in the context of a straight romance. Rebecca Hill argues that Irigaray's concept can not only be construed as a theory of subjectivity or intersubjectivity (that is, focusing on the relationship between two subjects), but also as that which enables the becoming of sexed forces (*Interval 2*).¹² In other words, she suggests that the interval can be apprehended in the context of our usual understanding of the subject as an agent endowed with

¹² This is what Hill calls the figuration of the interval either as "relation" or as "becoming" (*Interval 149*). In her interpretation of the interval as becoming, Hill builds upon Elizabeth Grosz's proposal, based in Irigaray's and Deleuze's work, that we move beyond political projects based on identity and ideology to refound them in terms of matter and forces (*Time Travels* 171-183 and 185-195). Grosz points out that identity politics function through processes of comparison or opposition, and *de facto* end up ascribing certain qualities to certain bodies (defining, for instance through autobiographical projects, the experiences of given minorities) (172). Rather than forging particular understandings of what it means to inhabit a given body in a given time and place, we should focus our attention on the production of new, as yet-unfathomable potentialities. Difference is therefore to be understood as an ontological force: it is grounded in the materiality of bodies to which no pre-established meaning has been assigned, and as such, we can never foresee what it will engender.

intentionality and desires, or within a Nietzschean framework that proposes a theory of the human, and beyond it, of the world, as produced by the interaction of a multiplicity of forces.¹³ These forces are not fixed characteristics, but rather form impersonal flows that go through bodies, overwhelm them, and constitute the individuals that they traverse. Sexed forces, in particular, “articulat[e] the tendencies of the masculine and the tendencies of the feminine” (*Interval* 149). This focus on forces makes it possible for Hill to emphasize the notion of (unpredictable) becoming that is at the heart of Irigaray’s thought, and to open up the interval to a reflection on difference beyond the heterosexual relation.

The interval can now be conceived as that which opens up both to a nonhierarchical relation between woman and man, and to the elaboration of sexed forces in general (*Interval* 3).¹⁴ Therefore, Hill argues that the interval is relevant to think about queer sexual and romantic encounters as well as straight ones (*Interval* 73-81). Further, she points out that Irigaray, while she clearly privileges sexual difference, does leave open the possibility of using the interval to reflect upon all forms of difference.¹⁵ This

¹³ Grosz elaborates this distinction in *Time Travels* 187.

¹⁴ Hill does not see these two readings of the interval (as relation and as becoming) as mutually exclusive: “The figuration of the relationship between subjects (an intersubjective approach) is an elaboration of becoming. For example, the threshold between a woman and a man is a relation in which each sex is in becoming in relation to the self and in becoming in relation to the other sex [...] The interval of becoming is also a threshold of relations [...] Here ‘relation’ no longer designates a relationship between ‘two’ subjects but an economy of relations within and between forces, outside the order of number” (*Interval* 149-50).

¹⁵ I would argue that Irigaray does so somewhat timidly. She writes, in *The Way of Love*, that sexual difference is “perhaps the most unthinkable of differences—difference itself” (*Way* 106 qtd. in Hill 3). Hill suggests that “[p]erhaps” leaves the potential of the interval open within the terms of her argument. To acknowledge the open potential of the interval is to acknowledge that the interval can be conceived as a threshold for the theorization of

broader understanding of the interval also makes it possible to mobilize it in the context of cinema, in order to make sense of sexually differentiated, nonhierarchical relations among characters, or between spectators and characters. Further, the interval can provide a theoretical foundation to study the aesthetic representation of difference through film devices. For example, since the interval, as a close distance, pertains to spatiality, it is particularly useful to make sense of the organization of cinematic spaces in relation to alterity.

With these elements in mind, let us turn back to *The Piano*. In the film, Ada does not surrender all of herself to her relationship with Baines, nor does she become entirely legible to the viewer. Instead, a part of her remains hidden, preciously protected in the dark, sublime world of her solitude. She is careful to keep her most intimate self shielded at a distance, at the bottom of the sea, tied to her old piano. Her last words are mysterious, widely open to interpretation, and it is telling that the movie ends with a movement of distancing from her, as the camera tracks back to leave us with nothing but a dark spot. She does not abandon her body and her soul to a romantic dream that in time would mark her as a place for him. Instead, she retains a measure of her identity without and beyond him.

What she points to at the end of *The Piano* is a place of silence and independence that would exceed the limits of phallogentrism and from which a truly autonomous female subject could emerge.¹⁶ This can be read as an interval: a generative space that

different relations of alterity and different becomings by no means secondary to sexual difference" (*Interval* 3).

¹⁶ I do not see Ada as an embodiment of the feminine. In her early works, Irigaray suggests that the feminine, in phallogentrism, is not actualized (and perhaps will never

opens up to nonhierarchical difference, and in which the feminine tendencies of life could become actualized. Even before this last scene, the film as a whole appears to be invested in the creation of an interval of difference in relation to Ada, as we, the spectators, are ceaselessly trying and always failing to reach her. This movement toward her (and simultaneous distance from her) begins with the near touch of her hands in the opening sequence, continues with Stewart's and Baines's failure to possess her, and ends under water, in a scene that marks the incompressible nature of the distance that separates her most intimate self from the expectations of the world. At the very moment when we think that we have finally grasped her, that a form of closure has been reached and that she is, after all, a very common woman, satisfied by the simple joys of married life, her true, mysterious depth comes forth one last time to defeat our delusional sense of conclusion. The aquatic scene can thus be seen as the culmination of the movie's continual preoccupation with distance as Ada's propensity for withdrawal becomes literal.

This movement-distance in relation to Ada is epitomized in the piano itself, to which she is attached in the very last sequence. The piano, as that which comes in between Ada and the outside world to express her creativity, can perhaps be seen as a material figuration of the interval. She uses her piano to navigate complex emotions: when we see her play a few notes on the beach upon her arrival on the island after a harrowing journey, she looks briefly comforted. She plays with profound glee, a few scenes later, when Baines brings her and Flora to the beach where Stewart has left the piano; and with anger when she wards off Baines' advances with an abrupt gigue. This inner expression is also deeply sensual, and she at times appears to have departed

be) but remains a force that makes woman constantly overflow the contours that have been assigned to her by a model designed according to the interests of male bodies.

entirely, her gaze lost, and her body reveling in the power of the instrument. In other words, Ada, as an artist and a woman, uses her piano to establish a space where she can come into her own.

Her playing also forms a mode of communication with others, evoking her most intimate life to whoever can or wants to hear it. Tellingly, Stewart is very suspicious of the piano and understands its importance to Ada before he has even heard her play, as he immediately decides to deprive her of it upon their very first meeting on the beach. As an insecure, conservative Victorian man who believes it his duty to master those he deems below him, he cannot allow his wife to enjoy a domain from which he is barred, be it by his own narrow mind-frame. Conversely, Baines begins to fall in love with Ada as he listens to her playing on the beach, presumably touched by the richness of her inner world. Although his love will soon prove to be very problematic, far from the openness to sexual difference that Irigaray advocates, the piano serves to create an encounter between them from which such an interval could perhaps have emerged. That Ada decides to throw her piano overboard when she embarks on her new life with Baines further underscores its function as the locus of her singularity and her mode of forging unusual relations: What purpose would it serve now that she is starting a more conventional lifestyle? Beyond the narrative itself, the purpose of her music is to draw spectators to Ada but without allowing them to grasp her, pointing as it does to nebulous emotions without ever revealing her thoughts with precision. Therefore, her playing captures the main pleasure of the film, which is also that of the interval: to move in the direction of an other who, at once close and distant, remains beyond one's grasp.

The movement of the interval that brings us toward Ada can also be traced in the camerawork, and in particular in the film's dominant aesthetic motif, the close-up. The latter, more than any other technique, intensifies one of the fundamental pleasures of cinema: it presents viewers with a constant "almost" that never finishes its curve, since the object to which the camera gets closer can never be touched. Although I can sense acutely what is represented on the screen, I can actually never touch it. The pictured object is so near that I can almost grab it or smell it, its sheer size, usually so much bigger than its actual referent, is overwhelming, and my desire for it can be as genuine as for a real body, but it remains eternally out-of-reach. The close-up therefore is about non-satisfaction, it is an irrepressible sensual experience that remains slightly frustrating because it can never be consummated: the object can never be grasped, the moment can never be captured, one's amazement can only last as long as the shot does. Like the interval, this is a pleasure of the "almost."¹⁷

In *The Piano*, the use of the close-up is sensual and can only be understood through references to its main character. Indeed, what better way than this "almost" to represent a character such as the always-elusive Ada? The technique is, from the very beginning, intimately connected to her: the first two shots of the movie, which were famously analyzed by Vivian Sobchack (*Thoughts* 63), figure two hands shot from such proximity as to become almost spectral. These, a reverse shot in close-up reveals, are a

¹⁷ Many film scholars have theorized the close-up. Sergei Eisenstein, for example, saw it as an ideal support for signification in film, directing the viewer's attention to a specific crucial detail that would enhance his or her capacity for analysis. Conversely, theorists like Jean Epstein, who were fascinated by close-ups in Hollywood films, have tended to focus on their ability to suggest closeness and knowledge of interiority. Mary Ann Doane offers a history of the theorization of the close-up in "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema."

point-of-view shot of Ada's own hands. This short sequence captures some essential elements of the movie. First, it anticipates the rest of the film for being an effect of her perspective, the close-up is attached to the character of Ada. We see the world of *The Piano* through her eyes: sometimes literally, through the numerous point-of-view shots, and in general because the whole world of the film is a function of her character. Indeed, her suppleness radiates everywhere, and even the abject is absorbed into beauty (recall, for instance, Flora being sick on the beach or Ada's greasy hair, neither of which is presented as repulsive). Ada is the force that sustains the movie and defines its aesthetics. The close-ups in *The Piano* reflect the way she goes about exploring the world: intimately and wordlessly. In other words, they form a way for the film to emulate Ada's largely tactile and intuitive mode of being and to let the spectator engage with the intimacy of her experience. Since the close-up is bound up in an incompressible distance, it is, like the interval and like Ada, best captured by an oxymoron—an insuperable closeness.

How different is this movement toward Ada from the one of the most tired phallogentric tropes, that of the elusive female other who attracts the subject's gaze and his desire but can never be captured?¹⁸ In a sense, they are very similar: the interval is predicated on the persistence of the other's mystery, and the limitations of cinema make the present instance of the interval inherently non-reciprocal, as Ada can not operate toward us, the viewers, the same movement that we engage in her direction. As that which is beheld, she is placed in a position of passivity in relation to our gaze. Yet the

¹⁸ For example, in film, Mary Ann Doane has shown this trope to be typified by the figure of the femme fatale (*Femmes Fatales* 99-118). In continental philosophy, Christine Battersby notes that Kant's understanding of nature as an ungraspable sublime infinity is feminized (93).

film strongly resists an objectifying portrayal of its protagonist. Instead, in an echo to Irigaray's spatial definition of subjecthood in "Le lieu, l'intervalle," *The Piano* focuses on Ada having and keeping a place of her own.

First, Ada creates a territory of her own through her art, diving as she does into the recesses of her soul while playing. It is primarily her artistry that typifies her as a more profound character than any other in the film. But for Ada to enjoy her own territory challenges woman's fundamental function in phallocentrism, which is to serve as a space where man can fantasize a return to the womb in heterosexual intercourse, and beyond sex, where he can elaborate himself as the norm against which all differences are to be measured. Since the primary place for any subject is the envelope of her own body, it is not surprising that the question of Ada's physical integrity is crucial: her subversion of phallocentric spatial norms is countered, through sexual violence, in a way that reaffirms them. Therefore, we are constantly led to ask ourselves: Is she going to get raped? When? And by whom? Further, the movie brings the imperative for Ada to claim her *lieu* into relief by centering on her pursuit of her own desire, as her initially distressing piano lessons with Baines turn into an exploration of love and eroticism. In sum, rather than being an object of desire, one that would function as a spatial expanse for the other to occupy, Ada is presented as a subject who must protect her own sensuality and resist being reduced to a target for male lust.

The Piano dramatizes the very problem of the objectification of women and undermines the conventions of the cinematic gaze. These, as Laura Mulvey pointed out in her well-known essay, connote woman as "to-be-looked-at-ness" ("Visual Pleasure" 19), an object to be appropriated by the male gaze so the threat (of castration) that she

represents for man can be kept in check. The architecture of looking operates differently in *The Piano*. Feona Attwood notes that Ada's voice is disembodied, as it is never to be found where it would be expected (coming out of her mouth), but is rather located in voice-overs, sign language, her music, written notes, or in gestures and Flora's translations. "[T]hese displacements," Attwood suggests, "work to disrupt synchronicity and make a kind of gap in [Ada's] positioning as insufficient, known, lacking [...]" This serves to position her as inaccessible to a male gaze, while investing her disembodied voice with authority" (Attwood 88). Ada cannot be captured by the usual modalities of phallic vision because she cannot be known by them. Instead, her voice and her modes of expression dominate the film and they put the spectator in a position of curiosity and eagerness toward this puzzling other, who is female and yet does not appear to "lack" (which brings Stewart to castrate her symbolically) and whose modalities of communication are deeply sensual.

Irigaray's distinction between two forms of straight sexual encounter in "Le lieu, l'intervalle" resonates with these two modes of vision. In the phallogentric mode, male desire wishes for possession and intra-uterine regression, the elimination of the space between I and the other, and thus the denial of the place of the other. In other words, it aspires to cross over and abolish the interval. In the regime of difference, penetration is no longer a piercing through, a denial of woman's singularity, but a place of intense encounter, in which desire both grounds each partner in her or his own place and goes toward the other through porosity (*Éthique* 55). Instead of destroying the other's envelope, the enveloping becomes mutual.

In *The Piano*, what prevails is the “transport” that characterizes the movement of the interval. Irigaray writes that, “[p]our que la rencontre soit possible entre homme et femme, il faut que chacun soit un lieu, aussi approprié pour et à l’autre, et vers lequel il ou elle soit transporté(e)” (“for the encounter to be possible between man and woman, each needs to be a place, also appropriate for and to the other, and to which he or she is transported”; *Éthique* 46). Rather than driving us to desire possessing Ada, *The Piano* excites our interest for her: since she does not speak, we must approach her through intuition and the senses. This attunement to her mysterious world is quite literal, as it happens largely through listening to her music. The impossibility of capturing her spirit while being irresistibly transported to it forms the main pleasure of the film, underlined by the consistent use of the close-up and the other filmic elements that conjure up at once a sense of closeness and distance.

1.4. Violent Spaces

The uninvasive wonderment induced by her character, which in an Irigarayan reading is inscribed within a sexual economy that affirms two subjects, contrasts with the pervasiveness of sexual violence, present everywhere in the movie, under the surface of things, ubiquitous yet unspoken. Ada lives in a very phallocentric milieu, in which sexual violence pervades and infects all intimate relationships between men and women. It is there when Ada is married off to a man she does not know; it is there, if only potentially so, in her interactions with the sailors when she first arrives in New Zealand; in Stewart’s insistence that he has rights over her body. And of course, it is everywhere in Baines’s arrangement. This movie is thus constituted on the basis of these two contradictory,

irreconcilable tendencies: on the one hand, admiration at a distance, and on the other, sexual violence and masochism.

Campion sees violence not only as ubiquitous and but also as that which gives its shape to straight sexuality, both in its passion and its horror, as abuse morphs seamlessly into love through a complicated network of relationships in which victims and perpetrators can be difficult to distinguish from each other, as both Baines and Stewart end up being victimized in some capacity, and Ada emerges with a measure of power. One particular scene in *The Piano*, in which Baines proposes his bargain to Ada, provides an intriguing illustration of this ambivalence between love, sensuality, and domination. The sequence opens with a view of Flora excitedly trying to hurt a dog with a stick through a hole on Baines's patio. The dog is underneath the elevated porch, and Flora is moving the stick up and down the hole, hoping to reach the animal. Inside, sheltered from the pouring rain, Ada is playing the piano for Baines. We see him move toward her, then a close-up reveals his large, powerful hand on her neck. He attempts to kiss her; she is horrified. He offers her the deal to get her piano back, to which Ada reluctantly agrees. She starts playing again, after having negotiated a favor for a key (it seems that she will lift her skirt). We are then back on the porch, but this time we see Flora cuddling the dog, saying "poor baby," commiserating with its plight. In spite of the profound differences between the two characters, Flora, like Baines, is both the aggressor and the lover: she assaults the dog, brutally enforces her power, but later appears to be gentle and caring. The diametrical ambivalence of her relation to the animal brackets the very scene where

Baines reveals for the first time his willingness to make use of his bargaining power for sexual favors and anticipates his later conversion into a loving, respectful partner.¹⁹

Campion sees sexual violence not only as ubiquitous and but also as that which gives its shape to straight sexuality, both in its passion and its horror, as abuse morphs seamlessly into love through a complicated network of relationships. *The Piano* composes a play of connivances between heterosexual love and the trappings of phallocentrism: Ada is an ambivalent character who partakes not only of autonomy and the possibility of an actualization of the feminine, but also of a predilection for masochism and traditional patterns of desire, as she falls in love with a man whose courtship was fueled by the imposition of his material and phallic power on her. Sue Gillett has produced an influential account of sexual violence in *The Piano* based on Irigaray, in which she argues that *The Piano* forms an example of what Irigaray calls “the market of women” (a metaphor for the patriarchal economy of desire) as Ada functions as a commodity exchanged between men. However, Gillett contends that this economy breaks down when Baines realizes that he does not want to dominate Ada but rather wants her to desire him, and she sees *The Piano* as an “attempt to envision an economy of sexual difference in which a woman's desire is able to circulate” (285). Therefore, Gillett insists that Baines’ behavior cannot be equated with rape or harassment. However, while I agree with her that Baines is not a rapist, the film does extensively blur the boundaries between consent and violation. Ada herself harbors a double nature, as both an autonomous woman and one who surrenders to another’s coercive desire.

¹⁹ Campion uses ironic parallelisms such as this one throughout the movie to underline key points (for instance, the settlers organize a production of *Bluebeard* that anticipates Ada’s mutilation at the hands of her own husband).

In the chapter “This Sex Which is Not One” of the eponymous book, Irigaray offers a new way of looking at female sexuality, through a critique of the psychoanalytical version of sexual difference. She shows that the way that femininity has been conceptualized by psychoanalysis is profoundly phallogentric: Freud has thought female sexuality through a paradigm that takes the male body as the standard for all human bodies, and assessed others in relation to it. One can argue, as sympathetic feminists have done (for instance, Juliet Mitchell), that his analysis is not prescriptive, but descriptive. And indeed, Freud does not suggest that women should envy men, but simply notes that they do. However, Irigaray shows that even a generous reading of Freud misses the mark, because what is at stake here goes beyond the observable oppression of women, to encompass a thorough repression of the feminine and of difference at large. As I suggested earlier, she argues that the world in which we live has relegated the feminine to virtuality and made woman unknown to herself because the specificity of her body has been ignored. Therefore, the violence that Freud does to women is not so much to propose that they envy men, which they may do since they are oppressed and unaware of who they are, but to ignore the singularity of their morphology. Instead of thinking women on the basis of their own bodies, psychoanalysis, and beyond it, all phallogentric discourse, has envisaged them as complementary, inferior, or contrary to male bodies (Grosz, *Subversions* 112). This fallacious conceptualization has had profound implications for women have become ignorant of themselves, unable to let their subjectivities blossom in accordance with their physical grounding and the specificity of their morphology. Women are, therefore, alienated in ways that are so entrenched, so vicious, that they have forgotten the very possibility of the production of difference.

What Irigaray proposes to do is thus to look at women's bodies, carefully, closely, and also creatively since woman, women remain to be brought into the world.

If a woman's body is conceived of in its singularity, if her vagina is not thought of as "un sexe masculin retourné autour de lui-même" ("a masculine sex turned back around itself"; *Ce sexe* 23), what then are its traits? What is her pleasure when we look beyond the pervasive imperiousness of man's jouissance? Irigaray does not give a definite answer, but as I noted earlier, she notes that woman touches herself continually: the lips that constitute her sex are in constant contact, and the pleasure that she derives from this ceaseless self-affection happens without mediation, beyond activity and passivity. She proposes nearness as that which gives its contours to female sexuality:

La femme resterait toujours plusieurs, mais gardée de la dispersion parce que l'autre est déjà en elle et lui est auto-érotiquement familier. Ce qui n'est pas dire qu'elle se l'approprie, qu'elle le réduit en sa propriété. Le propre, la propriété sont, sans doute, assez étrangers au féminin. Du moins sexuellement. Mais non *le proche*. Le si proche que toute discrimination d'identité en devient impossible. Donc toute forme de propriété. La femme jouit d'un *si proche qu'elle ne peut l'avoir, ni s'avoir*. Elle s'échange elle-même sans cesse avec l'autre sans identification possible de l'un(e) ou l'autre. (*Ce sexe* 30, emphasis in the text)

Woman would always remain several, but kept from dispersion because the other is already in her and is auto-erotically familiar to her. Which is not to say that she appropriates it, that she reduces it to her property. Ownership, property are, without a doubt, rather alien to the feminine. At least sexually. But not *the near*. The so near that any discrimination of identity becomes impossible. Thus any form of property. Woman enjoys a *so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself*. She exchanges herself ceaselessly with the other without any possible identification of one or the other.

Irigaray's discussion of touch is the closest she ever gets to a definition of the feminine beyond phallocentrism, but this definition is itself a product of its own ambiguity as "*le proche*" may be seen as a suggestion that the contours of woman's desire remain unknown. They are close by, but not captured. So rather than a definition of women's

desire, it appears to be an approximation, a nearing that resists the imposition of a strict definition.

In contrast to woman's nearness, "l'homme... a besoin d'un instrument pour se toucher: sa main, le sexe de la femme, le langage..." ("man... needs an instrument to touch himself: his hand, woman's sex, language..." *Ce sexe* 24). What marks sexual difference for Irigaray can thus be thought of spatially, in terms of proximity and distance: woman is morphologically closer to herself than man, her lips' constant touching forms her auto-eroticism, a mode of being in herself and to the world that diverges profoundly from phallogentric definitions of what constitutes sexuality and from the way a man may experience his own body. Instead of relying on a logic of penetration, the lips' perpetual embrace is marked by intimacy and nearness. Irigaray thus opens the way to a reconceptualization of sexuality, beyond a mythical and deceitful concept of complementarity between the bodies of men and women, against which she proposes difference as the foundational principle of any attempt to think the sexes.²⁰

Irigaray suggests that what woman could be, hopefully will become, will grow with and through her body from the sheltered, silent touching of her sex, just as man emerges from his own specific body. Woman's virtuality, however, is yet to be actualized as phallogentrism forces its violent logic upon her. Once again, Irigaray pursues her analysis in spatial terms:

[L]e suspens de cet auto-érotisme s'opère dans l'effraction violente: l'écartement brutal de ces deux lèvres par un pénis violeur. Ce qui déporte et dévoie la femme de cette "auto-affection" dont elle a besoin pour ne pas encourir la disparition de son plaisir dans le rapport sexuel. (*Ce sexe* 24)

²⁰ She confirms this insight in her later work on the interval, which does not so much imply a predisposition to harmony between woman and man, as it invites a simultaneous process of attunement to oneself and of opening to the sexuate other.

[t]he suspension of this auto-eroticism occurs in the violent effraction: the brutal moving apart of these two lips by a violating penis. Which deports woman and leads her astray, away from this “self-affection” that she needs if she is not to incur the disparition of her pleasure in the sexual relation.

The autoeroticism of woman is, metaphorically, constantly interrupted as phallocentrism, the force that estranges her from herself, functions like a “violating penis.” Irigaray suggests implicitly that the intrusive operation of phallocentrism is isomorphic to rape for its engagement with women forms a series of variations on the fundamental estrangement that separates woman from herself through a violent moving apart of the lips. Irigaray thereby redefines sexual violence: instead of being limited to forceful penetration and its avatars (such as sexual harassment, catcalls, and the standardization of female beauty), it comes to encompass the very obliteration of femininity in phallocentrism.

It is worth noting that Irigaray does not consider all heterosexual relationships to be embedded in violence. In “Le lieu, l’intervalle” she gives a different picture of what a heterosexual encounter could be: one that would be produced by the close distance of the interval, and in which the vagina, far from being seen as a passive receptacle, would be recognized in its active nature, and in which both woman and man would enjoy a proper place. The alienating moving apart of the lips is thus not a mechanism of violation inherent to straight sex, but one that is produced by phallocentrism. However, similarly to Campion, Irigaray shows sexual violence to be pervasive within a phallic economy of desire and to taint heterosexual relations, even consensual ones. For instance, she writes that,

[l]a femme, dans cet imaginaire sexuel, n’est que support, plus ou moins complaisant, à la mise en acte des fantasmes de l’homme. Qu’elle y trouve, par procuration, de la jouissance, c’est possible et même certain. Mais celle-ci est

avant tout prostitution masochiste de son corps à un désir qui n'est pas le sien. (*Ce sexe* 25)

Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is no more than a more or less obliging prop to the enactment of man's fantasies. That she would find *jouissance* in it, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But the latter is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not hers.

In this passage, Irigaray does not deny that women may find pleasure in their sexual relations with men within phallocentrism (indeed, she argues that they often do). But this pleasure is not a woman's own, only a parasitical engagement, in the passive mode, with another body's desire. *The Piano*'s initial portrayal of the romance between Baines and Ada is disturbing because it echoes Irigaray's theory: in Ada's love affair with Baines, it is his desire that shapes the relationship and his force that seduces her. Her pleasure is an offshoot of his.

Irigaray puts the very possibility of consent into question. To what could woman truly say yes if she does not know what she wants? *The Piano*, as we have seen, raises similar concerns. I agree with Gillett's astute observation that Baines ultimately realizes that "his desire is for her desire" (282) and not for domination. Yet desire, regardless of how we choose to assess the male character, originates in Baines, not in Ada. It is not a spontaneous and independent expression of her eroticism but a deliberately submissive response to the violence of his. Further, it is impossible to tell at what point abuse turns into consent since we do not know exactly when Ada ceases to resent Baines's caresses. Certainly, Ada chooses Baines after he has put an end to the sordid arrangement. But she must have found a form of pleasure in being demeaned, since she falls in love with him. However felicitous the outcome, Baines's deal with Ada remains deeply uncomfortable: her ultimate pleasure only reveals that she does not know what she wants, beyond his

overbearing desire. Echoing Irigaray, Campion lets the shadow of violation hover above the affair.

Irigaray proposes a feminist ethics of proximity and remoteness, as opposed to the logic of conquest, which forms the mode of phallocentrism. In spatial terms, Irigaray aims at replacing the phallogentric binary of estrangement and invasion, which is aligned with violation and the negation of the feminine, with the imperceptible movement between distance and nearness (i.e. the vibration of the interval). In *The Piano*, the narrative tension revolves around threats to the heroine's physical integrity.²¹ Spatiality becomes a field of usurping, conquering, penetrating forces as Campion suggests that sexual violence is at the heart of heterosexual erotics, pervading as it does the two relationships of the movie, between Ada and her husband and between Ada and Baines. But Campion also develops a feminist ethics that is grounded in closeness and distance, as Ada's characterization relies principally upon the alternation between the intimacy of the close-up and the unattainable distance of her being. The nearness of the lips finds a correspondence in that of the close-up: like the lips, it is invested in a "*proche*" toward which it moves, but never captures. Similarly, the unknowable nature of Irigaray's woman resonates with Ada's mysterious intent. Both the philosopher and the filmmaker produce a thinking of space that distinguishes between an invasive relation to the world (one that goes hand in hand with alienation) and one that privileges the distance/nearness that enables both autonomy and intimacy. Further, Campion's split character (Ada's

²¹ It should be noted that these threats to Ada's body are echoed in the very context of the film, the colonization of New Zealand, as both evoke an invasive intrusion. However, properly accounting for Campion's very controversial treatment of racial and colonial relations would lead us too far away from the virtual dialogue between Campion and Irigaray that this chapter establishes. For further reflections, see, among others, Dyson, Reid, and McHugh.

masochism and her independence) echoes Irigaray's contention that phallogentrism estranges woman from herself, although Campion's language, which is filmic rather than philosophical, brings her to very different modes of expression.

1.5. Melodramatic Subversions

The Piano uses not only camera techniques to bring us toward Ada, but also generic conventions, through which it makes us believe, briefly, that we can understand her. The film respects the style of classical cinema and does not depart from continuity editing (that is, spatial continuity is respected through the 180° system). In particular, Campion makes use of a whole array of standard Hollywood techniques that have traditionally served to give the spectator access to the character's subjectivity, thereby gesturing toward endowing Ada with a certain legibility and giving us the (always frustrated) illusion that we can understand her. For instance, many of the close-ups in the film are coded as point-of-view or over-the-shoulder shots, which have been used in classical cinema to give the viewer access to a character's mind: we see what Ada sees. Similarly, *The Piano* is rife with eyeline matches in which shot B shows us what the character in shot A (typically Ada) had been looking at. Further, the movie makes ample use of the combined effects of selective focus and high key lighting in shots where the background is dark and blurred and the focus is on Ada's face and its mysterious intent. Music, whether diegetic or nondiegetic (i.e. coming from inside or outside the story world), has also been a staple of classical cinema used to inform us about the mental state of a character. *The Piano* is no exception, and the rich musical texture that it creates is consistently associated with Ada's moods and sentiments. In short, the film resorts to a

plethora of techniques that have been used in classical cinema to bring the spectator inside, as it were, a character's mind.

But of course, as I have previously shown *The Piano* never lets us understand Ada, and in fact, the film only engages with these conventions ironically: we may see what Ada sees, but we still cannot grasp her the subtleties of her emotions. Unlike traditional Hollywood characters, Ada cannot be deciphered: we get to approach her states of mind, we get a sense of what they are, but we can never identify them precisely. One particular sequence illustrates this tension in a remarkable way: early in the movie, we see Ada looking from the top of a cliff at her piano left on the beach. The camera, in an over-the-shoulder shot, zooms in past Ada, her ribbon still fluttering in the lower part of the screen. In this shot as in many others, we see what Ada sees. But this one stands out because it is properly speaking an impossible point-of-view shot as the camera sees *past* Ada's vision (the human eye, unfortunately, cannot zoom in). This shot thus illustrates the function of point-of-view shots in *The Piano*, and beyond them, of all the techniques from classical cinema supposed to produce legibility and to give us access to Ada's mind in the film: they give us the delusion that we can grasp her, but the distance between her and us actually remains in place. We do not see what Ada sees. In fact, these classical techniques lure us in, they attract us to Ada, make us want to grasp her, but inexorably keep us at bay, making the movie resonate with Irigaray's interval.

Hence, rather than engaging with classical cinema, and in particular with the genre of melodrama, in an uncomplicated way, *The Piano* ceaselessly subverts its conventions. As Richard Allen notes, "*The Piano* adopts the conventions of the gothic melodrama: the mute heroine of the film suffers at the hands of the patriarch Stewart, she

is punished for her transgressive desires; and she is finally ‘rescued’ by her prince Baines. Yet these conventions are adopted in order to be subverted, for the ‘madness’ of the heroine is valorized and given a voice” (45). One well-known element of the melodramatic genre is its predilection for highly emotional plots (cf. “the weepies”), not infrequently accompanied by the death of the heroine. In a roundabout way, *Campion* makes her heroine die too for Ada’s submarine world, the coda of the film, is closely tied to death. But death here is not a tearjerker. In fact, it is not even inscribed within a register of emotions that includes joy and sadness, which would relate this scene to melodrama by associating death to loss or relief (for instance, from pain). Rather, Ada’s world is radically outside the sentimental conventions of melodrama. Its affects are linked to the abyssal, the haunting, the unfathomable, and far from triggering a sense of closeness and sympathy to the character, they mark the impenetrability of Ada’s being and the dark, mysterious distance that keeps her safe. This death-like world thus brings to the fore one last time the tension that has run across the film between melodramatic conventions and their constant subversion. At the same time, this generic subversion is also close to Irigaray, as it brings to the fore the autonomy of the main female character.

However, if a discourse that is close to Irigaray’s work is prevalent in *Campion*’s film, it remains necessary to resist the temptation of conflating their work beyond their natural analogies. Their projects differ in important ways, and it is not my intention to impose Irigaray’s work on *Campion*, nor to make *Campion* appear to be more of a philosopher than she is (indeed, nothing suggests that she is familiar with Irigaray’s work). In particular, whereas it is clear that phallogentric space is marked as negative in Irigaray, it is not so evident in *Campion* for in *The Piano*, it is from abuse that love and

desire emerge. An analysis of genre, which as I have just shown reveals resonances between Campion and Irigaray's projects, can also be used to point to their divergences.

Campion cannot be categorized straightforwardly as a feminist filmmaker: although her films have been championed by feminists for "their depiction of strong female characters rebelling against the roles expected of them by patriarchal society" (Hopgood), she has also been vilified by quite a few feminist critics (most notably, Barbara Johnson in "Muteness Envy") for her depiction of gender relations. Here is what Campion herself said about feminism in an interview: "This whole discussion is too limited. I am interested in life as a whole. Even if my representation of female characters has a feminist structure, this is nevertheless only one aspect of my approach" (Wexman 87). What interests Campion is not to produce manifestos against women's oppression, but to seek to account for all human behaviors. Her sympathies therefore go not only to victims, but also often to the perpetrators. Hence, feminism cannot be the only critical tool used to understand her work. I do not mean that her work is not implicated politically within networks of signification (that would be impossible), but that what drives Campion's filmmaking is an attempt at providing a multiplicity of perspectives, rather than at conveying a political message.²² Further, like her parents, who aimed at creating a smart popular theater in New Zealand,²³ Campion wants to make movies that are not only

²² It is worth noting that, in spite of the genre's predilection for ambiguity, this is far from being the case for all art cinema (cf. certain films by Chantal Akerman, Jean-Luc Godard, etc. that are decidedly political).

²³ Campion was born in 1954 to a prominent family in the world of New Zealand theater: her father, Richard, was a theater director and a producer, and her mother, Edith, to whom *The Piano* is dedicated, was a writer as well as an actress. The couple was instrumental in the development of a national theater in New Zealand: they founded two companies, both crucial to the history of theater on the islands, with the goal of creating a national theater that would be at once "genuine and popular" (McHugh, *Campion* 4), and

intelligent, but also entertaining and effective emotionally, and to that effect, she resorts to (and complicates) many of the generic conventions of melodrama.

With *The Piano*, Campion departs from more unambiguously feminist films such as, for instance, Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, by insisting on the vulnerability of her male characters: Stewart and Baines are both sensitive men who become overtaken by their emotions and find themselves at the mercy of their love for a woman. The male characters appear in their complexity and we are thus very far from the figure of the sexual predator as evil incarnate. This is especially true of Stewart, who, although he tries on two occasions to rape his wife, is also shown to be a sexually vulnerable man. In one particular sequence of scenes, Stewart, who has been trying, and failing, to attract his wife's love and attention, wakes up at night to find her gently stroking his face. His face denotes at once desire and hope, as well as fear and confusion. She fondles his chest, but recoils as he tries to kiss her. She is back in his room the following night, caressing his back as he lies prone on his bed. The camera focuses on the movement of her hands as she lays bare his buttocks, exposing them in a tender close-up. Stewart is panting in humiliation and pleasure. He tries to cover them but she undresses them again, and runs her fingers between his cheeks. Finally, Stewart, ashamed and confused, pulls up his pants, sits and asks his wife in despair why she will not let him touch her and if she does not like him. She stares back at him, and her mute gaze suggests that she is both incapable and unwilling to respond.

that would embrace the following principles: "To present the best plays of all kinds and, while not pandering to box office appeal, not to present plays [that] cause loss of touch with the audience" (Simpson 75, qtd in McHugh, *Campion* 4). This is precisely the kind of delicate balance that Campion has been treading in all her feature films.

Campion has insisted in interviews that Stewart is a “sex object” (Wexman 109) for Ada, who objectifies her husband as a means to explore her own desire. Her masochism, upon which I have elaborated earlier in this chapter, is thus matched by a measure of sadism. Ada’s caresses in these scenes are excruciating for him for they are too much opposed to traditional gender roles, especially since she will not let him touch her in return. Stewart may be depicted elsewhere as selfish and conservative but his faults derive from his sense of entitlement, duty even, to act according to the standards of his day. From this perspective, his main crime is not so much to try to rape his wife, not even to chop off one of her fingers, but to indulge in the hypocritical comfort that enables him to not question the legitimacy of his position. In the words of Sue Gillett, “[h]e is presented as an 'ordinary' man trying to live in conformity with his culture, driven to his actions by the 'ordinary' demands of his Western rational masculinity, demands that he experience his sexed identity through an acquisitive, proprietorial relationship to nature, women and other races.” (286). Further, for Ann Hardy, he is “a sad man whose myth has run out of validity and, through him, one effect of Campion’s film appears to be to make simple nonsense of the idea that there is a central, male source of meaning and power.” (82). Hence Stewart is not presented as a psycho-pathological misogynist, but rather as a man who does not realize that he himself is getting hurt by the very system that ensures his supremacy; that his emotions, and in particular his powerlessness, cannot be reconciled with the figure that he is supposed, and fails to, incarnate, i.e. the rational guardian of both patriarchy and the Empire.

Baines is also shown to be vulnerable and despite the very masculine strength of his body (which we know quite well since Campion clearly enjoys showing him naked),

he is at the mercy of Ada's love for him. We are expected to understand, in retrospect, that this was the case even when he was imposing the ignominious bargain on her: "The arrangement," he tells her as he is calling it off, "is making you a whore and me wretched. I want you to care for me, but you can't." One interesting aspect of this scene is Baines's disarming honesty: it seems that until then, he had sincerely believed that sexual coercion was going to lead Ada to fall in love with him and is genuinely surprised when he realizes that she had a strong dislike of it at the same time as it seduced her. The film leaves open two possible interpretations: either Baines is very lucky, and Ada falls in love with him in spite of his roughness when she understands that he is in fact a very sensitive man. Or he senses intuitively that in a phallic libidinal economy, it is by demeaning her that he will find the key to her desire, for it is grounded in masochism. This strategy would be pre-conscious because he is a genial character,²⁴ and nothing in the film suggests that he deliberately seeks to manipulate Ada. However, in a narrative in which heterosexual relationships are so heavily rooted in violence, it is far from impossible that Baines would have an intuitive understanding of Ada's masochistic tendencies. Regardless, Baines is moved by sincere feelings and a profound devotion to Ada, with whom he seems to fall in love at the beginning of the movie when he is enchanted by the sight of her playing the piano on the beach. The film flirts between a condemnation of his acts and an eroticization of him as a sexy and powerful man, which conceals the sexual politics upon which his courtship have rested. At the end of the film, which pictures the couple's life in Nelson, his sexual aggression is elided, and the

²⁴ As a marker of his probity, Baines demonstrates a much greater openness of mind than any of the other colonizers as he has befriended several Maoris and learned to speak one the Maori languages. It is also suggested that he has started a ritualistic process, perhaps one of initiation, as he has an unfinished tribal tattoos on his face.

innocence of heterosexual romance is restored as his strength becomes the sign of the honesty of his passion. But the film, of course, does not end in Nelson. Ada's independence, her ability to fulfill her own needs, find their full force in the very last under-water sequence. What thus ultimately prevails in *The Piano* is not its flirtation with more or less traditional gender roles, but the possibility of a space form which woman could actualize herself.

Yet Campion's sympathetic treatment of sexually violent male characters begs for further investigation. In "Muteness Envy," Barbara Johnson problematizes Campion's sympathetic view of patriarchal masculinity in *The Piano*. In an astute critical move, Johnson traces the poet's envy of silence, often feminized and described as superior to words, through key examples in the history of Western literature, and shows its collusion with sexual violence. Like Irigaray in her critique of Aristotle in "Le lieu, l'intervalle," Johnson focuses on the ambivalent metaphor of the receptacle: the fate of Keats's urn in the "Ode to a Grecian Urn" is to be "ravished," which "can mean either 'raped' or 'sent into ecstasy'" (134). She shows that "the work performed by the idealization of this silence is that *it helps culture not to be able to tell the difference between the two*" (137, emphasis in the text), a trait which is quite prominent in *The Piano*, where the spectator does not know at what precise moment Ada's disgust at Baines's bargain changes into actual desire. Coextensive with this blurring of woman's pleasure and violation is men's insistence on being considered victims. Commenting on the emotional vulnerability of the male character in *The Piano*, she writes, "[i]t is in this male two-step—the axe wielder plus the manipulative sufferer, *both* of whom see themselves as powerless—that patriarchal power lies" (153). Johnson challenges the double binaries of

masculine/feminine and dominator/victim, and asserts that patriarchal power actually resides in its own capacity to wallow in self-pity and claim the victim status for itself.

Linda Williams, in “The American Melodramatic Mode,” offers a thought-provoking framework from which to reflect upon Johnson’s analysis of sexual politics in *The Piano*. Williams argues, along with Gledhill, that melodrama has been erroneously categorized as a feminine, excessive genre, opposed to “masculine” genres such as western and gangster films. Instead, she proposes to view it as a pervasive modality that is present in a wide variety of genres, “as what most often typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film, and television when it seeks to engage with moral questions. It is the best example of American culture’s (often hypocritical) attempt to construct itself as the locus of innocence and virtue.” (Williams 17).

Following Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Williams shows melodrama’s foremost trait to be its predilection for moral legibility: in a modern world where moral ambiguity is ubiquitous, the function of melodrama is to provide the viewer with certainty. Its main mode of conveying clarity is through pathos, that which evokes pity, as suffering becomes aligned with innocence. Williams thus demonstrates that claiming the victim status, of which Johnson accuses the male characters of *The Piano*, is in itself a melodramatic move: melodrama hinges on moral revelation, and it is suffering that endows a character with moral legitimacy (Williams 44). Further, emotional and/or physical pain, especially when it is highly visible, is not only a proof of virtue, but also has the function of feminizing the character with which it is endowed since it is tied to powerlessness (Williams 29). Both Stewart and Baines are thus closely aligned with melodramatic conventions and able to partake in the role of the victim, even as they are

harassing or torturing Ada, for their pain washes them from their sins and endows them with the innocence that is conferred to sufferers in melodramatic narratives. It is worth noting that Ada herself is not victimized: she displays a remarkable degree of strength and composure throughout the film. Most notably, she does not cry or even contort her face when Stewart chops off her finger.

In this respect, Johnson further shows that the film does not direct us to question the structure of the sexual politics in which these characters evolve. We are led to be satisfied to see Ada being taken away by the man she loves and assume that he will henceforth behave in a decent manner. What is ultimately occulted, what should but does not make us angry, is Ada's thorough powerlessness, the fact that she is at no point effectively in a position to make her own decisions regarding her life, because Victorian patriarchy has made it impossible for her to be in the least materially autonomous. Yet, instead of objecting to this terrible injustice, we are encouraged to focus on the respective behaviors of Stewart and Baines and "value the better of the two men" (Johnson 148). Rather than soliciting our capacity for indignation, rather than foregrounding and sustaining the terrible antagonistic forces that Ada has to confront, *The Piano* tends toward the resolution of conflicts, and in this too it resonates deeply with melodrama.

Like myths, the purpose of most popular narratives is to reconcile opposite tendencies and to solve basic contradictions.²⁵ In particular, *The Piano* seems to fulfill the compulsion of melodrama "to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return" (Williams 37). This contradictory movement is crucial to understand how the

²⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that the resolution of contradictions is the foremost function of myths in "The Structural Study of Myth."

movie functions. The problem here is the gendered violence that is at the heart of heterosexual seduction in patriarchy: what entices Ada, who, like virtually all of Campion's heroines, displays strong masochistic tendencies, is the (masculine) power that Baines uses to seduce her. This force is at odds with the reverence for the loved one that romantic love entails. At the end of the film, brutal sensuality has morphed for good into romantic love, as Baines's force has come to mark the strength of his love for her. Reconciliation has been achieved, conflicts are erased, the powers that worked against love are vanquished. Brooks and Williams note that melodrama tends to constitute the home as an icon of innocence, and usually ends in one. And indeed, in *The Piano*, the penultimate scene shows the home to have been restored to its rightful position as a locus of love and happiness, after having been at the heart of harrowing conflicts and threats to Ada's body earlier in the movie.

Thus it seems for a moment, when we see Ada with Baines in Nelson, that Campion has capitulated to the landmarks of melodrama, and turned her tale of feminine passion into the unproblematic celebration of a conventional heterosexual relationship. But the film eschews melodrama at the last moment for *The Piano* simultaneously raises a second set of problems, to which it offers a diametrically different solution. To the question, How can a woman reconcile her autonomy as an artist and a subject with the passion of romantic love?, the film answers: by remaining autonomous, secretive, and embracing death and solitude, beyond the joys of marital life. What the film ultimately proposes is thus something much more interesting and much more complicated than melodramatic innocence: it is the possibility of a proper world for woman, one that is irreconcilable with the needs of the community, and thus legitimizes a radical form of

female autonomy. It is also a vision that is divested of any form of morality: Ada does not abide by the rules imposed upon her sex. More generally, the film at large rejects morality: in a Spinozist manner, specific acts cannot be deemed morally good or evil. Rather, what matters is whether they have good or bad effects. *The Piano* thus proposes an ethical, rather than a moral, approach to sexuality and gender relations.

This tension between affirming and challenging the melodramatic modality pervades the entire film. For instance, Campion aims at disentangling romanticism from the melodramatic mode in which it has been captured in Hollywood films. To this effect, she reveals the dark side of romanticism and shows the violence that underlies it. She said in an interview that “Romanticism has been misunderstood in our era, especially in films. It has become something pretty and lovable. Its hardness, its dark side has been forgotten. I wanted to create a feeling of terror in the spectator when faced with the power of natural elements. That's, I think, the essence of romanticism: this respect for a nature that is considered larger than you, your mind, or even your humanity” (Wexman 87). Campion wants to reveal Romanticism back to itself: not the cloying, easily swallowable genre that Hollywood has turned it into, but the daunting, terrifying, sublime affect of its origins. Campion’s project with Romanticism goes beyond her engagement with nature, although it is certainly an important part of it. As I have shown, she also exposes the difficult questions that are at the heart of romantic love itself.

Kathleen McHugh offers an elegant analysis of Campion’s engagement with melodrama when she argues that the filmmaker “wants to ironize melodrama while retaining its capacity to generate affect and render conflict between people and forces of unequal power” (“Female Narration” 204). *The Piano* thus proposes a very complicated

ethical framework. In generic terms, it can be said that the conventions of melodrama are blurred. Central to melodrama is “the quest for a hidden moral legibility” (Williams 18).

If melodrama is about revelation and visibility, *The Piano* is about ambivalence:

Campion flirts with melodrama throughout the movie but ultimately foregoes it in the final scene. This ambivalent engagement reflects the contradictory tensions in the film between feminism and fairly conservative sexual politics. She turns our expectations on their head: the movie does not end in the home, innocence is not restored, nor is there a moral revelation. Instead, Ada revels in a beautiful, narcissistic vision of her own death, away from Baines and motherhood.

Campion thus addresses, plays with, and ultimately subverts the norms of melodrama as a modality. As I have shown earlier, we can also understand melodrama as a genre and focus on her interpretation of various aspects of generic conventions. To conclude this essay, I would like to take a brief look at Campion’s peculiar embrace of the norms of acting in melodrama for I believe that it sheds light on the singular richness of her project in *The Piano*, beyond politics and feminism. In terms of performance, Campion’s work in *The Piano* can be thought of as a mode of transcending generic boundaries not so much by challenging them, as by pushing them to the point where they come to signify differently. Campion takes many aesthetic risks with her actors, and in particular with Holly Hunter, as a character like Ada and the enchantment that surrounds her could easily be a little risible. It would not take much for Ada to be a caricature of a great character: a few displaced gestures, an over-dramatized gaze and some tacky symbolism would plunge her and the entire movie into the realm of kitsch. *The Piano*, like all truly great cinematic and literary works, is never far from being a little grotesque.

As a parallel, one can think, for instance, of the disarming simplicity of Dostoevsky's metaphors in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where goodness is aligned with little birds or children. In a similar vein, James Wood notes that "Because [Henry] James's own refinements run so close to self-parody, the contemporary Jamesian runs the risk of pastiching a parodist" (86). Likewise, *The Piano* engages wholeheartedly with the conventions of performance in romantic period dramas. These include gestures such as that of a woman putting a hand on her white forehead with her eyes closed to express doubt or sadness, or running in distress through a forest, movements that are reminiscent, for instance, of Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. Campion could have chosen to downplay those since they often come across as too theatrical. Instead, the film intensifies them and thereby brings them to a place where they cease being only theatrical. Their emotional impact is increased by the filmmaker's boldness to face those conventions instead of turning away from them, choosing rather to seize them bodily in order to bring them to their most accomplished point.

In *The Piano*, it is paradoxically Ada's utmost, sometimes nearly exaggerated dignity that keeps the movie from being soppy, and this dignity is enhanced by the fact that it not only reminds us of other dignified female characters in period dramas, but actually deepens and transcends them. It is Campion and Hunter's bravado, their daringness that turn *The Piano* into a bit of a miracle. This courage, always flirting with danger, always on the point of losing itself, but adamantly attached to a cinematic style that is inscribed within a tradition of movies targeted to women, mirrors Ada's romance, for she too is often on the brink of losing her dignity (to Baines's advances, or to her husband's violence). Both Ada and the movie thus engage in a perilous exercise in which

what is at stake is the possibility for a woman to exist as a woman (or, in the case of the film itself, a feminine genre) who dares to affirm her desire. Campion is inflexible in her determination to make a romantic movie with a daringly graceful female character in the same way as Ada is resolved to get her piano back and to love the man she chooses. Ada embraces romantic love but remains autonomous; the movie flirts with melodrama but goes beyond it. Ada's grace is also the film's grace.

1.6. Conclusion

Campion both embraces and subverts the norms of melodrama. For examples, her point-of-view shots only give us the illusion, nourished by film conventions, that we are granted access to Ada's subjectivity, but distance actually remains in place. The director is at once close and estranged from the conventions of melodrama, thereby mimicking her main character's own complex engagement with space. An analysis of this oscillatory engagement brings to the fore the problems that her film poses for a feminist analysis. Yet Campion's ambivalent attitude toward patriarchal privilege does not prevent her from developing a deep and rich female protagonist, whose personality radiates through the film's aesthetics, and in particular, through its treatment of spatiality.

Campion and Irigaray develop two remarkably similar understandings of spatiality in relation both to sexual difference and to sexual violence. Distance and closeness, the fundamental qualities of space, find two corresponding modes of expression, one positive and one negative, in each project. As we have seen, in the negative sense, distance manifests as alienation, and closeness as a form of intrusion. In their positive understanding, they are portrayed as a safe distance, on the one hand, and

intimacy, on the other. Irigaray proposes the nearness of the lips as the core of an alternative sexuality to phallocentrism, one that would affirm, rather than ignore, the specificity of women's bodies. She further develops her spatial conceptualization of sexual difference with the interval, which refers to the intimate separation that ensures that the physical and emotional integrity of the two subjects is respected. The distance of the interval is thus a closeness, it is the force of desire that is also that of difference and that brings two subjects together without engulfing one in the other. The interval and the lips find a correspondence in the close-up: like the latter, they are invested in a nearness toward which they move, but never capture. In *The Piano*, Ada's inner self is conveyed through the alternation between the intimacy of the close-up and the unattainable distance of her being, which becomes literalized in the very last, under-water scene. Further, as an enigmatic character, she resonates with Irigaray's theory that women's unknown qualities remain to be actualized. In sum, both Campion and Irigaray, in their respective language, propose a reflection on femininity (its current restrictions, what it could become) that relies on complex spatial compositions, the subtle alternation between closeness and distance, whose vibratory force, if attuned to the needs of women's bodies, could sketch the geography of a new world.

Chapter 2. Claire Denis and the Flow of Time: *Beau Travail*

2.1. Introduction

This chapter and the next both explore Claire Denis' work, focusing on *Beau Travail* (1999) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001), which are respectively the most celebrated and the most vilified of her films. In this chapter, I offer a reading of *Beau Travail*, focusing in particular on her approach to foreignness and difference. This topic has been much discussed in relation to the film, and other scholars have addressed Denis' critical engagement with post- and neo-colonial relations in France and in its former colonies.²⁶ These works offer crucial insights into Denis' politics, but they do not place the film in a philosophical context that would deepen our understanding of its aesthetics. More pointedly, they do not uncover how the director creates a unified framework for the enmeshment of politics, philosophy, and film form across *Beau Travail*.

I argue that Denis presents us with a recurrent device, that of the trajectory, that can be traced throughout the movie to bring to light its aesthetic and conceptual coherence. A trajectory is usually understood as the path followed by a being or an object in movement. In this chapter, it will be understood more abstractly and augmented with a temporal meaning. Specifically, following Bergson's definition of a singular movement,²⁷ a trajectory will be understood to mark a singularity (be it a character, a scene, or another aesthetic device) endowed with a proper existence in time, that is, a proper duration, and it will serve my analysis of Denis' take on difference. As an example, I claim that *Beau*

²⁶ See for instance: Beugnet (*Denis*); Beugnet and Sillars; Hayward; and Vicari.

²⁷ An introduction to Bergson can be found in the "Denis and Bergson" section of this chapter.

Travail is comprised of a constellation of personal trajectories, through which each character is affirmed in her/his singularity. This approach differs from a much more common filmic device, whereby secondary characters evoke the corolla of a flower, serving to enhance (through similarity) or to oppose (through contrast) a central relationship or character. In *Beau Travail*, although some trajectories and intersections are emphasized more than others, all have an equal value. This process can be likened to the Japanese game of *Mikado*, in which wooden sticks of the same length are piled, creating an assemblage of a multitude of units.

The concept of the trajectory is useful for film, because it allows for an account of character evolution, as well as of encounters between various filmic devices, such as editing and camerawork. Further, the spatial connotation of the trajectory is relevant in the context of *Beau Travail*, which emphasizes the issue of foreignness. The numerous trajectories that constitute the film take a variety of shapes: for example, they serve as representations of difference or of being adrift. This investigation will lead us to four main areas: an analysis of Denis' aesthetics of difference; an analysis of Denis' evocation of difference through temporality in relation to Bergson's work; a reading of Denis' work with Irigaray's theory of alterity; and lastly a critique of Irigaray's philosophy informed by Denis herself.

2.2. Narrative Summary

Beau Travail, which is loosely based on Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, is one of Denis' most celebrated films. It is set in the barren, seemingly infinite desert landscapes of Djibouti, where the French Legion, the *Légion étrangère*, has established a training

camp. The legionnaires, all of them young men, perform their arduous, sometimes perilous exercises under the scorching sun and the watchful gaze of the *adjudant-chef*, the ugly Galoup (the phenomenal Denis Lavant), and the *commandant*, the wise and composed Bruno Forrestier (Michel Subor, who played a character with the same name in Jean-Luc Godard's *Le petit soldat* in 1963). The traditional army training exercises are punctuated by mesmerizing dance scenes, in which the soldiers perform slow, meditative movements, set to the grandiose music of Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* (Denis prepared these scenes with the help of the choreographer Bernardo Montet). The film is told from the point-of-view of Galoup through the use of a voice-over: he is back in France, in the mild but bleak Marseille winter, and he comments on the narrative while also reflecting on his life by writing a diary. Galoup, we learn later in the film, has been dismissed from the Legion for trying to kill a legionnaire. The young man in question is Sentain (Grégoire Colin), the film's equivalent to Melville's "handsome sailor," a boy whose fine, perfect features match a flawless character. Sentain quickly distinguishes himself by his courage, as he bravely rescues a fellow legionnaire after a helicopter accident. Already appreciated by all his comrades, Sentain wins Forrestier's esteem and thereby attracts Galoup's jealousy. The nature of Galoup's admiration for Forrestier is ambiguous, as it seems to be lined with a measure of repressed desire—one that hovers over their relationship but is never explicitly stated. Galoup seeks an excuse to get rid of Sentain, and finds one when the latter punches him in the face, outraged by the unfair treatment that Galoup is inflicting upon one of the legionnaires. As a punishment, Galoup drives the young man away to the middle of the desert, arms him with a sabotaged compass, and leaves him headed for certain death. Sentain, lost and dying of thirst, lies

down in a sea of salt. He is rescued, against all odds, by a group of Djiboutian nomads who are walking through the area. A legionnaire finds his flawed compass at a roadside market, and Galoup is sent back to France, to be judged by a military tribunal. In the penultimate scene, set in Marseille, Galoup tidies up his room in a preparation for suicide, adhering one last time to the domestic immaculacy mandated by the Legion. The very last scene is breathtaking: Galoup, alone in the Djibouti nightclub where the legionnaires often went, performs a free, manic, improvised dance interpretation set to the 1993 pop song “The Rhythm of the Night.” The scene seems to serve as a metaphor for Galoup’s death (Denis called it the “Dance of Death”), but it could also be read as a last, frenzied grip on life or as an exasperated and hopeless commentary on the inexorability of his fall.

2.3. Denis’ Worldview: Beyond Morality

Although this brief summary may suggest a Manichaeian narrative, grounded in a formulaic opposition between good and evil, Denis’ work in fact strongly resists such dichotomies. Instead, there are no hierarchies in Denis’ universe: *Beau Travail* makes us sympathize with Galoup’s existential trials, even as we see him plot Sentain’s death. The film creates a sort of moral vacuum: Denis undermines the spectator’s ability to judge by systematically resisting evaluating her characters. This is remarkable considering how eager she is to portray highly questionable figures: in *Trouble Every Day*, one of the main characters, Shane (Vincent Gallo) is a serial killer and rapist; *J’ai pas sommeil* (*I Can’t Sleep* 1993) tells the story of Thierry Paulin, a young man who was charged with the murder of twenty-one elderly women in Paris in 1987. *S’en fout la mort* (*No Fear, No*

Die 1990) focuses on men who train cocks for deadly fights. The trajectories are thus properly speaking singularities: they function without the validation of secondary characters, or of a moral framework that would give or refuse them legitimacy.

Unlike most independent (and mainstream) filmmakers today, Denis is not interested in victims.²⁸ What attracts her is to probe the limits of this openness with characters that engage in violence and cruelty and yet with whom spectators are invited to sympathize. Her films are thus constituted by a long series of affirmations, in which no character needs to be denied for another to exist (in Irigarayan terms, no one functions as place for another). These relations can be summed up, using a schema developed by Grosz (*Subversions* xvii), as A and B, in which each letter is defined on its own terms, independently of the interests of the other. This model counters that of phallocentrism, the logic of oneness, represented by A / not-A, in which the negative term has been made to give up its singularity to provide a territory where the positive term can flourish. This is also the way that melodrama functions: one character is vilified so another one can incarnate innocence. It can also be noted that flat characters are absent from Denis' filmic world, as all have a complex interiority that could be the subject of another movie. Likewise, there are no secondary characters, but only people who populate the screen for a longer or a shorter span of time. Various trajectories intersect, sometimes producing a positive encounter (love, friendship, appreciation), sometimes a negative one (violence, envy, death).

²⁸ She said in an interview: "The subject of so many films is the protection of the victim, and I think, I don't give a damn about those things. It's not the job of films to nurse people. With what's happening in the chemistry of love, I don't want to be a nurse or a doctor, I just want to be an observer. I do believe that this kind of love exists and has nothing to do with taboo. I don't think cinema is there to victimize or accuse people. Cinema has another aim." (Denis, "Spectacularly Intimate")

Denis' work forms a sustained effort to transcend the logic of oppositionality, of "us vs. them." In this respect, her commentary on American cinema is eloquent: "Violence in American movies is always due to the bad ones, to the others. Their violence is horrific and pernicious yet depicted as moral because the bad guys always lose in the end. I find this simplistic moral absolutely revolting" (Morice qtd. in Beugnet 182, her translation). What disturbs her most profoundly is the assumption that evil is always on the side of others. A quote by Chester Himes, which appears at the beginning of *S'en fout la mort*, captures this essential aspect of Denis' worldview: "Every human being, whatever his race, whatever his country, creed or ideology, is capable of everything or just anything." Denis demands, through her films, that we cease to believe ourselves the exclusive bearers of goodness. In contrast, what interests her is the fault line that everyone carries and through which evil can deploy itself if circumstances lend themselves to it. Because of this fault line, the source of unforeseeable actions, we do not know what we are capable of and cannot judge it in advance. Iniquity then ceases to be defined as "that which is not me."

One interesting consequence of this perspective is that rather than promoting a film reception process that establishes the superior knowledge of the director (about right and wrong, for instance), Denis chooses to foreground ignorance, hers and of course also ours. More precisely, she refuses what Jean-Sébastien Chauvin has described as a very common trope of contemporary auteur cinema, which consists in presenting what seems to be a profound reflection on our world, only to conclude, sententiously, that all is not going well. As an example of such a practice and the problems attached to it, Chauvin quotes the following assertion by Serge Daney about Robert Altman:

Ce qui est déplaisant dans son cinéma, c'est que la seule chose à laquelle on nous demande croire, c'est à l'intelligence de l'auteur. L'auteur est toujours plus intelligent que ses cobayes, il en sait toujours plus sur eux, mais son savoir est toujours protégé. On ne trouve pas ce mépris dans –je prends exprès des auteurs très hautains– Bresson ou Antonioni parce que ce sont des gens qui se moquent complètement de “ce-qu'il-faut-avoir-l'air-de-penser-pour-paraitre-intelligent.” (Chauvin 73)

What is unpleasant in his cinema is that the only thing in which we are asked to believe is the auteur's intelligence. The auteur is always more intelligent than his guinea pigs, he always knows more than them, but his knowledge is always protected. This kind of contempt cannot be found in—and I'm taking very haughty auteurs on purpose—Bresson or Antonioni, because these are people who don't care at all about “what-you're-supposed-to-think-in-order-to-appear-intelligent.”

This kind of intellectual arrogance is absent from the cinema of Denis, who deliberately places herself in a position of anti-expertise: the director does not have a better understanding of the world of the film, of the motivations of its characters, or of what should be done, than we do.

Likewise, Denis' characters exist independently of the spectator: they do not seek to seduce us by being lovely or witty or conventionally attractive, or by inviting our pity. The filmmaker evokes vast inner worlds, yet she never grants us straightforward access to them, limiting us (and herself) to their exteriority. Further, her characterization, and beyond it her entire *Weltanschauung*, is marked by a certain fatalism, a resignation to life being what it is, inexorably so in *Beau Travail*. The association of the film to the mythical through a series desert dance scenes, in which the young Legionnaires acquire a semi-divine aura through their hieratic movements and the grandiose music of Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, feeds this impression of the unfolding of fate. Further, as Beugnet and Sillars note, this sense of inexorability is reinforced in *Beau Travail* by the fact that the story is told in flashback (169). Denis demands an abandonment to life: its

movement, its exuberance, and also its cruelty. This surrender is set in a filmic world in which there is no benevolent higher organizing principle that would confer meaning and order to the existences of her characters. Indeed, the meaning of fate in *Beau Travail* is akin to that in Greek tragedies, and it stands in contrast with the melodramatic modality, which aims at recreating a life less unbearably light and unfair, and in which meaninglessness and arbitrariness are replaced by goals and justice, or at least the establishment of clear boundaries between what is right and what is wrong.²⁹

In *Beau Travail*, spectators cannot invoke a sense of immanent justice in order to reconcile themselves to the absurdity of the world or turn a deaf ear to the other's pain. In Denis' films, people make mistakes, they do not always understand their own motivations, and it is sometimes too late to rectify the course of things. Tellingly, Galoup twice repeats this line from Godard's *Le petit soldat*: "Peut-être qu'avec les remords commence la liberté" ("Maybe remorse is where freedom begins"). Her characters are resigned in their openness to life and they participate in an ethics that is profoundly at odds with the capitalistic view that defines the contemporary Western world and that sees life largely as something that can be mastered: dreams can be pre-fabricated, sold, and made to function within life projects that fulfill the expectations of the market rather than the depth of each individual.

Similarly, Denis stands out in that she is not very interested in the notion of choice, which is at the heart of the liberal understanding of the subject. Her characters do

²⁹ Denis' worldview resonates with Deleuze's ethics, developed in his reading of Spinoza (*Spinoza* 32-7). Rejecting traditional, transcendental notions of good and evil, Deleuze (through Spinoza) focuses on encounters: a good encounter is one that augments our power, our ability to persevere in our being, while bad encounters do not fit our nature and bring us into processes of decomposition.

not tend to face choices and she certainly does not dwell on their hesitations. Rather, they act as they are impelled to by their emotions, by their intuitions, by their desire, or simply by circumstances. In other words, hers is not a liberal world in which choice is the predominant mode of understanding the flow of human existence. Her plots are not driven by considerations related to problem-solving. Moreover, the narratives of accomplishment (of one's "life journey," of one's goals) cherished by Hollywood do not appeal to her. She summed up her philosophy in an interview as follows: "C'est le destin des hommes: être fait de chair et de sang et être damné, mais damné laïquement, par le désir" ("it is the destiny of man: to be made of flesh and blood, and to be damned, but damned in a secular way, by desire"; Denis, "Ce poids d'ici-bas"). What we find in her films are thrusts of happiness, of liberty at most; encounters, violence and desire. It is the flow, the evanescence of life that Denis wants to convey to her viewers. When Amy Taubin asked her what feelings she wanted the spectator to experience. Denis replied that she wanted "to share things that are fleeting" (Denis, "Body Language").

Denis' is not a cinema of identification. Her characters are too distant and elusive, their worlds too mysterious and left unexplained for the spectators to become one with them. We never have more than a vague understanding of who they are, their origins, their motivations, and the true nature of the anxieties and fears that beset them. Her cinema rests on what Thierry Jousse calls a "dramatic atonality":

Rien n'est expliqué et tous les actes, les meurtres y compris, sont filmés d'un point-de-vue *cool*, c'est-à-dire avec une sorte d'atonalité dramatique, comme si tous les gestes, y compris les plus terribles, étaient au même niveau, perçus hors de tout jugement moral ou de toute hiérarchie. (22)

Nothing is explained and all the acts, including murders, are filmed from a 'cool' point-of-view, that is, with a sort of dramatic atonality, as though all gestures,

including the most terrible, were on the same level, perceived outside of any moral judgment or any hierarchy.

What prevails is a radical openness.

2.4. Film Aesthetics: Representing Foreignness

This openness and rejection of authority are salient in *Beau Travail*, a film that elaborates explicitly on the notion of foreignness. As Denis herself declared in an interview,

La question était en réalité : qu'est-ce que c'est qu'être à l'étranger ? C'était ça la vraie question; ce n'était pas de décrire le voyage de quelqu'un—ça n'a pas d'intérêt —, mais d'aborder la notion d'étranger. Tout de suite, je me suis rendue compte que partir à l'étranger ne suffirait pas pour faire ce film. J'avais l'impression qu'il me fallait analyser ce que contenait le mot 'étranger.' De là est venue assez vite l'idée de Djibouti, comme terre vraiment étrangère, et puis celle de la Légion étrangère. (Denis, "Ce poids d'ici-bas")

In reality, the question was: what does it mean to be abroad (*être à l'étranger*)? That was the real question; it wasn't to describe someone's trip—that is uninteresting—but to approach the question of foreignness. I immediately understood that going abroad wouldn't be enough to make this film. I had the feeling that what I had to analyze was what the word 'foreign' contained. From there, the idea of Djibouti came quite quickly, as a really foreign land, and then that of the Foreign Legion.

This interest in the *étranger* is not only present in this film: Denis has never ceased, from her first movie on, to study foreignness: foreign characters populate her films and faraway countries have been regular settings since the beginning (her first film, *Chocolat* (1988) takes place in colonial Cameroon). Further, she is one of the very few filmmakers in France to consistently offer prominent, non-stereotypical roles to actors of color.

Denis' perception of alterity is complex and ambiguous. Her films provide neither an idealized nor a derogatory view of the foreign other, but instead, they study difference itself. On the one hand, she explores the singularity of each of her characters, as complex individuals whose values and world views may be deeply unfamiliar; and on the other,

she examines the questions and problems that arise from the encounter between two or more distinct trajectories.

This complex affirmation of the other's difference is particularly transgressive in a French context, in which, as Beugnet and Sillars note the utopia of assimilation has dominated discourse on immigration since the formation of the nation-state (167). Since the ideals of the Republic are understood to be universal, it follows that all human beings should aspire to identify with them and, implicitly, want to become French. In practice, this means that foreigners are expected to Gallicize their identity if they find themselves in France, especially as far as language and religion are concerned. Further, Beugnet and Sillars remark that the Legion itself embodies the French ideal of assimilation, as the legionnaires, who come from all over the world, take on a new identity, transform their bodies through intense exercise, and wear identical uniforms.

The Legion is a very intriguing institution: it is part of the French army but includes both French and foreign soldiers, who, until 2010, had to change their name and assume a "declared identity" in order to join the corps (they are now allowed to keep their real name if they so wish although this is by no means compulsory). Although the film does not elaborate on this, many legionnaires have a past loaded with trauma, abuse, or even crime that they wish to leave behind. The Legion offers them the opportunity to start anew, in exchange for their loyalty to the French state and blind submission to a very strict discipline. Given Denis' fascination with foreignness, the anonymity of the Legion is an ideal setting for her work. However, Beugnet and Sillars remark that the customary narrative of unicity and universalism associated with the Legion is systematically undermined in the film: for example, they note with humor that in the scene where Denis

dramatizes the need for the young men to learn French, Sentain teaches a Russian legionnaire all the terms for underwear, as they are tidying up a laundry line.

Foreignness in *Beau Travail* goes beyond the categories to which it is often restricted (such as white/other) to embrace all interpersonal relations. In an interesting reversal of the French colonial narrative, in *Beau Travail* not only Africans, but also the Legion itself are constituted as foreign: in one amusing scene, we are invited, through a point-of-view shot, to identify with the gaze of a group of Djiboutian men, as they silently stare at the legionnaires who are performing Herculean, yet perfectly random tasks (Galoup spoke of a “pretext”), under the midday desert sun. The legionnaires themselves are foreign to each other, coming as they do from a variety of countries and speaking different languages. Encounters between a multiplicity of singular trajectories are thus at the heart of the notion of foreignness as it is developed by Denis. Further, these personal routes themselves are complex, as all characters in Denis’ world are not only foreign to others but also to themselves.

Denis also carefully records the legionnaires’ interactions with Djiboutians. The images are almost banal: we see people going about their daily lives, the soldiers dancing with young black women, and Galoup cherishing his Djiboutian girlfriend, Rahel (Marta Tafesse Kassa). The filmmaker underlines the persistence of French colonialism in Africa and the futility of the presence of the French Legion in Djibouti: there is no war in sight and yet the legionnaires maintain, day after the day, the same impeccable discipline, the same stupendous, at times deadly, physical exercises, the same sense of devotion to an anachronistic institution. However, Denis is also careful not to judge the legionnaires,

and her sometimes-ironic shots embrace an amused curiosity that never veers into outright derision.

This respect pervades Denis' work, even marking her collaborations and the shooting process. Beugnet remarks that characters who hold a significant role in one movie will often make a fleeting appearance in another. She gives the example of Jacques Nolot, who stars in *La Robe à cerceau* (1993) and in *Nénette et Boni* (1996), and can be discerned, very briefly, in a porn cinema in *J'ai pas sommeil*. Denis is well-known for collaborating with the same people across her films: the actors become familiar faces to Denis' fans who have seen, for example, Grégoire Colin grow from a teenager in *US Go Home* (1994) to a young man in *Beau Travail* and an almost middle-aged one in *Les 35 rhums* (2008) and *Les Salauds* (2013). Similarly, Denis has collaborated consistently with Jean-Pol Fargeau (script writing), Nelly Quettier (editing), Agnès Godard (cinematography), and many others. Her shooting process relies on these relations of trust: Denis, like other art filmmakers before her (e.g. Jean-Luc Godard), disrupts the traditional rehearsal process: she will often have actors practice a different scene than the one she that she is planning to shoot (sometimes even from a different script than that of the film), so that actors are prepared and focused but also spontaneous and on the edge of improvisation. What then comes through is the actor's proper embrace of the character, instead of one that is directed by the filmmaker. Her shooting technique thus insists on surprise: she does not direct actors or shape characters as much as she gives a frame

within which actors can blossom³⁰ and this method testifies to Denis' attachment to both freedom and singularity.

Similarly, she resorts to forms of focalization that do not encourage the spectator to drift into dichotomous thinking. For instance, in *Beau Travail*, we become intimately bound to Galoup's take on the story, since he is telling it through a voice-over and his narration reveals the intensity of his vulnerability and his remorse. Hence rather than judging him as a traitor and a murderer, we largely sympathize with his frustration. However, this empathetic opening does not lead to a straightforward process of spectatorial identification, for we cannot help being suspicious of the reliability of the narration of Galoup, who remains largely inscrutable. For instance, it is frequently unclear if he has imagined the situations that he describes (and that we witness through the visualization of his narrative), and he sometimes accounts for events in which he was not present. Denis also constructs complex plays of gazes that thwart a straightforward process of focalization. The film is rife with apparent eyeline matches that create a network of trajectories that function as singularities, almost independently from each other. Two characters will seem to be looking at each other, but the next shot will reveal that they are actually looking just past each other, creating two lines of sight that embody two individualities (as we will see in the next chapter, this technique is particularly prevalent in *Trouble Every Day*).

The sound editing reflects this sense of discontinuity: Denis' long takes are accompanied by a soundtrack that often has a complicated relation to the images. In *Beau*

³⁰ In the third chapter of her book, "Practising the Feminine: Contexts of Production, Direction and Reception," Bainbridge gives an Irigarayan reading of such collaborations between a director and her team.

Travail, Britten's majestic music brings the young men's physical exercises into a semi-divine realm. At the same time, the music also contrasts with the vulnerability with which their youth endows them, and offers an ironic commentary on the delusions of greatness that sustain the Legion. A similar tension emerges in the very last scene, where we see Denis Lavant execute the frenzied dance set to "The Rhythm of the Night." Here, the commercial music selection runs against the transcendent, metaphorical dimension of the scene. But the soundtrack also alludes to trajectories in a different way, as the music, and in particular Britten's opera, echoes the other prominent feature of the soundtrack in *Beau Travail*: the sound of the wind, which blows ceaselessly in the desert, and forms as central an elemental presence in the film as sand and water. The wind, like Britten's *Billy Budd*, evokes an ungraspable, insuperable force that comes from far away—literally in the case of the wind, and figuratively in the case of the opera's sacral-like tunes. Its uninterrupted blowing, like the flow of the sea and the movements of the sand, evokes the passage of time itself.

Denis' camerawork also participates in the elaboration of distinct trajectories. She is keen on long silent close-ups that reveal the complexity of her characters without allowing the viewer to grasp them or to reduce them to a generic category. For example, early in the film we see a group of legionnaires in a boat. Instead of introducing them all through an establishing shot, which would have endowed them with a sense of commonality, Denis shows them one by one, their heads in close-up against the vibrant blue sea. The young men all look serious and determined, and their air is reminiscent of late medieval Flemish or Tuscan portraits. The absence of an establishing shot renders the scene mysterious: it takes a few shots before we realize where we are, and the initial lack

of an explanation regarding the purposes of this boat trip makes the looks on the young faces inscrutable.

The construction of the trajectories thus serves to endow Denis' characters with an aura of mystery. Janet Bergstrom speaks of the "opacity" of Denis' films, as we observe characters from whom we remain fundamentally separated (71). However, this opacity does not aim at producing a sense of alienation so much as an opening, a movement toward: at the heart of her filmic project is the mystery of the other, who functions in her/his singularity and to whom we are drawn. Denis herself once remarked that "[a]ll [her] films function as a movement toward an unknown Other and toward the unknown in relations between people" (Camhi). Characteristically, one of the first scenes in *Beau Travail* pictures a train headed in an unknown direction, and she named her documentary on the French choreographer Mathilde Monnier *Vers Mathilde (Toward Mathilde)*. As I remarked earlier, Denis is extremely suspicious of discourses that place evil on the side of others. Instead, she observes the disruptive presence of evil inside one's own soul. Therefore, the movement toward the other that her characters describe is also an often-difficult engagement with the other within the self, the result of identities that are never closed off but always in motion.

2.5. Trajectories in Space and Time

The trajectories in *Beau Travail* carry Denis' characters toward the foreign. Therefore, for the legionnaires, *la trajectoire* also becomes properly speaking *un trajet*, or a route, that brings them from their country of origin to Africa. But this route is not a straightforward path that would mimic the colonial narrative of progress from barbarism

to civilization. Rather, these men are adrift, having given up their names and identities for a new life as members of the Legion. Sentain, an orphan, does not know where he comes from at all. Some of them are very young—we see the legionnaires celebrate a boy's eighteenth birthday. Galoup, albeit older, abandons himself to a vicious desire for revenge and loses himself in the process. This sense of disorientation is reinforced by the landscape, made out only of sand and water, which Denis portrays through frequent long takes. It is easy to get lost in both these elements, and because the filmmaker does not show us the connections between different locations, we have no understanding of the spatial arrangement and cannot chart the territory of the film. Further, both sand and water are mobile: in permanent motion, ceaselessly adrift and shifting, and thereby essentially unmapable. The fluidity of both the desert and the ocean contrasts with the order of the Legion, its interminable, impeccable ironing sessions, its hierarchy, its discipline, and its precision. But in fact, the Legion itself is drifting: the grand narrative of colonialism that I have just evoked is no longer all-powerful. The legionnaires go from one useless task to another, and one fails to understand what exactly this French institution is doing in Djibouti.

The spatial uncertainty that sustains the film is epitomized in Sentain's forced exile into the desert with a flawed compass, which is also the accomplishment of Galoup's plan: to maximize disorientation to the point of death. Sentain's sabotaged compass becomes the literal representation of the generalized sense of drift that underlies the legionnaires' lives in *Beau Travail*. But in the nick of time, a group of nomads, *des étrangers*, rescue the young man after they find him dying in a sea of salt. We see a woman take care of him on a bus, presumably bringing him to a place where he can heal,

perhaps back to the Legion. It must be noted that Sentain's lack of spatial landmarks is not shared by the Djiboutians: the nomads who find him are not lost in the desert. The flawed compass, in turn, suddenly becomes incomparably precise: after a legionnaire finds it at a roadside market, it points without a doubt to Galoup's guilt and sends him straight back to France for his judgment.

Denis' representation of foreignness is thus undoubtedly grounded in spatiality (Djibouti is distant from France) and vision (we see both Africans and foreign landscapes). Yet I argue that the embodied and geographic differences in her films are only the material face of an engagement with difference at the temporal level around which her entire filmic project revolves. Indeed, the various filmic devices that I have just described serve the elaboration of different trajectories, that is, of different durations. These are first reflected through the very particular editing at work in *Beau Travail*.

The film's temporal structure is deeply destabilizing: it is constituted of what appears to be a series of flashbacks taken from the perspective of Galoup, who remembers the events that have led up to his present tragic condition, ousted from the Legion, alone in Marseille, and in all likelihood about to commit suicide. However, as I have just noted, logical impossibilities infiltrate the narration, as several sequences suggest that Galoup "remembers" situations he cannot possibly have witnessed. Further, although the narration proceeds for the most part chronologically, and Galoup's flashbacks follow the order of events with occasional incursions into his present-day life, some scenes seem to function out of time, or to be placed in a different time. For example, the dance scenes in which we see the legionnaires perform mysterious movements in the desert, albeit not temporally illogical, seem to occur in a sort of

mythical time, different from the domestic time that structures the legionnaires' many chores or Galoup's perpetuation of those in Marseille (we see him mostly in his apartment, making his bed, ironing, making coffee, etc.).

One scene in particular exemplifies this other temporality, which sometimes blurs boundaries between reality and fantasy. We see Galoup walking around the streets of Djibouti at night. A group of legionnaires, with Sentain at their front, walk around the illuminated arcades, then down a dark alley; they disperse to let a car drive through and we distinguish Forrestier in the passenger seat, and a black man driving. In a point-of-view shot from Forrestier's perspective, we see a white figure walk haggardly toward the car. As it gets nearer, we recognize Galoup, who seems to fall down as the car drives past him without stopping. The film cuts abruptly to a shot of Galoup's girlfriend in medium shot and slow motion, dancing happily in the night club, looking up to a mysterious off-screen object. The sound continues as we move on to the next vignette, of the disheveled legionnaires walking a seemingly wounded, bare-chested black comrade on their shoulders through narrow streets at dawn, presumably after a night of carousing. Galoup, dressed entirely in black civilian clothes, watches them from a distance like the spirit of death.

This mysterious sequence of events appears to illustrate Galoup's reminiscences as well as his unconscious processes. These include his self-destructive adoration of Forrestier, whose car will not stop for Galoup even as he is collapsing; his girlfriend's ambition (her eyes look up) and lack of emotional engagement with him (she is staring

away), both of which suggest that she does not care much for him;³¹ his association with evil things to come (Sentain's attempted murder); and his envy of Sentain's popularity. The sequence is at once inscribed within the flow of the narration and completely foreign to it: these scenes may have happened but they are also oneiric.³²

This dreamlike sequence, as well as other episodes in the film, such as the desert dance scenes, seem to function out of time, lying as they do outside the bounds of the weight and the obligations of everyday life. These scenes are suspended between chimera and actuality. As such, all echo the foundational moment of suspension in *Beau Travail*: that of the opening scene, which comes just after the credits and begins in complete silence, with a one-shot of a young Djiboutian woman blowing a kiss in the nightclub that we will see several other times in the film. As her lips draw to a close, the kiss from Tarkan's 1997 song "Simarik" resounds³³ and the girl smiles and starts dancing. This is the first moment of suspension: her own kiss hangs in the brief mysterious silence that

³¹ It should be noted that Denis does not judge her: she is not rich and Galoup is a kind man who seems to provide her with a measure of material comfort. In all likelihood (the film does nothing to invalidate this suggestion), this exchange of gifts or money for sex and tenderness extends to the other relations between the legionnaires and the young Djiboutian women. However, Denis does not condemn prostitution, and while she insists on the gendered, racial, and economic imbalances that sustain these relationships, she also shows the interactions between the two groups to be flirtatious (as opposed to exploitative and violent) and inscribed within the context of partying at a nightclub.

³² Other scenes in *Beau Travail* are linked to dreaming: in one of them, Galoup comes near his sleeping girlfriend, Rahel, and tries to wake her up. She does not, but he then has a vision of her lying on her belly, looking straight into the camera. A little before, he had a dreamlike vision of a close-up of her face while she was dancing in the flickering red light of the night club. Later, a sequence opens with a close-up of Galoup's face, who has fallen asleep on his desk, his hands resting on his journal. What follows is a long take of a medium-long shot of Forrestier's silhouette as he appears in the doorframe and says, "Galoup! Réveillez-vous, mon vieux" ("Galoup, wake up comrade!"). The same disquieting music resounds as in the triumphal march that I have just described. Galoup opens his eyes but does not turn around. The length of the take and the music suggest that Forrestier's command may come from a dream.

³³ The song has remained famous for its numerous kisses.

precedes the irruption of music, life, and dance. The camera lingers on her and then focuses on other dancers. The atmosphere is very joyful and flirtatious: two of the African women dancing gaze straight into the camera and laugh candidly, and the legionnaires are happy and sensual. A brief play of gazes and movements between Galoup, Rahel, and Sentain evokes the tragedies to come. The sequence ends with another suspended kiss: a close-up shows us a lighthearted, cheerful legionnaire dancing very close to a young woman, his arms lifted in the air. His lips blow a kiss that again matches the kiss in Tarkan's song. But here too a delay sneaks in: the song ends abruptly and a complete silence reigns on the screen, but we continue to see the young man laughing for a second, creating, again, a sense of void and suspension. The eerie silence that interrupts the soundtrack of life seems to inform us that impermanence underlines all experience. Strikingly, this evocation of death is marked by an extreme lightness: life is suspended for a very brief moment, and it happens in the midst of exultant joy and youth. Melancholy itself becomes light, associated as it is with ephemerality. This sense of suspension echoes throughout the film, and *Beau Travail* can be read as a suspended moment that precedes Galoup's almost certain suicide, as he remembers the events that have led up to his present situation.

Galoup's suicide is at once alluded to and seemingly questioned by the very last scene of the film in which we see him dancing frantically in the nightclub. Hovering between rapture and destruction, this scene is marked by Lavant's extreme and surprising lightness, as his harsh features contrast with his preternaturally agile body. All the outlandish sequences in the film partake of these contrasting qualities: on the one hand, lightness, ephemerality, suspension, and on the other, death, grandeur, heaviness, and

permanence. For example, the desert dance sequences both engage in the grandeur of the mythical, set as they are to Britten's majestic music, and in the evanescence of movement. The elements too participate in this assemblage: Denis produces a world that is shaped by both the dry hardness of the rocky, windy desert and the fleeting suppleness of the Gulf of Aden.

These sequences form temporal intrusions of difference, for the time that they portray is not ours. They are literally "out of time." Or more precisely, it seems that the whole film is constituted by the interplay of different times, some actual and others virtual, and yet others flickering between one and the other without ever settling for either:³⁴ there is the exact time of the legion, the mythical time of the military dances, the Marseille time of death, the mysterious time of the unlocalizable sequences, the time of remembrance and the time of invention, the time of love between Galoup and his girlfriend, the time of suspension, etc. These various times do not match specific characters, but rather form their own trajectories that converge to create this elaborate, bewildering film.

2.6. Denis and Bergson

The quality of her attention to time makes of Denis a very Bergsonian director. Bergson deserves a brief introduction: his work was overlooked for a long time as it was largely ignored or critiqued by structuralists and post-structuralists who dominated continental

³⁴ The latter, in particular, call to mind what Deleuze calls "crystal images," that is, film images that show us the very scission of time between the actual (the lived experience) and the virtual (the simultaneous conservation of each moment in the whole of the past). In the crystal-image, the actual and the virtual become interchangeable, and we no longer know whether we are facing a perception or a memory (*Image-Temps* 109).

philosophy after the Second World War. However, it has known a form of revival in the past fifteen years, no doubt thanks to Deleuze's enthusiasm for it. The central concept in Bergson's thought is that of duration, *la durée*, which he uses to define a specific understanding of the passing of time. Bergson argues that we tend to treat time as a form of space since we usually approach it through division: we count time in seconds, minutes, years, etc. Time becomes a divisible sequence, very far from our intuitive experience of it as a flow, and at odds to its true nature, which is not spatial, but of course temporal. How then can we think time as time? What is time if we take it beyond division and its confinement to clocks and calendars? First, Bergson argues that duration is a continuity, that is, it cannot be divided, and it is inscribed in movement: one single movement marks a single duration. For example, in his reading of Zeno's well-known example,³⁵ Bergson argues that an arrow accomplishes a single movement between the moment it is shot and when it reaches its target. It should be noted that one being is constituted of a myriad of different durations, which include the respective durations of the cells, of the organs, of each movement, and of the entire life of the organism. Second, Bergson shows that duration is both singular (one movement) and a multiplicity: all durations, all movements, participate simultaneously in a single cosmological duration, the whole of time.

This distinction between duration and a spatialized view of time enables Bergson to establish another important division between what he calls "differences in kind" and

³⁵ Zeno of Elea (ca. 490-430 BC) proposed a series of philosophical problems, one of which, the arrow paradox, goes as follows: if time is constituted of instants, that is, durationless bits of time in which no motion occurs, how then can movement happen? Bergson shows that this temporal division into instants rests upon a spatialized view of time and proposes duration, the accomplishment of one single movement, as an adequate representation of time.

“differences in degree.” Each duration forms a singularity that cannot be reduced to a comparison to other durations: one’s life is not simply longer or poorer or happier than somebody else’s, it is a singularity, that is, it forms a proper irreducible movement that has a proper nature. In other words, each duration is of a different kind than other durations. In contrast, to draw divisions or establish comparisons is to think in terms of differences in degree. Bergson calls these two categories “qualitative” and “quantitative” differences and attaches the former to time and the latter to space: when we spatialize differences, we place them on an abstract grid and measure their variations (small and big, friendly and mean, etc.). In contrast, recognizing qualitative differences entails following the flow of each duration.

Our everyday life orients us toward a spatial understanding of the world: our survival depends upon our ability to act and we therefore need to rely on a very efficient and analytical mode of engagement with the world. To this effect, we perceive our environment through a process of simplification: our perception selects the elements that we need and discards or obscures others (conversely, Bergson calls “attentive recognition” the slower mode of perception that we resort to, for example, when we are observing art works). Our habitual engagement with time forms a good example of the necessity of spatialization for action, for we would be unable to keep appointments or to hold elections were it not for hours and years. Our everyday world, the actual, is what we act on, what is present and immanent, what has to be addressed by living beings for them to survive. But this is not the whole of the world. There is, Bergson maintains, another, fundamental dimension, that of the virtual. The virtual is the realm of duration: it holds the whole of the past and it is from this vast reservoir that the present borrows in order to

create the future. The virtual is real, as much as the past is real, but it does not become actualized unless the necessities of the present make life tap into its potent memory. Another definition of duration is thus that of a virtuality in the process of being actualized.

As I have pointed out, *Beau Travail* is made up of a variety of temporalities, as certain sequences are oneiric, while others depict flashbacks or the diegetic present of the film. These, as well as the various trajectories of its characters, offer an echo to Bergson's understanding of the whole of time as a myriad of distinct durations. Further, Bergson offers a theory of difference and time that can be used to make sense of Denis' temporal arrangements in the film.

Bergson assimilates the unfolding of time to a process of differentiation: "Il s'agit toujours d'une virtualité en train de s'actualiser, d'une simplicité en train de se différencier, d'une totalité en train de se diviser: c'est l'essence de la vie, de procéder 'par dissociation et dédoublement', par 'dichotomie'" ("It is always about a virtuality in the process of being actualized, of a simplicity in the process of differentiating itself, of a totality in the process of being divided: it is the essence of life, to proceed 'through dissociation and doubling,' through 'dichotomy'"; Deleuze, *Bergsonisme* 96). The whole of time, Duration, becomes actualized into a myriad of unique durations, that of each singularity (be it matter or a living being), from the hawk to the protozoon, from the blade of grass to the piece of sugar. Likewise, in Denis' films, it is through the unfolding of time that difference becomes manifest: she portrays a variety of singular durations and insists that we contemplate the other's time.

Bergson also argues that our experience of the world is made of a series of leaps: perception does not happen in our mind, but rather forms a leap outside ourselves in space, by taking us to where the object of our perception resides.³⁶ Memory takes us to where the past is,³⁷ and language to where concepts are. Similarly, Denis, through her multiple trajectories, brings us into the milieu of difference, to the place of the Other, that is, where the Other can enjoy her territory and her singularity. Therefore, her engagement with difference diverges, as I have just shown, from that of many, if not most other filmmakers, who seek to make difference in the world manageable, assimilable, by reducing it to a kind of grid—for example by producing hierarchies in terms of race, sex, class, intellectual ability, or simply good and evil.

Reading Bergson with Denis reveals that such hierarchies betray the very essence of difference because they spatialize a phenomenon that is really temporal. Indeed, thinking of differences in terms of hierarchies relies on spatial relations where one term or set of terms is placed on top of others. However, if difference is to be understood in an ethical way, as the affirmation of the other, it can only be temporal, as it then designates a multiplicity of durations. In this context, the very notion of a hierarchy is impossible: one duration cannot have more value than another since, by virtue of existing in time only, it cannot be organized spatially. In her films, Denis brings out the temporal nature of difference, as she seeks to reveal a multiplicity of durations and to resist the imposition of

³⁶ Bergson resists the idea that perception occurs through the formation of an image in our brain, separated from the material world, that would then be projected onto the object that we perceive. Instead, he suggests that the perceived object, the rays that it emits and our own perceiving body form a whole, and that it is therefore in the perceived object itself that its image takes shape and that perception happens (*Matière* 41).

³⁷ To remember is to leave the actual, the realm of action and perception, to enter the virtual, in which the whole of the past is preserved.

a spatial model on life and time. For example, she strongly opposes representing foreignness through hierarchies, and racial differences are irrelevant to the worthiness of any individual in her films. Similarly, she resists the allure of exoticism, whereby the other appears to be excitingly different from a main character who is presented as normal. In *Beau Travail*, as in the rest of Denis' work, all characters are foreign to one another and, to some degree at least, to themselves.

2.7. The Politics of Looking

Given this imperative, it will not come as a surprise that Denis frequently resorts to sequence shots, especially in *Beau Travail*. She once said: "Le plan séquence, pour moi, c'est le temps nécessaire pour qu'un rapport s'établisse avec un personnage" ("The sequence shot, for me, is the necessary time to establish a relation with a character"; Lifshitz). Indeed, the sequence shot, in particular if it focuses on one character, forms the cinema's most evident means to give the viewer a sense of that character's proper duration, as it records an entire scene in one single shot, without any editing. Therefore the sequence shot lends itself well to the elaboration of the other's time (her/his duration) and place (in the uncut, continuous space of the shot), and thus for the elaboration of the other's difference. This feature of Denis' work must therefore be understood in relation to other aspects of her aesthetics of difference: it is her insistence on a multiplicity of trajectories that enables this mobilization of the potential of the sequence shot for a temporal representation of alterity.

Further, these individual durational trajectories find a striking manifestation in the dance scenes that punctuate *Beau Travail* and in which the legionnaires perform slow and

mysterious movements in the desert, and which confront us with the other's time in a very literal way. Let us take the first one of these scenes as an example. Like the other dances, it almost seems religious, a strange ritual of salutation to the force of the sun, to the desert, and to the powers of contemplation. The operatic soundtrack, the slow rhythm, and the camera movements all contribute to this sacrality. The scene begins after several long, static shots of the desert, with a slow left to right pan shot of the desert ground, upon which we see reflected the long, Giacometti-like shade of a legionnaire moving slowly. Britten's music sounds like a haunting, rising incantation of male voices. As the camera moves further along, we discover other similar figures and then we encounter their source, as the camera pans upward to reveal, in medium close-up, the bare torso of a young black man, his arms risen against the infinite blue sky, under the scorching sun, eyes closed in meditation. The camera pans to the right again and we find his comrades, all in the same contemplative pose. The men are not aligned, but stand a few feet from each other facing different directions, oblivious to each other. They do not, as in the other dance sequences, perform deliberate yoga-like movements, but the wind and their own breath makes them stir slightly. We see thirteen men before Denis cuts to a slightly rocking shot of the sea, most likely taken from a boat.

There are three such scenes in the film, inspired by yogic moves. Other dance-like sequences explicitly represent the building up of tension and hostility. For example, we see Galoup and Sentain circle ever closer to each other on a cliff off the ocean, their gazes locked in mutual abhorrence. In a short under-water sequence, we see two legionnaires swimming and simulating a fight with knives. The film is rife with scenes in

which Denis seems to be only interested in looking at the legionnaires' bodies, and she pictures numerous exercising sessions and preparations for combat.

If Denis' films are structured around multiple trajectories, one of these is the force of the silent presence of the director herself, who has chosen how and where to look. In this sense, Denis herself embodies the most fundamental trajectory of any of her films: it is from her that the primordial movement toward the other originates, that which is at the source of all others. Interestingly, like Campion, Denis greatly enjoys looking at men.³⁸ Her films are often mostly focused on male characters, and she evidently delights in watching them move on the screen, observing their unfamiliar bodies, often uncommonly firm, and their mystifying, vigorous grace. My purpose here is not to wonder whether Denis objectifies her characters and whether this makes her gaze powerful or masculine.³⁹ In fact, I do not think that her work lends itself well to such an analysis because it aims so emphatically at resisting hierarchies that her gaze is not willfully invested in an imposition of visual power. Rather, what intrigues me is the arch of sexual difference that goes from the female director to the male characters on the screen, the careful observation of the sexuate other.

Asked about the prevalence of male characters in her films, Denis replied, "I like writing stories about men not because I want to dominate them but because I like to observe and imagine them. A man is a different world and this masculinity interests me." (Denis, "Body Language"). In another interview that I have quoted earlier, Denis

³⁸ The resemblances between the two directors' predilection for men is worth noting. In particular, Baines and Galoup are both middle-aged men who are sensitive and vulnerable, have very strong features and compact, muscular bodies. Both live abroad and are isolated from their respective communities. Both are overwhelmed by their passions and commit violent acts.

³⁹ These questions are discussed in Brault.

explains that what interested her in *Beau Travail* was to explore the notion of foreignness. But she adds, “[j]’ai compris qu’il y avait [dans la Légion] quelque chose d’étranger pour moi... surtout ce monde d’hommes, beaucoup plus finalement que Djibouti” (“I understood that there was something foreign to me in the Legion... especially this world of men, much more ultimately than Djibouti itself”; Denis, “Ce poids d’ici-bas”). Men thus form in a sense a frontier of alterity, the ultimate form of foreignness.

We are invited to admire the dancers: their bodies are strong, taking part in rituals we know nothing about, set to a seemingly sacred music. Yet the men in *Beau Travail* are not offered for possession. Rather, we are invited to sympathize with them for their youth renders them vulnerable and they are absorbed in contemplation. Since these scenes are devoid of dialogues, our attention is focused on the legionnaires’ gestures. These, in spite of the Legion’s ambitions for uniformity, are somewhat erratic: some legionnaires stretch out further, some jump higher, some are in pain, some relish the effort. The intended yet failed perfect synchronicity and identity of movement only serves to highlight the differences between these independent bodies. Discrete movements for discrete becomings. In these scenes where speech is absent, our mode of access to them is not slowed down by language, but stems from our own body and our own becoming. Yet paradoxically, these men also elude us in the immediacy of this silent encounter. What do we really know and understand about them? The film asks that we accept that a distance always separates us from others.

In this oscillation between the known and the unknown, the explicit and the hidden, the immanent and the ideal, Denis finds herself at the same crossroads as

Irigaray, exploring the point at which the material and the transcendent meet in relation to alterity, and in particular to sexual difference.

2.8. Irigaray and Denis: Difference as Becoming

Irigaray is useful to understand Denis' approach to otherness. The director is often criticized for focusing largely on men in her films. Although one fails to see why a woman filmmaker would have an obligation to direct her attention to women, this condemnation does raise the question of Denis' relation to feminism. To the best of my knowledge, she has not claimed the term for herself, and indeed, her filmic project is very far from being rooted either in a straightforward celebration of women or in foregrounding their oppression. Yet the resonances between Irigaray's and Denis' world views are such that the philosopher's elaborate conceptual apparatus can perceive more finely the tenets of the filmmaker's ethics.

Irigaray and Denis cultivate a similar understanding of the temporality of difference. We have seen that Denis is keen on sequence shots and close-ups. Both of these, I have argued, are useful to bring to life the multiplicity of individual trajectories that populate her films. Further, Denis strengthens the effect of the sequence shot for the elaboration of otherness through her scarce use of dialogues. This predilection for the absence of spoken language recalls Irigaray's contention that silence is necessary for each subjectivity to blossom and for the creation of the interval of sexual difference. Indeed, silence can form a figuration of the interval if it serves as a medium through which the two can approach each other. For Irigaray, silence is productive, as it opens up a field from which the feminine can emerge. On the screen, silence between characters, or

between character and viewer, offers a space in which the unspeakable—any unspeakable—can exist. It is there that that which does not conform to the expectations of our world (of rationalism, of phallocentrism, of racism, of capitalism) is left to function in its unutterable singularity. *Beau Travail* can be read as a film about silence, since at its heart is the unspeakable nature of Galoup's attachment to Forrestier. This admiration, which is perhaps sexual, perhaps brotherly, perhaps purely reverential, cannot be expressed adequately with words, and Galoup avoids addressing the precise character of his love for his commandant, even in the sanctuary of his diary. Silence participates in the production of distinct trajectories. These, which Irigaray understands as "becomings," form a central concept in her theory of sexual difference.

Although she announces in the introduction to *Éthique* that both time and space will need to be transformed for the world to move beyond phallocentrism, only her discussion of space has been addressed in depth, most prominently by Rebecca Hill. Irigaray's theory of temporality in *Éthique* is less readily localizable, but I argue that she develops one in the first pages of her last chapter, "La fécondité de la caresse" (173-99). In this text, Irigaray offers a reading of Levinas' "Phénoménologie de l'éros" in *Totalité et infini*, and she analyzes the durational changes that an embrace of sexual difference would entail.

Irigaray begins with an account of phallocentric temporality, which is characterized by a denial of becoming: this subject, closed off to admiration, initiation, and mystery, is geared toward possession, consumption, and mastery. In other words, he lives in an arrested world, as domination and its acolytes rely on the delusional belief in the capacity to bring time in general, but in particular the other's time, to a standstill:

“you are mine.” To subvert this model, Irigaray proposes to cultivate *la volupté*, or voluptuous pleasure. The latter relies on the perpetual deferral of *l’assouvissement*, an accomplished form of sensual satisfaction. In its stead, lovers remain open to the unending flow of the new that characterizes life. Irigaray deploys the best of her poetic prose to evoke what can hardly be captured with purely descriptive language: the evanescence of becoming, the indistinct passage of time, as past, present, and future join their ineffable powers to allow for lovers to delight in the open-ended unfolding of their caresses, while they treasure and protect each other’s alterity. In the past lie their respective births, the indelibly maternal source of their proper time and place. In the present is the caress itself, *eros*, the sensual community that lovers create in their embrace. The latter, however, is decidedly oriented toward the future: in a radical rejection of the arresting of time that characterizes any attempt to dominate and own the other, true lovers cultivate fecund gestures that open up the possibility of a new birth.

This parousia does not aim at replacing the maternal origin or to supplant one’s own sense of self with a new persona. Rather, the lover’s caress invites the beloved to plunge into herself through a process of remembrance “du lieu où se réserve, pour moi, la plus secrète vie” (“of the place where the most secret life reserves itself for me”). Far from denying the mother, this search nourishes itself from one’s actual birth in order to discover uncharted territories of the self, landscapes that can only awaken through the amorous exchange. This process of self-elaboration, however, cannot be fulfilled: the new birth promised by the lover’s touch always remains to be accomplished. The caress is fecund precisely because the birth it announces is always deferred: the touch of the caress is “ce geste toujours et encore préliminaire à et en toutes noces” (“this gesture

always and still preliminary to and in all nuptials”; 174). The shaky semantic construction of the quotation is deliberate, as it enables Irigaray to point to a precise, yet unfamiliar temporality. The fertile loving gesture is at once eternal (“toujours”) and always to be renewed (“encore”), and most strikingly, it is not only “preliminary to,” but simultaneously also “preliminary in” lovemaking. In other words, lovemaking can only be fecund if it happens in a world in which this kind of caress already exists. And yet, as it is “preliminary in nuptials,” this gesture remains to be invented within lovemaking itself. It is a becoming that cannot be defined in advance and yet whose pre-existence is necessary for the lovers to encounter each other (the complex time construction of *Beau Travail*, through a myriad of different temporalities that do not always fit together logically, echoes Irigaray’s subversion of time).

The time of difference is thus without a doubt that of becoming, because the latter makes any form of possession impossible. This means that duration is the very condition of alterity: the other’s duration is not only another one of her characteristics (like sex, race, or hair color) but it is really the principle that makes it possible for difference to exist. Without it, the beloved is nothing more than an arrested image to be possessed or adored. Similarly, temporality is not simply a quality of lovemaking (long or short), but it is what enables the very existence of the fecundity of the caress, whose creative powers rest on the perpetual deferral of the lovers’ mutual parousias.

Denis entertains a similar relation to her characters: like the Irigarayan lover, she creates an intimate, sensuous community with them, in which they are able to deploy their singularity, echoing Irigaray’s vision of a mutual birth. And like the philosopher,

Denis insists on the durational quality of this process, placing the spectator face-to-face with the slow unfolding of time.

The correspondences between Denis and Irigaray go further. In another chapter of *Éthique*, “L’admiration” (75-83), Irigaray explores a form of wonder similar to that which Denis invites in her dance scenes. The philosopher proposes that admiration form our mode of approach to the other, and she does so through a reading of Descartes’ *Les passions de l’âme*. Descartes defined admiration as follows:

Lorsque la première rencontre de quelque objet nous surprend, et que nous le jugeons être nouveau, ou fort différent de ce que nous connaissions auparavant ou bien de ce que nous supposions qu’il devait être, cela fait que nous l’admirons et en sommes étonnés;... il me semble que l’admiration est la première des passions. (Art. 53 Bibl. de la Pléiade” qtd. in *Éthique* 76)

When our first encounter with some object surprises us, and we deem it to be new, or very different from what we used to know or of what we used to suppose it should be, we admire it and are surprised by it;... it seems to me that admiration is the first of the passions.

Irigaray argues that a new gaze, that of wonder, and the joy and surprise that go along with it, should nourish encounters between women and men. Descartes situates the passions at the meeting point between the psychological and the physical. Likewise, for Irigaray, admiration

garde un chemin entre physique et métaphysique, impressions corporelles et mouvements vers un objet, empirique ou transcendantal. Passion première et carrefour perpétuel, entre terre et ciel, ou enfers, où pourrait se remanier l’attraction entre les différents, notamment sexuels. (*Éthique* 82)

keeps a path between the physical and the metaphysical, corporeal impressions and movements toward an object, be it empirical or transcendental. First passion and perpetual crossroad, between earth and sky, or hell, where the attraction between the different, among others sexual, could be revised.

Admiration is not a blind adoration for the other, grounded in the delusion that s/he is superior to the self, but a creative affect that recognizes the surprise that difference

generates as well as the latter's dual nature, as both material and ideal; it is on this basis that new relations can be forged.

In *Beau Travail* in general, but in the dance scenes in particular, Denis insists on a distance, an interval of wonder that needs to be maintained for difference to exist. Like Irigaray, she sees admiration as rooted in both the spiritual and the physical, which are reflected in the almost devotional soundtrack and the sensuality of the young men's bodies. However, the physicality of those scenes appears to be situated outside the domain of lust. Desire is not what Denis primarily seeks to trigger. The director herself said of the shooting process of *Beau Travail*, "the legionnaires became an erotic object, but their beauty was more sad to me than erotic" (Denis, "Body Language"). Denis does not let us identify with or objectify her characters. She prefers a movement toward, a sympathy, a sort of affinity with the people who populate her films, those mysterious others who are too singular to be reduced to generic conventions and about whom we know too little to be able to colonize them with our own projections.

But the look that Denis casts on men is not only one of wonder, it is also disarmingly open and nonjudgmental. She delights in observing not only their youth and their vulnerability, but also their day-to-day virility, their machismo, their occasional inanity. The legionnaires in *Beau Travail*, are, aside from Sentain, Galoup, and Forrestier, represented in an extremely realistic way: in a couple of scenes, we hear them interact with each other in ways that reveal the kind of language, of jokes, of familiarity that they use. They resemble to a T the young men one would meet, for instance, at a bar in a small French city. For example, we see them stop for lunch and hear them interact in the distance. Their casual, boyish conversations, their tone, their crude vocabulary ring

strikingly true-to-life and spontaneous, and they cut through the film, unexpectedly, as these conversations (there are a few of them, always overheard furtively) contrast with the film's sleek, finely honed aesthetic, and that of the Legion itself. For example:

Legionnaire 1: "Wo! Putain, Nita t'as pas une bouche t'as un trou toi!" Legionnaire 2: "Casse-toi!" Legionnaire 1: "Mais ferme ta gueule, toi" (Legionnaire 1: "Hey! Shit, Nita, what you've got is not a mouth, it's a hole!" Legionnaire 2: "Get off!" Legionnaire 1: "Why don't you shut the fuck up?"). This scene, along with other instances of the everyday in *Beau Travail*,⁴⁰ needs to be set within the larger framework of Denis' entire filmic work. For instance, in *Nénette et Boni*, we overhear one of Boni's (Grégoire Colin) friends using explicitly sexist language ("C'est qui c'te fille? Elle est bizarre c'te chienne là" "Who's that girl? That bitch is weird") while referring to his sister Nénette (Alice Houri). The film, like a silent witness, records this line but does not condemn it. Boni simply replies that she is his sister. His own adolescent candor gets the better of our political consciousness, as Denis invites us to sympathize with him in his sexist pubescent sexual fantasies: we watch him, eagerly imagining his rape of the baker's wife (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi) while he is vigorously kneading a loaf of bread. What is truly remarkable is not only that Denis shoots these scenes without judgment, but that her look is so tender that these men's very mundanity, these elements of their personalities that we would probably find exasperating or despicable in real life, become strangely endearing. Paradoxically, this prosaic language also participates in the characters' appeal: an

⁴⁰ In *Beau Travail*, the mundane takes not only a linguistic form (at odds with the elegant precision of Galoup's diary), but it also manifests itself in the endless domestic tasks that the legionnaires undertake (at odds with the majesty of their desert dances and the virility of their trainings), as well as in the several pop songs that Denis uses throughout the film (Francky Vincent's "Tourment d'Amour," Tarkan's "Simaric," Corona's "Rhythm of the Night") which contrast with the solemnness of Britten's opera.

important aspect of Denis' cinematic skill is precisely this ability to integrate the mundane and the grandiose, two discrepant trajectories, into a coherent aesthetic that feeds on the very tension between the two. Denis' approach is a true instance of an acknowledgment of difference: one that does not seek to assimilate the other to the self but that recognizes him, admires him in his world-an instance of the interval of sexual difference.

This tension between the mundane and the lofty, between the earthly and the unearthly, which is central to Denis' films, can be traced in Irigaray's work as well, whose texts are rife with double entendres, sentences that can be read to refer both to metaphysics and to everyday life. The famous "two lips" of *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* are at once facial and vaginal, as well as a metaphor for the feminine as a virtuality that is yet to become actualized. These ambiguities are a part of her rhetorical strategy, which refuses to condone the artificial, phallogentric division between the realm of the spirit and that of the material. Irigaray suggests that this separation is at the heart of phallogentric thought and its betrayal of women since it enables philosophers and religious believers alike to disavow their debt to the maternal-feminine. This disavowal includes for example their obligation to their wives, who, more often than not, provide the material framework that enables the production of thought by cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children, and in many cases, giving financial support. Hence Irigaray makes frequent allusions to domestic work in her writings. Consider the following sentence, again from "La fécondité de la caresse," in which she discusses two lovers who encounter each other in the mode of difference: "Dont chacun ménage-aménage l'environnement, le corps et le berceau sans clore quoi que ce soit d'une chambre, d'une maison, d'une identité" ("Of which each

handles carefully and fixes up the environment, the body and the crib without closing off anything of a room, of a house, of an identity”; *Éthique* 174). The mutual production of a place for the other, where s/he can blossom in the singularity of her or his sex is framed by the vocabulary of the household: the crib, the room, the house. Further, “ménage-aménage” resonates with the domestic tasks traditionally executed by women: “ménager” means “to treat considerately,” but used as an adjective it means “domestic.” “Une ménagère” is a housewife. Similarly, “aménager,” “to fix up” evokes the laying out of rooms and interior decoration.

The enmeshment of the material and of the ideal is crucial to Irigaray’s philosophical project because the blossoming of difference in the world, which includes the realm of philosophy, will necessarily entail a recognition of embodied, that is, material, differences. Likewise, Denis will not allow for sexual difference to be reduced solely to either the physical or the ideal: both must and do have a place in her cinematic project.

2.9. Denis and Irigaray: Beyond Sexual Difference

I have so far used Irigaray to comment on Denis’ project. I would now like to try the reverse operation, and suggest that Denis’ filmic work can be used to reflect upon Irigaray’s, and in particular upon the place of non-sexual difference in her work. Whereas Irigaray addresses the issue of alterity in general on the basis of sexual difference, Denis is interested in the other in all her or his facets, and although she does focus on sexual difference in *Beau Travail*, her film does not suggest that she confers a special status to it. How does Irigaray conceptualize difference at large?

Like Denis, who engages with difficult aspects of alterity (and in particular with violence, as we will see in the next chapter), Irigaray is wary of the tendency of our age to extol a very vacuous form of difference. In particular, she criticizes the concept of “multiplicity,” which politicians so often use as a mark of their supposed open-mindedness and “tolerance,” an equally disturbing notion since it rests on the opposite of an affirmation of difference. She remarks that these terms most often actually serve to deny difference, for the other is made to look, think, and act just like us. Irigaray complains that “multiplicity” is used to camouflage Oneness and disavow difference. She demonstrates that there cannot be difference among three or among one thousand if difference between the two (man and woman) does not exist. Sexual difference, she argues, is the only ontological difference, as it pertains to one’s very position in the chain of life: either I stem from a body that is like mine and I belong to a sex that can give life, or I stem from a body that is different from mine and my sex cannot bring life into the world.

Further, Irigaray argues that sexual difference is the only *universal* difference:

La différence sexuelle est sans doute le contenu le plus adéquat de l’universel. En effet, ce contenu est à la fois réel et universel. La différence sexuelle est un donné immédiat naturel et elle est une composante réelle et irréductible de l’universel. Le genre humain tout entier est composé de femmes et d’hommes et il n’est composé de rien d’autre. Le problème des races est, en fait, un problème secondaire – sauf du point de vue de la géographique? – qui nous cache la forêt, et il en va de même des autres diversités culturelles, religieuses, économiques et politiques. (*J’aime à toi* 84-5)⁴¹

⁴¹ Although Irigaray’s assertion that there are in the world only women and men is absurd, since it disavows the existence of intersex and transsexual subjects, her argument remains valid, as taking non-cisgender communities into account does not invalidate her argument but merely broadens the scope of sexual difference. Transsexual and intersex identities have proper ontologies, different from those of cismen and women, since they are positioned differently with regard to life and reproduction. To the best of my

Sexual difference is without a doubt the adequate content of the universal. Indeed, this content is at once real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. Human kind as a whole is composed of women and of men and it is composed of nothing else. The problematic of the races is, in fact, a secondary problem-except from the point of view of the geographic?— that makes us unable to see the forest, and the same goes for other diversities, be they cultural, religious, economic or political.

All other differences are very real, and they may have more importance in one's day-to-day experience than sexual difference, but only the latter is universal. While other differences are contingent or geographical, only sexual difference is present in all cultures, situating each subject within a group (in the vast majority of cases, female or male) that has a very precise, irreducible relation to reproduction. Race, for instance, albeit clearly embodied, is always a matter of context. "Races" are temporary arrangements, provisional categories that evolve ceaselessly.⁴² Along the same lines, differences in expressions of sexuality, although they exist throughout the world, vary tremendously in their expression from culture to culture and they evolve in the course of one's life (the sexual preferences of a one-year old girl have little in common with those of a 15-year-old or of the mature woman that she will become). Fundamentally, various races or sexual orientations do not produce divergent ontological positions with regard to life and its generation. Sexual difference is thus the only universal, ontological difference.

knowledge, Irigaray has not addressed these questions in writing but she did acknowledge them verbally in these terms (Doctoral Seminar, June 2008).

⁴² For instance, up until the 1980s, the Italians who had been brought to Belgium in very large numbers throughout the first half of the twentieth century to work in the mining and the steel industries were not seen as white, and yet nowadays they are overwhelmingly identified as such.

Opening Irigaray's reflection to difference at large, as Denis invites us to do, is a risky operation: indeed, the danger for feminist philosophy is to drown sexual difference into a sea of other differences, making it just one of many, and thereby abandoning its specificity and its very pertinence to feminism (not to mention the relevance of feminism itself). At the same time, sexual difference is only one of the many traits that constitutes each individual and one of the many lines through which power operates to establish alienating hierarchies among people-race, sexuality, health, and others serve the same purpose. Moreover, it is impossible to isolate entirely sexual difference when thinking about subjectivity as it is always already tied into a network of various dimensions that coalesce to form a subject. Therefore, while it is important to maintain the particularity of Irigaray's philosophical work and its focus on sexual difference, it is just as important to detach it from an exclusively feminist framework for it always participates in a much greater reality, that of life and power, and not only as it pertains to the relations between the sexes.

Irigaray's concept of the interval, on which I elaborated in the previous chapter, forms a strong basis from which to open up her work. For isn't the interval already inherently multiple and paradoxical? And isn't this imposition of coherence (that is, arguing that Irigaray's work cannot be used to think about sexual difference *and* about difference at large) itself at odds with the tenets of her philosophical project? Indeed, Irigaray has radically questioned the demands of coherence and Aristotle's law of noncontradiction throughout her work. She has shown that these postulations, which are generally considered to be universally valid, could not be used to think about female sexuality: in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, she asks us to do away with conventional

arithmetics and to recognize that woman “n’est ni une ni deux” (26). Irigaray suggests that the logical constructs that we live by, and the law of noncontradiction in particular are in no way universal. Rather, they are isomorphic with male bodies and represent their interests: either the penis is there or it is absent (castration). One or zero. There is no place, in this mode of thinking, for the specificities of woman’s sex, in which zero, one, two and the multiple appear simultaneously. Therefore throughout her work, Irigaray has defied the foundations of Western logic through the use of paradoxes, aporias and oxymorons.

Although Irigaray does not use them explicitly, a close reading of “Le lieu, l’intervalle,” in which she discusses the interval, reveals that she defines the latter through a series of implied oxymorons: the interval, we infer, is a close distance, abolished to enable intimacy and maintained to guarantee integrity; it is at once indefinable and embodied, abstract and tangible; it is present and yet to be realized; it is both space and time. Not a thing but also the universe deployed.

The oxymoron constitutes a tension between two irreconcilable terms, it is a destabilizing force that is always revolutionary and transgressive. For is there a greater taboo than to break the law of noncontradiction? It means going to the epicenter of what sustains the world as we know it and its rationalism nourished by Aristotle, Descartes, and Hegel. The oxymoron also demands an abandonment: we can no longer calculate, guarantee, foresee and have no other choice than to surrender to its productive energy. Whereas the paradox offers an apparent contradiction but is ultimately coherent, the oxymoron, as a figure of speech rather than a philosophical statement, is not subjected to the rules of rationalism, and it does not resolve the tension between the two terms that

constitute it. It is also in this respect that it finds its feminist dimension: instead of imposing upon us a phallic logic of sense and power, it seduces us, and without our noticing, it opens ourselves up to ourselves, to others, and to the forces of the world. Indeed, the oxymoron is itself a contradiction: very real and at the same time impossible, tangible and yet always to come.

The shape of the oxymoron goes as follows: and... and... and... It affirms endlessly without seeking to subsume difference under one category. Therefore, I want to argue that the interval works to address both sexual difference specifically and difference at large *at the same time*, and that this does not constitute an impossibility within the framework of a philosophical world that refuses to adhere strictly and always to the law of noncontradiction. The interval is thus at once that which mediates the relation between man and woman as the only universal difference and that which can be used to think difference at large.

From this perspective, if the trajectory is understood as the movement of a subject in duration, the interval is that which enables the existence of all trajectories, not only sexual. In other words, if the subject is not approached spatially (through hierarchies) but temporally, she exists through a vast network of intervals, which at once enable her relations to others and keep her from being subsumed in them. Denis and Irigaray both propose a durational approach to alterity, close to Bergson's thought, in which the other's mystery is left to unfold at its own rhythm, and in which time itself functions as the driving force from which all differences can blossom.

2.10. Conclusion

In *Beau Travail*, Denis seeks to represent foreignness: all film techniques, from editing and sound to characterization and mise-en-scène are mobilized to serve this evocation of difference through a vast network of distinct trajectories. I have shown that Denis' depiction of alterity is rooted in a particular understanding of space and time that resonates with Bergson's own theory of duration and differentiation. Moreover, Denis both follows and subverts Irigaray's conceptualization of sexual difference as an interval of time, through which the philosopher suggests that difference can only be actualized if the other is approached in duration: rather than reducing her to an image that can be venerated, owned, or destroyed, Irigaray insists on a love rooted in becoming.

The next chapter, which addresses *Trouble Every Day*, further investigates the echoes between Denis and Irigaray through the interval. However, *Trouble Every Day* raises an entirely different set of questions, albeit ones that are complementary to those studied in this chapter. *Beau Travail* relishes in the impossibility to capture the other: admiration at a distance sustains many of the filmic pleasures it offers. Conversely, *Trouble Every Day* examines the melancholy that stems from this unreachability. Further, the film delves into the question of love as lust and desire, and depicts the monstrous violence that they can generate. As we will see, through this evocation of violence, Denis brings us once more to face the limits of Irigaray's thought.

Chapter 3. Time and Difference: Love in Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day*

3.1. Introduction

While desire is repressed and crypted in *Beau Travail*, it is literally exploded in *Trouble Every Day*, a gore film capturing the violent, bloody encounters between two devouring lovers and their victims. It is Denis' *oeuvre maudite*, her most misunderstood film, at least judging by the very unfavorable criticism that befell it upon its release. Although it has now achieved cult status, the movie created a scandal at Cannes, where two spectators fainted during the projection, and critics' reactions to the film were overwhelmingly negative. As Judith Mayne remarks, Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* is "almost generous" compared to other critics, when he calls *Trouble Every Day* this daring, intermittently beautiful failure of a movie" (qtd. in Mayne 107). More than the violence itself (the film only contains two gory scenes), I argue that what makes *Trouble Every Day* so shocking is that it provides a deeply disturbing, yet convincing commentary on love, postulating the impossibility of ever actually reaching the other. It is this confrontation with the underside of love that renders the film at once so brutal and melancholy. Yet paradoxically, by giving us no way out of the tragic nature of love, the film demands that we renew our belief in the world.

Like *Beau Travail*, *Trouble Every Day* draws its force from temporality.

However, rather than focusing on trajectories of difference, this film uses time to explore what lies in-between, such as the gaps between individuals who always fail to truly meet one another. It does so through the devices of modern cinema as they were outlined by Deleuze, and in particular through what he called "the interstice," an irrational spacing

between two images or two sounds, which provides the formal expression of the missed encounters, the conflicts, and the furtive, violent embraces that pervade the film. I further argue that the interstice can be seen as forming an aesthetic pendant to the interval. Since the impossibility to meet the other in *Trouble Every Day* is a form of interval, but one fed by lust and violence, the film provides an interesting framework from which to offer critical perspectives on Irigaray.

3.2. Narrative Summary

Trouble Every Day tells the story of a woman, Coré (Béatrice Dalle) and a man, Shane (Vincent Gallo), afflicted by the same incurable ailment, a mysterious disease that gives them the irrepressible urge to mingle sex and violence, by biting, even devouring their partners during intercourse. Their perversion forms the expression of the uncontrollable intensity of their desire. Coré lives with her husband Léo (Alex Descas) in a house in the suburbs of Paris, where the latter, who is a doctor, tries to keep his wife captive in order to prevent her from indulging in her murderous excursions, while he seeks to find a cure for her. Shane is on his honeymoon in Paris, with his young wife June (Tricia Vessey). It gradually becomes clear that this specific destination was motivated at least partly by Shane's wish to visit Léo: the two men had collaborated years before, until Shane, who is also a doctor, stole some of Léo's work, apparently resulting in the latter's ban from the scientific community. Now Shane seems to hope that Léo can help him cure his disease, and he attempts to track him down. When he finally finds his home, however, instead of Léo, Shane encounters Coré, his female alter ego, with whom he has a strong, though undefined bond. For her part, Coré has just set fire to the house, yearning to die after

being yet again unable to resist her murderous impulses. In a confusing scene, the two protagonists embrace each other, but their loving tenderness quickly turns into a violent confrontation, in which each tries to strangle the other to death. Coré loses the upper hand, and Shane kills her as the house is being consumed in flames. In the rest of the film, he continues his usual sinister activities (following, groping, raping and killing women), while maintaining an appearance of normalcy, supported by his young, uncannily virginal wife, whom he loves dearly. In fact, each of these two couples is bonded by a very strong, mutual love. Neither Shane nor Coré is simply evil. Rather, as Beugnet puts it, “in *Trouble Every Day*, the transgressor is a tragic figure, beset by irrepressible cravings, but tormented by the horrifying nature of his or her desires” (*Denis* 165). Both are utterly desperate about their condition: Coré wishes to die (this is almost the only sentence that she pronounces in the entire film) and several close-ups of Shane disclose his extreme desperation.

3.3. Love in *Trouble Every Day*

3.3.1. Devouring Passions

If *Trouble Every Day* is interpreted, as I argue it should be, as an allegory of love, then Denis’ vision of it is frightful, as the danger that it entails is nothing short of death itself. While this risk is represented metaphorically through devouring, the latter also alludes to the actual menace of obliteration that comes with amorous surrender, as the ego becomes filled with projected images of the other.⁴³ But the threat of death, far from forming an

⁴³ In “On Narcissicism,” Freud notes that “The highest phase of development of which object-libido is capable is seen in the state of being in love, when the subject seems to give up his own personality in favour of an object-cathexis” (75).

obstacle to the emergence of love, rather brings into relief its inescapable nature, as characters keep coming back to each other in spite of the horrors that their relationships bring about.

Denis gives us a picture of love as a force so deep and brutal that it cannot be contained. She has stated that unspeakable violence is always at its heart, noting “that every mother wants to eat her baby with love” (Gibbons and Jeffries). Tellingly, the film was billed “I love you so much I could eat you.” In *Trouble Every Day*, love can be at once lust and fondness, or lust only: that Coré and Shane direct their murderous impulses to strangers would seem to suggest that they are driven by blind sexual appetites only. However, they are also terrified of submitting their cherished spouses to their bloody assaults, as they direct the same savage passion to their beloveds as they do to their random victims. Hence in the film, love and desire cannot be properly distinguished as they function on the same continuum. For Denis (as for Irigaray), all love is physical, grounded in bodies that always want more.

In her films, and particularly in *Trouble Every Day*, Denis foregrounds desire’s nature as a force, and as such she shows it coursing blindly through people and overwhelming them. Desire knows no morals, living beyond codes and prescriptions. It gushes forth and carries characters from body to body; it lifts them up and pushes them toward the other, the unknown, and the overcoming of the self. As Denis notes in an interview: “Moi, je parle du désir de manger l’autre, de la ‘dévoration’ dont il est question dans les romans, de ces moments de trouble dans la passion amoureuse où se révèle une force brute (et non brutale) qu’on appelle la libido” (“I speak of the desire to eat the other, of the ‘devouring’ that novels talk about, those moments of turmoil in amorous

passion where a brute (but not brutal) force that we call libido reveals itself"; Tinazzi 13). Instead of being an end in itself, violence is a product of this force, and while it emerges almost accidentally, it can never be entirely removed. Lust is always linked to transgression and it is dangerous: "It threatens the integrity of the body and of the self, and reveals the fragility of the human mind and flesh, beset by a sense of loss and lack and always at risk of dissolving into desire, to be 'consumed' by it" (Beugnet, *Denis* 132). This violence, like the martial dances in *Beau Travail*, is aestheticized. For example, the most memorable of several extreme close-ups in the film occurs as Coré is about to murder her teenage neighbor. The camera, in what appears to be a point-of-view shot from Coré's perspective, slowly studies the young boy's torso: his scattered hairs, his nipples, the pale grain of his skin come to form the texture of an almost lunar landscape. The boy is pure throbbing flesh. The pain of desire, suffused with melancholy and morbidity, becomes captivating.

Paradoxically, the flesh depicted in this scene is at once extremely close and irremediably distant. In Irigarayan terms, the film presents us with always fruitless attempts to do away with the interval, the separation that is needed for the other to breathe (quite literally in this case). In this respect, Jean-Luc Nancy offers an interesting commentary on the film: he writes that it is made entirely on and about the skin (4) and notes that "[w]hat this fury is after is the truth of a body in so far as it is made up of that which exceeds its enclosing, in so far as it is something other than an arrangement of organs and limbs, something other than its more or less attractive shape" (4). Like Irigaray, he posits that love and desire seek to attain the mystery of the other. But Nancy then goes on to suggest that Coré and Shane discover this truth in the act of

dismemberment, as he writes that “[t]he mutilated body reveals its interiority, its depth, the secret of its life” (8). Here I disagree with him. Rather, the mystery of the other is never attained in *Trouble Every Day*: Coré and Shane *seek*, by devouring their lovers, to get to their secret, but they always fail to do so, which makes them need to commit their crimes over and over again.

Therefore, if I concur with Nancy’s insistence that this is a film about the skin, a film that presents us primarily with skins, I would argue that this is a way of foregrounding the futility of Coré and Shane’s sexual atrocities: tearing the skin to get to what lies beyond is an illusion. The skin (to which Irigaray would perhaps refer as the mucous) can in fact never be crossed, and neither cutting nor rape can open up the other’s mystery. “I love you so much that I’m going to eat you up” is always bound to fail as the devouring goes hand in hand with the disappearance of the other. The difference of the other is irreducible (so long as s/he is alive) and the interval always remains in play.

3.3.2. Missed Encounters and Aberrant Spaces

This failure to meet the beloved is mirrored at the formal level, as Denis breaks away from the rules of continuity editing by using an elliptical montage that confers a sense of repeated missed encounters. The effect is disconcerting, fostering disorientation in her viewers. The film’s breaches in continuity are small, almost imperceptible, yet strong enough to make the viewer feel confused and slightly lost in the space of the film, and sensing that the meeting with the other has somehow been missed. In particular, Denis

enjoys violating the 180-degree rule and using false eyeline matches⁴⁴ and point-of-view shots, which leads the spectator to experience the space as fragmented rather than unified, and the characters as disconnected from each other.

The examples are countless in *Trouble Every Day*; one may be found in practically every scene. For instance, after the credits, the first scene of the film begins with an establishing long shot of Coré leaning against the right side of a gray van in the outskirts of Paris and looking roughly towards the camera. Next, through an apparent point-of-view shot, Denis shows a red tractor-trailer driving toward Coré, who is presumably standing in her original position. However, as the tractor-trailer drives by to the left of the camera, it appears that Coré must have moved, since the road shown in the first shot was too narrow for the truck to drive past her. The truck driver looks down, slightly to the left, presumably toward Coré. His gaze goes beyond the camera without meeting it, which leads us to conclude that we had been mistaken to think this was a point-of-view shot from Coré's perspective, since it would be logical that he be looking at her. And indeed, Coré walks into the frame a second later from the right, violating the 180-degree rule (she is now on the "wrong" side of the camera). Her position suggests, not only that the earlier shot was not a POV, but also that the truck driver was not looking at her. At the end of this shot, we see Coré in profile, looking to the left. The following shot is thus set up as another POV from Coré's perspective, and we see the truck stop and back up toward her. The camera slowly tracks to the left, moving just beyond the back

⁴⁴ The eyeline match is a film editing technique that allows spectators to see what a given character is looking at. Shot A will show him looking into offscreen space and shot B will picture the observed object. A false eyeline match will appear to show us what a character is examining, but shot B will in fact picture a different object than the one the character beholds.

left corner of the truck, which stops. The driver gets out of the truck, and then there is a reverse-shot of Coré, who is staring at him with a mysterious look on her face. As the driver walks toward her, eventually passing to the right of the camera, it becomes clear that what we had thought was a point-of-view shot was in fact taken from about a yard from Coré's actual position. We learn in the next scene, shot at night, that this man has been the victim of Coré's rapturous and violent loving, as he has died, and his corpse lies disfigured in a meadow where Léo finds him. Coré sits curled up a little further away, distressed. The lovers (Coré and the truck driver) have missed each other, as he has tragically misread her intentions. The play of gazes, always a little awry, thus mirrors the theme of the film: that is, the failure to meet the other, the difficulty of love, and the blind brutality of passion.

Denis also multiplies missed gazes and destabilizing montage effects beyond carnal relationships: after Léo has found his wife in the scene I have just described, he looks up to the sky, and the next shot shows us Shane and June looking down from a plane window, briefly creating the illusion that they are looking at each other. Similarly, the young neighbor whom Coré murders spends a lot of time looking at her house from his window, but his gaze is never really aligned with what he is supposed to be looking at. All these instances, and many more, serve to create a play of gazes that forms an unstable geometry, drawing impossible shapes in a filmic universe in which cause and effect are systematically disrupted and loneliness reigns.

The sense of void and solitude, rooted in the impossibility to reach the other, is rendered through this frustrating play of gazes and misaligned shots that creates the notion of aberrant spaces. But Denis goes further. First, the camera explores many large

in-between spaces, such as the endless hallways of the hotel, its disquieting basements, and the outskirts of Paris in which Léo and Coré live. Moreover, whereas traditional narrative cinema tends to signal intimacy between characters through dialogues, *Trouble Every Day* counts very few of them (Coré and Léo hardly exchange a word, and even Shane and June do not say much to each other). The film's soundtrack at large contributes to form a sense of emptiness, with the forlornly beautiful music of the Tindersticks and the impersonal, hard-to-identify mechanical sound effects (for instance, the mysterious bass sounds in the basement where the maid changes into her uniform, the sound of the plane, the tick-tock sound of rotating stir bars in beakers in the scientist's laboratory and the deafeningly loud sounds around the glass tanks, which probably come from fans and filters). The film's slow rhythm, with many long takes of either empty spaces or objects whose existence is never justified in the narrative, further reinforces the sense of void. Additionally, with the notable exception of the scenes that capture Coré's devouring ecstasies, which are shot in extreme close-up, medium and long shots are common in *Trouble Every Day*, creating a distance between audience and characters. Lastly, the film relies consistently on elliptical editing: links between scenes are missing, and we rarely know how characters get from one place to another, or how much time has elapsed between their actions. Sometimes, the editing is elliptical within scenes, creating a slight sense of destabilization. For instance, when Shane walks into the hotel to check in, June stays outside, looking at the Parisian street for no visible purpose. This method keeps the viewer feeling that she has missed something and that she is not entirely connected to the film, as though it were keeping something from her. It does not function like a tease or an element that will be revealed eventually within a suspenseful narrative

(such as, for instance, the name of the murderer in a classical Hollywood film). Rather, the feeling here is that something is missing and that it has been lost forever.

This sense of loss marks all of Denis' films. She has stated in an interview that "[she] always thought of Herman Melville as a brother in the sense of sharing his feelings of sadness, nostalgia and disappointment, the sense of having lost something" (Denis, "Desire is Violence"). Similarly, the French critic Jean-Sébastien Chauvin writes that,

[l]es films de Claire Denis ne se laissent pas aisément appréhender. Toujours, quelque chose semble se jouer à la marge en même temps que sous nos yeux, comme si un mouvement souterrain, une inquiétude diffuse infléchissait imperceptiblement la marche réaliste de l'histoire. (Chauvin 77)

[t]he films of Claire Denis do not let themselves be easily apprehended. Something always seems to be playing out in the margin at the same time as under our eyes, as though an underground movement, a diffuse anxiety, imperceptibly inflected the realistic unfolding of the narrative.

The narrative itself invites a sense of emptiness and a lack of power: not only is it slow, but mostly all the characters are powerless in the face of the disease and its insatiable hunger. They are also defenseless with regard to their love for each other: Shane and June, Léo and Coré are tied by their profound, sincere devotion to each other. There is a terrible sadness in *Trouble Every Day*, which stems from the inexorability of both illness and love. Paradoxically, it is maybe Shane and Coré, the abusers, who are the most impotent because they cannot help their sexual urges, even though they are destroying their own lives. Thus we find in *Trouble Every Day* another incarnation of the fatalism of Denis' films that I have evoked in the preceding chapter: a form of abandonment to the flow of life.

The formal elements that Denis uses to address the impossibility of meeting the beloved other in *Trouble Every Day*, that is, the missed gazes, the sense of void, the aberrant spaces, the disruptions of cause and effect, are all characteristic of what Deleuze

calls the cinema of the time-image, which by and large overlaps with post-World War II art film. Like Denis, Deleuze's work on film is deeply invested in a reflection on love, and his analysis of the functioning of modern cinema sheds light on Denis' aesthetics in *Trouble Every Day*. Given that his views on film form a complex philosophical system, I will begin with a brief introduction to his cinema books.

3.4. The Time-Image

3.4.1. Gilles Deleuze and the Interstice

Deleuze seeks to understand the evolution of cinema, and in particular to account for the division between pre- and post-WWII cinema,⁴⁵ on the basis of time and space. The first period in the history of film is marked by a commitment to what he calls "le schème sensori-moteur," or the 'sensori-motor system,' that is, a filmic world determined by causality and logical spatial and temporal coordinates. Deleuze describes this type of cinema as "l'image-mouvement," a mode of filmmaking in which time serves movement, as the montage allows the actors' actions to make sense. This model has continued on to this day in much of Hollywood cinema and its global offshoots. After the Second World War, Deleuze notices a breakdown of the sensori-motor system in what has generally come to be referred to as "art cinema."⁴⁶ what matters in the films he studies is no longer the logical unfolding of events, but contemplation. Characters themselves have become observers, plunged into a world that cannot be understood according to a unifying, totalizing purpose or even common spatio-temporal coordinates. In this type of film, time

⁴⁵ Deleuze's system is based almost entirely on his readings of U.S., Russian, and a few European national cinemas. He makes references to Japanese cinema throughout, and to what was then called "Third World Film" in Chapter 8 of *L'Image-temps*.

⁴⁶ It should be noted that this is not a term that Deleuze himself uses.

is no longer subordinated to movement and action. On the contrary, time exists for itself, as an end of its own to be contemplated and experienced, which leads Deleuze to state that this kind of film conveys a direct image of time.

In the seventh chapter of *L'Image-temps*, “La pensée et le cinéma,” (203-45), Deleuze develops the concept of the interstice. He notices that in the cinema of the movement-image, the logic of montage mirrors Bergson’s understanding of time: duration, the passing of time as it brings about the emergence of the new, can be thought of in two interrelated ways that I have evoked at the beginning of the preceding chapter. First, we can think of duration as a series of closed systems, of isolated movements, that exhibit the characteristics of commonsense space and time. Secondly, duration can be seen as the open whole containing all these closed sets as universal vibration and flow. Deleuze argues that this double nature of time can be traced in the cinema of the movement-image: “the frame of the camera delimits a closed set of elements. The shot is a discrete set of elements enduring in time, and hence a unit of movement in which objects change positions and by doing so express the transformation of a whole. And montage, as that process of cutting and splicing whereby shots are literally put in relation to one another, is the means whereby the open whole of *durée* plays through and informs the entire film” (Bogue 42). The whole is an “organic totality that establishes itself by opposing and overcoming its own parts” (*Image-temps* 206). One paradigmatic example of this kind of cinema is the work of Sergei Eisenstein, whose dialectical system of filmmaking stems from the juxtaposition and collision between shots. In his films, the unity of the whole is the product of its conflicting parts.

In contrast, in modern cinema, the whole is what Deleuze calls “le dehors” ‘the outside.’ What matters is no longer the unity of the work, the correspondence between the parts and the whole, but the interstice between the images, that is, “un espacement qui fait que chaque image s’arrache au vide et y retombe” (“a spacing that makes each image tear itself from the void and fall back into it”; *Image-temps* 234). The arrangement of images in the cinema of the time-image no longer operates on the basis of association: images are not chosen to be put side by side because they correspond to or conflict with each other. Rather, modern cinema arranges images by virtue of a process of differentiation. This does not mean that they are randomly placed next to each other. Rather, the effect that is sought in editing is the liberation of a potential, of a force coming from the outside and flowing in the space between shots. The same goes for sound: whereas in the movement-image, the soundtrack was congruent with the images on the screen, modern cinema often does not allow what is seen and what is heard to overlap. Further, sounds themselves will come to clash with each other, creating disorienting effects.

In sum, the crack, the fissure is now the most important element of film, for film itself has ceased to be a chain of images and sounds, tied together by logical concatenations and the imperatives of the action-image, to become the expression of the power of the void. Interstices proliferate everywhere. Deleuze writes that the “*faux-raccord* [...] prend un nouveau sens, en même temps qu’il devient la loi” (“the *continuity error* [...] takes on a new meaning at the same time as it becomes the law”; 235, emphasis in the text). This new meaning marks the evolution from the simple continuity error (such as a character wearing lipstick in one shot and none in the next) to the generalized attack

on Hollywood continuity that characterizes modern cinema (think for instance of the destabilizing editing in the scene from *Trouble Every Day* that I have analyzed earlier).

Most intriguingly, Deleuze argues that the interstice is also important from the point-of-view of thought in the cinema. In classical cinema, thought is the result of what Deleuze called a “nooshock,” a shock to the mind, which awakens in the viewer the “spiritual automaton,” the thinker of the cinema. For Eisenstein, for instance, the conflicts between shots were meant to awaken the political consciousness of the viewer through the violence of dialectical collisions, as these mirrored the Marxist account of history and the ineluctability of the revolution. The problem, Deleuze argues, is that these methods were recuperated by State interests. The forces of the movement-image were made to manipulate the masses and serve propaganda (he cites Leni Riefenstahl): “L’automate spirituel est devenu l’homme fasciste” (“The spiritual automaton has become the fascistic man”; 214). After World War II, what Deleuze calls “good” cinema, that is, cinema that acts and thinks, can no longer believe in its own capacity to transform thought and the world.

Instead, what emerges in the second half of the twentieth century is the interstice, the shock between images, between sounds, and between images and sounds that no longer serves the unity of the whole by tying images together rationally, as it did in classical cinema. Now the interstice is primary and it represents the formal reflection, as well as the instrument, of a new mode of thinking that serves the purposes of the contemporary world, in which unified, harmonious, Cartesian thinking has become impossible. Deleuze relates the breakdown of the sensori-motor system to the breakdown of the link between man and the world. In the modern world, the nature of what is

intolerable has changed: whereas the intolerable used to be restricted to major injustices and nameless tragedies, it has now become our daily lives themselves: we are stuck in the unbearableness of banality itself. Further, we are constantly faced with our own incapacity to produce unified thought systems. It is commonly held that modern people no longer believe in a world beyond this one;⁴⁷ it is similarly frequent to hear that no salvation can be found in discourse or politics. And indeed, for instance in Godard's work, the discourse of the socialist or even that of the filmmaker does not receive a better treatment than that of the torturer (*Image-temps* 224). But Deleuze goes much further and contends, shockingly, convincingly, that the essence of our modern lives is that we no longer believe in the world itself. He writes, "[n]ous ne croyons même pas aux événements qui nous arrivent, l'amour, la mort, comme s'ils ne nous concernaient qu'à moitié. Ce n'est pas nous qui faisons du cinéma, c'est le monde qui nous apparaît comme un mauvais film." ("We do not even believe in the events that happen to us, love, death, as though they only half-concerned us. We are not the ones making films, it is the world that appears to us as a bad movie"; 223). We have become anesthetized, we are numb to the world and to life, as "l'homme est dans le monde comme dans une situation optique et sonore pure" ("man is in the world as in a pure optical and sound situation"; 223), detached from his own existence and unable to believe in the very principles of life. In the words of Ronald Bogue: "In the absence of a unifying sensori-motor schema, the world seems alien; its certainties and verities seem hollow parodies of themselves, no longer credible or believable" (179).

⁴⁷ The great numbers of religious believers in modern societies, especially in North America, may seem to invalidate this claim, but in support of Deleuze's thought, it can be argued that contemporary faith is so strong precisely because it rests on a disavowal of the meaninglessness of the modern condition.

The great challenge of our time, then, is to restore our belief in the world, for only faith, even if it is not religious, can reconnect man to what his senses tell him about the world. Only belief can make us live *in* the world again, instead of observing ourselves from a distance. Therefore, “[i]l faut que le cinéma filme, non pas le monde, mais la croyance à ce monde, notre seul lien” (“it is necessary that cinema films, not the world itself, but the belief in this world, our only link”; 223). Deleuze gives examples in the history of philosophy of thinkers who have privileged belief over knowledge. Some of these philosophers have been atheists: Nietzsche, in particular, constructs his whole work on the basis of an unfaltering belief in the world. As an example in film, Deleuze cites Godard’s 1964 film *Bande à part*, which tells the story of a group of three young delinquents. He quotes Godard saying about the characters in the film that

[c]e sont des gens qui sont réels, et c’est le monde qui fait bande à part. C’est le monde qui se fait du cinéma. C’est le monde qui n’est pas synchrone, eux sont justes, sont vrais, ils représentent la vie. Ils vivent une histoire simple, c’est le monde autour d’eux qui vit un mauvais scénario. (223)

These people are real, and it is the world that is the outsider (*fait bande à part*). It’s the world that fantasizes (*se fait du cinéma*). It’s the world that is not synchronic, but they are right, they are true, they represent life. They live a simple story, it is the world that surrounds them that functions like a bad script.

But what would it mean to believe in this world? Deleuze argues that belief is no longer a matter of believing in a world beyond this one, or even in the transformation of the world as we know it. Rather, we need to believe in what we have, that is, simply, in the body, our own and that of the world. In a delightfully incisive passage, he writes that,

Nous devons croire au corps, mais comme au germe de vie, à la graine qui fait éclater les pavés, qui s’est conservée, perpétuée dans le saint suaire ou les bandelettes de la momie, et qui témoigne pour la vie, dans ce monde-ci tel qu’il est. Nous avons besoin d’une éthique ou d’une foi, ce qui fait rire les idiots; ce n’est pas un besoin de croire à autre chose, mais un besoin de croire à ce monde-ci, dont les idiots font partie. (225)

We must believe in the body, but as in the germ of life, the seed that bursts cobblestones, that has preserved itself, that has perpetuated in the holy shroud or in the wrappings of the mummy, and that testifies for life, in this world as it is. We need an ethics or a faith, which makes idiots laugh; it is not a need to believe in something else, but a need to believe in this world, of which idiots are a part.

Deleuze shares with Denis the same absolute demand that life, including the untold horrors that sustain our daily existence (such as the certainty of death or the dizzying terror of passion), be faced with courage. In particular, they are invested in the necessity to renew our belief in love through film, and both agree on the method: the interstice, that which comes between the shots to reveal that which we can no longer think and experience.

3.4.2. Interstices in *Trouble Every Day*

The opening sequence of the film constitutes a good place from which to further explore the resonances between Denis' work and the interstice. *Trouble Every Day* begins, before the credits, with a series of vignettes, the first of which lasts for almost an entire minute (fifty-seven seconds) and pictures a young man kissing a young woman in the backseat of the car, at night. The scene is shot in close-up with a hand-held camera from the front seat. The characters are only faintly lit by a bluish glow coming from the back of the car. He kisses her ravenously, devouringly; their embrace is set to a haunting, melancholy song by the Tindersticks called "Trouble Every Day." A long black screen follows, that lasts for over twenty seconds before changing into a view of the golden glint of street lamps reflected in the Seine at night. A dissolve brings us to a wider view of these reflections, now including the river banks and a series of bridges, before dissolving once more into an even wider view of the river, at dawn this time, featuring a postcard-perfect

outlook on the Seine, with purple skies, a bridge, and what may be the basilica of Montmartre in the far background (each of these three views of the Seine lasts for about fifteen seconds).

The very first vignette offers noteworthy insights into the film as a whole. The young couple kissing avidly seems to suggest that Coré and Shane's disease should not be judged as fundamentally different from other, more common forms of passionate desire. Theirs is simply a desire that has gone to the limit of what lust can be (that is, a need to open up and devour the other) but this is a difference in degree, not in kind. The young passionate couple in this early sequence participates in the same movement: a love that wants so much it becomes almost violent. Denis shows that the underside of love, its murderous, devouring energy, which explodes in Shane and Coré's excesses, is always present in amorous passion.

This opening scene, about which Denis said that it contained the whole film (Denis, "Desire is Violence"), confirms that *Trouble Every Day* is primarily a film about love. Hence, Godard's note on *Bande à part* can be extended to the characters of *Trouble Every Day*: they too are true for their love is visceral and sincere, although it is also destructive of themselves and of others. In fact, *Trouble Every Day* invites us to believe in the flesh "comme dans le germe de la vie" 'as in the germ of life,' following Deleuze's formula that I quoted in the previous section. This task is dangerous and these bodies overflow in all directions, bursting with a desire so vivid and sharp that it annihilates the other. For Denis, as for Deleuze, it is impossible to contain passion within the boundaries that are assigned by "romantic" love, that is, a desire that would not be violent. Love and

desire are forceful, enrapturing affects that destroy her characters as much as they sustain their lives.

The connection between Denis' and Deleuze's respective projects is made even clearer by the use of the black screen that follows the lovers' embrace and that foregrounds the use of the interstice in the film. This long black screen recalls the process of differentiation that separates shots in the cinema of the time-image. Blackness here is the unreadable, it is a force that cannot be tied down to one single interpretation as it makes itself radically available to all readings. As the interstice that prefigures all others in the film, and most notably the missed gazes that I have evoked earlier, it anticipates the darkness and the mystery around which the film revolves. As such, the black screen marks the first instance of our inability to think and to arrest meaning.

What Deleuze calls the void can be traced in Denis in the sense of emptiness that pervades *Trouble Every Day*. The black screen marks the intrusion of this vacuity, which we will find over and over again not only between shots but also in the narration itself. For Deleuze, the void generates disorientation and it brings us irremediably away from the unity of the movement-image. Deleuze focuses on the organization of shots in film, its temporal structure, but does not relate this to the mood of films or to particular narratives. Yet it seems that Denis' films, and in particular this one, are marked by a sense of void that echoes that to which Deleuze refers. The whole film seems to be drawing from this original black screen, blowing emptiness throughout the film, like a cold draft. This void is related to the melancholy of *Trouble Every Day*, in which violence is pictured as an abandonment to the body and its drives, the "secular damnation of desire" to which I alluded in the previous chapter. It would be futile to try to resist this

damnation for it forms the very material of life, and for Denis, we have no choice but to abandon ourselves to it. The possibility of perfection does not exist in her worldview; there is no utopia, no ideal as to what relations between humans should be. Her most interesting characters are shown to remain true to this desire⁴⁸ and to affirm life for what it offers them, accepting that divergent desires create painful relations. This is, quite simply, ineluctable and it would be foolish to rebel against it and disingenuous to impose harmony upon a world that cannot contain it. Therefore, the black screen can also be read as the desolation and the abysmal powerlessness in the face of frenzied illness, love, death, and cruelty. It is telling that, like the lovers' embrace in the first vignette, Coré and Shane's crimes are always committed at night, underground, or in the penumbra.

Interestingly, given the film's complicated engagement with the dangers of love and desire, the next series of vignettes, and especially the view of Paris, could be described as romantic, in the popular sense of the term, although they are tinged with a sadness that contrasts with the narratives of mutual fulfillment that often underlie romantic love. The romantic vignettes that open the film resonate with Shane and June's choice of Paris, *the* romantic city, for their honeymoon, which is of course itself the most romantic trip of all. In fact, the movie is rife with references to sentimentalism: June is the perfect, virginal young wife, Shane is the dark and mysterious but devoted husband. In one scene, they go to the top of Notre Dame together, he makes faces to make her laugh, they take pictures with a disposable camera, they kiss, and her bright green scarf flies away over the roofs of Paris. He later gives her a puppy. But all these instances are

⁴⁸ Although desire in *Trouble Every Day* is clearly sexual, in the rest of Denis' work it must often be understood in a larger sense, as what one feels is right for one's life: for instance, at the end of *Nénette et Boni*, Boni storms with a rifle into the hospital in which his sister has just given birth to kidnap the child she has decided to give up for adoption.

tainted with an undercurrent of irrevocable emptiness. The views of Paris are set to the gloomy music of the Tindersticks and the city seems to be strangely inaccessible (most of the scenes are shot in in-between spaces, such as the hotel or the banlieue). Fresh and lovely June may be the perfect incarnation of a certain ideal of femininity, but we know all too well who Shane really is. In their day trip to the cathedral, they are surrounded by gargoyles and Shane mimics Murnau's *Nosferatu*—a character that is a little too close to his nature for the performance to be truly endearing. He seems to have picked up the puppy during a nocturnal excursion during which he sexually harassed women. And of course, the horror of Shane and Coré's actions *de facto* banishes the film from the romantic canon. However, the film's real departure from romanticism lies not there, but in its questioning of the values and beliefs that are tied to romantic love, whose underlying assumption is that there is a world beyond this one that arranges ours in a meaningful manner and gives us what "was meant to be," specifically, that unites us with our "better half," thereby calling to mind Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*.⁴⁹ Conversely, according to Denis, the beliefs that sustain romantic love disavow the complexity and profound lack of harmony of our world. Yet this is the one that we inhabit and in which, Deleuze writes, we must learn to believe. Denis produces a cinema that does just that, giving an account of love and desire that is marked by an abandonment to the random cruelty of life, with its divergent trajectories of desire.

Given this attention to flow, it will not come as a surprise that Denis is fond of aquatic imagery, which is also very present in *Beau Travail* and *Nénette et Boni*. The last

⁴⁹ Aristophanes gives the following account of romantic love: in primal times, humans' bodies were made of two people. Zeus, scared of their might, chopped them in half and since then people have tried to recover their original form by looking for their better half.

third of the images that Denis presents in her series of vignettes at the beginning of *Trouble Every Day* are of the Seine. After them comes the title of the film, and the names of the actors, all in letters that look as though they were made of water. Trouble every day, it seems, is the fabric of our lives. Water is an incarnation of time, the flow that is inexorably bringing the world into its own, not because the latter is predetermined to be a certain way, but because time, life, desire (and thus trouble) will never cease to emerge. In Denis' work, interstices proliferate, evoking the cruelty of love and the impossibility of truly reaching the other, while at the same time affirming their cardinal importance for human life. Her cinema aims at bringing its audience back to the tragic realities that underlie our lives, and that our age often seeks to sugarcoat.

3.5. Deleuze and Irigaray: Interval and Interstice

This initial black screen reveals interesting points of convergence, not only between Denis and Deleuze, but also between Denis and Irigaray, and between Irigaray and Deleuze. Indeed, the interval and the interstice are concepts that reverberate with each other, and both could be mobilized to think about the black interlude at the beginning of *Trouble Every Day*.

The interstice reveals Deleuze's concentration on difference and it reflects his project in the cinema books, which was aptly summarized by the French philosopher Pierre Montebello as demonstrating that "le cinéma pense par ses propres moyens des thèmes qui ont été centraux dans l'histoire de la métaphysique" ("film thinks through its own means themes that have been central to the history of metaphysics"; Montebello). Difference has certainly been a, if not *the* central them in the history of French

philosophy in the twentieth century.⁵⁰ There are numerous similarities between Deleuze's and Irigaray's concepts: first, both refer to a temporal and spatial hiatus: the interstice comes between images, and the interval, between woman and man. Further, both the interstice and the interval are figurations of difference, and both are concerned with the body. Finally, as we will see, both address our inability to think.

Both the interstice and the interval are primarily matters of time and space, as well as the place where time and space are confused. In spatial terms, we find on the one hand the spatial force that comes in between shots and/or sounds, and on the other, the spatial hiatus that separates subjects, even as they are touching each other. As regards time, Deleuze sees the interstice as the temporal gap between two shots or sounds, while Irigaray distinguishes the time of becoming, which allows for the existence of at least two subjects, from a phallic, arrested notion of temporality (cf. the previous chapter). The interval, like the interstice, is the gap, that which is not defined by either term but exists in and of itself while allowing each term to function in its singularity.

Both Deleuze and Irigaray think of difference as productive. For Deleuze, the principle of selection of the shots that will be linked by the interstice functions as

⁵⁰ Lacan argued that the very nature of the subject is to be split, different from itself, as it is irremediably torn between the three modalities of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. From Bergson to Beauvoir, to Derrida, to Hocquenghem, to Levinas, to Fanon, to the women who have been dubbed the "French feminists," French philosophy in the twentieth century has been fed by a thorough reflection on difference. Beyond philosophy, it has also formed one of the principal, if not the most crucial social question of the post-World War II world, as most of the great social movements of the second half of the twentieth century were concerned with the affirmation of difference: decolonization, feminism, the Civil Rights movement, the gay rights movement, etc. However, a crucial difference between Deleuze and his peers needs to be underscored: whereas almost all French philosophers in the twentieth century have focused their work on the subject, Deleuze has sought to reject this category and to elaborate a philosophical project that does away with the very concept of subjectivity. Instead, Deleuze proposes that individuals are made out of various forces that recompose themselves ceaselessly.

follows: “un potentiel étant donné, il faut en choisir un autre, non pas quelconque, mais de telle manière qu’une différence de potentiel s’établisse entre les deux, qui soit producteur d’un troisième ou de quelque chose de nouveau” (“after a potential has been given, another one must be chosen, not just any, but in such a way that a difference in potential establish itself between the two, which can produce a third or something new.”; 234). Deleuze thus defines the interstice as a void, but a productive one: it is, it seems, the only place from which something genuinely new, something absolutely surprising can emerge in the cinema, as the chaos of the interstice contrasts with the pre-established unity of the movement-image. Similarly, Irigaray conceives of the interval as the locus of the emergence of sexual difference, that which would be radically unpredictable.

Further, both thinkers are invested in the connection between their concept and embodiment, and strikingly, both discuss the question of the body in relation to belief. Deleuze, as we have seen, argues that the role of the cinema of the time-image is to restore our faith in the body, since we have lost our belief in the world itself. Irigaray too pleads for a trust in the body: in a Spinozist manner, she contends that we do not know what the body can do, and in particular that we do not know what possibilities the bodies of women contain because they have never, as far as we can remember, had a chance to let their worlds unfold. Like Deleuze, she sees the interval as a passage to another mode of engaging with the body.

Even more surprisingly, both Irigaray and Deleuze conceptualize the interval/interstice in relation to thought, and both do so through an acknowledgment of our inability to think, at the same time as they argue that the interval/interstice produces another mode of thinking. For Deleuze, the interstice produces a shock to thought “but

without thought being able to assimilate that shock within a coherent set of rational coordinates. Logical thought breaks down and experiences its own limits, its ‘unpower’ or ‘impotence’” (Bogue 176). We have not yet begun to think for we cannot think the unthinkable, that is, the force from the outside which passes through the interstice. More precisely, we cannot think difference itself, incarnated in the cinema as the absolute difference between two shots that are not anchored in a common, logical association.

Deleuze’s work on these questions is inspired by Antonin Artaud’s reflection on thought. What cinema foregrounds, for Artaud, is thought’s fundamental problem: “l’impuissance à penser au coeur de la pensée” (“the incapacity to think that is at the heart of thought”; *Image-temps* 216). For Artaud, thinking is not a coherent, unified process grounded in linear logic and deduction, but rather forms the chaotic deliberation of multiple voices. Thought is always already “pétrifiée, disloquée, effondrée” (“petrified, dislocated, collapsed”; 218), and the only object upon which it can really attempt to reflect is the incapacity to think itself. Artaud believes that modern cinema has the power of engendering “une force dissociatrice qui introduirait une ‘figure de néant,’ un ‘trou dans les apparences’” (“a dissociative force that would introduce a ‘figure of nothingness,’ a ‘gap in appearances’”; 218) that would mirror the sundering of thought. Through the interstice and the “unpower” to think, Deleuze addresses our inability to subsume difference within ourselves.

In turn, Irigaray suggests that this incapacity to think concerns difference between subjects as well, as she suggests that it is at the heart of the way in which Western thought has shaped itself. In *Speculum de l’autre femme* and *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, she shows, using a plethora of examples, that Western philosophy rests upon a

disavowal of the debt it owes to the mother's body. In other words, Western philosophy has elaborated itself by denying that humanity owes its existence not to gods, but to mothers. Further, it has denied that thought is not transmitted through light, as the well-known metaphor goes (see for example, Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, or expressions such as seeing the light, shedding light on a problem, etc.).⁵¹ In contrast, Irigaray reminds us that thought is actually passed on through a body that would simply not exist had a woman not given it shape and life. Since this conceptual apparatus rests on the very negation of sexual difference, it will not come as a surprise then that the latter is *the* difference that cannot be thought with the intellectual machinery that we now possess. It is impossible to think sexual difference directly with the philosophical language that we have, since it is, as Irigaray and others have amply demonstrated, a phallogentric language. As a reaction, Irigaray has developed a very particular and playful writing style. But even more strikingly, as I have suggested earlier, she has radically questioned the demands of coherence and Aristotle's law of noncontradiction. Sexual difference, of which the interval is a figuration, is the unthinkable par excellence. Hill therefore reads the interval not only as the opening to sexual difference in terms of relation and becoming, but also in terms of thinking: sexual difference, she writes, is "*the* difference from which thinking emerges" (*Interval* 120). Irigaray's interval forms the in-between from which differentiated thinking can grow. A thinking that, far from denying its debt to women's bodies, affirms sexual difference, and that operates a move from a thought grounded in the repression of the maternal-feminine to a mode of thinking that uses sexual difference as its very threshold.

⁵¹ For an extensive analysis of Irigaray's critique of light in Western philosophy, see Vasseleu.

Irigaray and Deleuze both choose the form of the fissure as the epicenter of profound transformations: it is from the encounter and the confrontation between two different yet equally valuable entities that change can come into being. All the films reviewed here not only cultivate the interval, they also adhere to what Deleuze has outlined as the principles of modern cinema: even *The Piano*, which would seem at first sight to follow faithfully the rules of coherence and continuity, offers many examples of disruptions, most importantly in its two irreconcilable endings. Denis and Martel go even further in their embrace of this style, and multiply interstices through temporal, visual, and aural effects. These strategies are not surprising: all three filmmakers perform in-depth explorations of alterity, and modern cinema lends itself particularly well to such a study because it brings to life an aesthetic expression of difference, through the encounter between shots and sounds that do not match, but rather create new thoughts and feelings. The three filmmakers studied here echo Irigaray's particular understanding of difference, which resonates with Deleuze's: it is a productive force that is anchored in bodies, space, and duration, and whose accomplishment necessitates a reconsideration of thought.

3.6. Denis and Irigaray

3.6.1. The Interval in *Trouble Every Day*

These echoes between the interstice and the interval are especially interesting in relation to *Trouble Every Day* given that Irigaray's understanding of relationality through the interval can be traced out in Denis' depiction of love. Of course, Irigaray's vision of a love devoid of sexual violence is at odds with the exuberant ferocity found in the film; I will address the question of desire and brutality in a moment. Yet, as I have suggested in

my critique of Nancy, *Trouble Every Day* can be seen as a reflection on love that examines the impossibility of becoming one with the beloved, which Denis enacts through, for example, the visual construction of unaligned gazes. From this perspective, the black screen featured in the second one of the opening vignettes could be read as a commentary on the kiss that precedes it: the lovers' embrace is not followed by a triumphant image of union and synthesis but by a long separation between two shots, calling to mind the theme of the impossibility of becoming one with the other that runs through the film.⁵²

As noted earlier, this insistence on the necessity of a gap in both Denis and Irigaray counters traditional notions of romantic love held in the West, and which rest upon the Platonic understanding of desire as lack (I am desperately seeking my better half). In the Irigarayan account, which is inspired by Nietzsche, desire is an affirmation (I am already whole but I want more because it is the nature of life to seek to overcome itself). Therefore, she can conceptualize desire as both an opening to the other and a distance that preserves one's singularity, as opposed to a merging with the other. Like Irigaray, Denis suggests that it is impossible to truly possess the other, even through murder or rape: the exultation of savagery is short-lived, and the mystery of the other persists, now irremediably out of reach. Likewise, for Irigaray, the distance between the two must remain in place or the other is annihilated. In fact, a form of interval always remains in play, as the other can never be entirely subsumed. For example, the feminine continues to exist even in conditions where it cannot be actualized, showing that women

⁵² It can further be read as an ironic reference to the classical Hollywood tradition of the discrete (or not so discrete) ellipses that stand in for sex. In this reading, the ellision in *Trouble Every Day* does not serve to conceal the flesh (which is abundantly represented in the rest of the film), but to foreground the unspeakable of love itself.

may never be completely subjugated by phallocentrism (Hill, personal communication). Therefore, Irigaray does not so much plead for a form of harmony between lovers, as she advocates for the mutual affirmation of difference.

In the film, echoes of the interval can be traced not only in relations between characters, but also, like in *The Piano*, from the viewers to the characters. For example, numerous close-ups of Shane's face indicate that far from being a monolithic brute he is a deep and complex man, depressed and tortured by his monstrous desires. Little, however, is actually known about his interiority. The paucity of dialogues keeps Shane, and all the other characters, at a distance: he remains an enigma and we sense that he is a sad, lonely man more than we understand him. In other words, rather than grasping Shane rationally, intellectually, we develop an intuitive sense of his character (the role of intuition will be developed in the next chapter).

However, the resemblances between Irigaray and Denis around the interval stop here, as Denis sees love as irremediably grounded in forceful desire, whereas in her later work, Irigaray envisions nonaggressive passions, in which the violence of desire is replaced by a relation that enables each (heterosexual) lover to cultivate her or his own spiritual and physical singularity, in accordance to the needs of her or his sex. The romantic relationship then forms a productive alliance in which woman and man can come into their own both as individuals and in relation to each other. Desire becomes a political force, in fact the most efficient and crucial of political forces, for it generates new forms of communication between human beings that are grounded in a mutual

respect, and that enable them to live out the accomplishment of their spirits and bodies.⁵³

The question of violence is thus essential, as it goes to the heart of these two divergent worldviews: on the one hand, the possibility of “felicité” (*J’aime à toi* 57) and mutual enrichment, and on the other, a desire that always wants to take more, even as it loves dearly. As we shall see, Denis’ film, inspired as it is by a Nietzschean vision of amorous passions, provides a fruitful framework from which to offer a critique of Irigaray’s understanding of love. But before moving on to that analysis, it must be pointed out that even the filmmaker’s account of brutal desire is suffused with Irigarayan inflections. Indeed, the way in which *Trouble Every Day* addresses the question of love through that of sexual differentiation echoes Irigaray’s critique of phallocentrism in *Ce Sexe*.

3.6.2. Sexual Difference, Sexual Violence

I have outlined Irigaray’s analysis of violence and desire in chapter one, and shown that she understands all phallocentric sexuality as inherently grounded in sexual violence: phallocentric sex is modeled to serve primarily the needs and desires of male bodies. Therefore, phallocentrism is a force that estranges woman from herself, functioning like a “violating penis” that interrupts her constant autoeroticism and alienates woman from what defines her most intimately. Similarly, *Trouble Every Day* can be seen as an exposition of the way in which power borrows from the materiality of bodies to create conditions that stifle women and endow men with an inordinate amount of sexual freedom. Although both Coré and Shane violate the bodies of their victims, the film gives divergent accounts of the way in which their disease has taken hold of them. The cinema

⁵³ Irigaray develops this understanding of love in books such as *J’aime à toi* and *The Way of Love*. She explores its spiritual origins and implications in *Between East and West*.

of the time-image is put to the service of an astute reflection on sexual difference and sexual violence.

The film presents us with two monstrous characters who appear to be suffering from the same ailment. Yet for all their similarities, there are crucial differences between the two, shaped both by the specific way in which the illness has developed in each character and by the way in which the world responds to their respective behaviors. Coré and Shane lead very different lives: she is confined to her room by Léo, who literally shuts her off; she hardly ever speaks, she is completely isolated, and refuses to take her medication. Shane, on the other hand, is a well-respected researcher who works for a major pharmaceutical company. He is on his honeymoon in Paris, and lives a seemingly normal life, partly due to the fact that he does follow a chemical treatment—in fact, he carries an entire suitcase of medication.

The two characters experience their perversion in very distinct ways. With Coré, Denis captures the union of brutality, animality, and rapture: her enjoyment when she kills is primal and exuberant. Violent sex transports Coré beyond the human, where her joy is as overwhelming as her victim's agony. In one of the most memorable scenes in the movie, she smiles and laughs softly as she tortures a teenage boy to death. Conversely, Shane is utterly sinister and calm, even as he rapes and kills the hotel maid who has been the object of his desire since the couple's arrival in Paris. Most importantly, whereas Coré's perversion only expresses itself in its most unbridled mode, Shane's version of the disease is at once more pervasive and more "acceptable" according to societal norms, as he not only murders some women, but also sometimes limits himself to following and groping others. Significantly, these are acts which happen

in public spaces and yet for which he is never condemned, which points to their disturbing tolerability. Further, it appears that his mysterious, threatening look actually fuels the desire of many women in the movie, including the maid, who is at once alarmed and enticed by the shady eroticism that emanates from him.

The film thus emphasizes several features of sexual violence and its function with regard to sexual differentiation: first of all, it points to the normalcy of sexual violence within phallocentrism, as Shane is able to indulge in reprehensible behavior in public without being called out by anyone. Then, the film underlines the even more disturbing fact that danger and even the threat of violation are actually constitutive of heterosexual desire as it has been constructed in Western eroticism, as several women are at once excited and scared by Shane's behavior, at least as long as it limits itself to sexual harassment. I contend that it is precisely because violence is at the core of what is widely conceived of as sexually desirable, and because this violence is gendered (in the last instance, the rapist always occupies a masculine position and the victim a feminine one), that Shane is able to live an apparently normal life while Coré is not.

Shane's perversion, while it is in essence the same as Coré's, is channeled and normalized by phallogentric forces, as his creepiness fits uncannily well within pre-existent expressions of desire. As has already been mentioned, the sinister and abusive nature of his desire can function smoothly, as long as it is contained within certain limits. This may also explain why Shane assents to taking medication, whereas Coré does not: while her case is hopeless, he has everything to gain from a light taming of his ardor, since it is enough to make him a functioning, even a respected member of society. This reading is further sustained by the fact that Shane's wife, June, is the incarnation of a

very conservative ideal of femininity, proud to carry her husband's name and to be his lovely, demure wife. Her wardrobe is oddly evocative of the Eisenhower era: she wears perfectly fitted clothes, white gloves, and even wraps a scarf around her head.

Unintentionally, she enables Shane to pursue his criminal activities by maintaining a façade of bourgeois conventionalism. She senses that her husband is fiendish but she does not, perhaps dares not intervene.

In contrast to Shane's, Coré's sickness cannot be normalized. Visually, she is associated with bounteousness: her body is full and buxom, and her room and clothes are decorated with brocaded baroque motifs. The camera often captures her intimately, demanding a form of association with her that either abolishes distance (through extreme close-ups) or creates an uncanny form of awe, for instance when we see her, in a low angle long shot, werewolf-like, slowly opening her coat for the cars on the highway to see, while producing a low, eerie sound. When we share her gaze, we are invited to look at the world with fresh eyes, experiencing it in a deeply unsettling, animal way: as she is about to embrace and murder the teenage boy, the camera makes us partake in her delight at observing her lover's skin, which her tender yet hungry gaze relishes. Similarly, the camera focuses on the pleasure of her hands and mouth during the act, thereby creating a sensual, yet horrifying, haptic space.⁵⁴

On the other hand, Shane's gaze is sinister and our alignment with it is deeply discomforting. This is particularly clear when he first encounters the maid, who is walking in front of him, carrying his luggage in the hotel hallway. The camera is hand-held from his point-of-view and focuses on the maid's neck in a way that we cannot help

⁵⁴ "Haptic" refers to images or sounds that stimulate the sense of touch. This concept will be further developed in the next chapter.

but interpret as menacing. This gaze is inscribed within the broader presentation of Shane on the screen, who figures as an almost iconic late nineteenth-century pervert, complete with the sickly pale skin, the green-gray eyes, and the long mustache. Contrary to Coré's baroque, dark and confined environment, Shane stays in a modern, bright, impersonal hotel room, decorated with vertical lines, that suggests a rational mode of living, one that is congruent with his function as a scholar and scientist. Coré's desire, conversely, is situated before language: it is neither calculated nor ritualized. The pre-symbolic nature of Coré's pleasure is further reflected in the fact that she only speaks once in the diegetic time of the movie, and what she says is that she wants to die (we also see a flashback of her asking for a cigarette). In other words, she realizes that she cannot exist in the world as it is. In contrast, when she is seized by her condition, she functions before language, blissfully. Her very name supports this reading: Coré evokes the "*chora*," which Julia Kristeva has defined as the unspoken but central prelinguistic stage that links the subject to the mother's body (*Révolution* 23-7). It may further allude to *kóρη*, or kore, the Greek word for maiden and for a type of ancient Greek sculpture representing a young woman.

The fact that Shane kills Coré irremediably confirms that she cannot exist in phallocentrism. Moreover, Shane never tries to find Léo again after murdering his wife, suggesting that he was actually looking for her, more than for him. Hence the film can perhaps also be read as a mythical story of origins, where primal female desire is destroyed by its already patriarchal equivalent. Coré simply cannot continue to exist in this world, and it only makes sense that it would be Shane himself, the extreme incarnation of patriarchal desire, who would bring her down.

Like Irigaray, the film describes normalized heterosexual desire as resting upon violence against women, and it can therefore be read as a critique of phallocentrism, even though Shane and Coré are equally bloodthirsty. Yet, an important difference separates Denis and Irigaray: whereas the latter envisions a world in which the two could come meet without either partner seeking to subjugate or consume the other (*J'aime à toi* 171), Denis has no such illusions. In *Beau Travail*, the soldiers' dances can be read as slow martial dances, at once erotic, violent, and ethereal. As becomes even more evident in *Trouble Every Day*, Denis links desire strongly and irremediably to violence: there is no desire that does not partake in either brutal animality or phallic violations (albeit there are many variations of degree). This interest in the power of attraction of brutality is inscribed within a prominent tradition of aestheticized violence in continental, and particularly French culture, one that includes, among others, the Marquis de Sade, Jean Genet, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Violence in Denis' films is thus not only a perhaps regrettable part of the world, but also a source of fascination. The latter is not morbid: there is no exploitation in her films, no effort to *choquer le bourgeois*, that is, to confront her spectators with the inanity of their own repression, but a sincere attempt to capture that which is irrepressibly appealing in violence, and to suggest that desire is inseparable from it. Denis' work shows us something terribly primal and blind in desire that Irigaray's thought cannot accommodate, as her proposal for a world where sexual difference can be affirmed does not take into account the ineradicability of violence. Denis' films thus confront Irigaray's work with its own limits.

3.6.3. Ineradicable Violence

Trouble Every Day can be read as an allegorical study of desire. It proposes that in love, as in all encounters, the two individualities that come together inevitably oppose each other at a given moment because their needs do not always match (this is exemplified in the caring yet impossible relationship between Coré and Léo). The necessity or the wish to affirm the primacy of one's wants, and therefore to predominate, will unavoidably emerge. *Trouble Every Day* does away with the illusion of a long-lasting concord: the most lovers in the film can hope for is a truce. This is particularly true of sexual relationships as the movie suggests that the violence of desire that fuels them is ineradicable: lust is always entangled in power, whether it wants to take or to abandon itself.

To understand this account of relations between lovers in the film, we can best turn to Nietzsche, whose theory of violence is apt to make sense of *Trouble Every Day*. Indeed, Nietzsche himself can be seen as the strongest philosophical voice in the tradition of aestheticized violence that I have evoked earlier, and in this sense, he is a prominent intellectual precursor to Denis' filmmaking. Nietzsche is also particularly relevant in this context, because he is, paradoxically, one of Irigaray's most crucial influences. His understanding of human nature is rooted in the "will to power," through which he posits that pleasure stems from a feeling of power (*Will* 347) and that violence, that is, any disruption of the established order, is the ontological, visceral manifestation of a being's aliveness. The will to power refers to living beings' natural tendency to assert themselves

and their needs, and therefore to seek to exert mastery over their environment.⁵⁵ It is easy to see how Nietzsche's theory of pleasure can be mapped on to Coré and Shane's own relation to lust and power. However, this understanding of violence seems to be at odds with that of Irigaray who, in her later work, aims to mobilize (heterosexual) desire to develop a culture where each sex can safely come to accomplish its singularity. The interval is precisely that which can enact such a culture, through the establishment of loving and sensual relationships of difference. Yet this insistent rejection of violence may come as a surprise to her early readers. Indeed, works like *Speculum* and *Ce Sexe* form subversive, often wily (and therefore violent) analyses of major figures in the history of philosophy. In *Amante marine de Friedrich Nietzsche*, for example, Irigaray becomes the latter's lover and, with the fluidity of a sea creature and the tenderness of a mantis, she attacks his phallocentrism from a position of intimacy. Like Nietzsche, she posits the necessity of self-affirmation, through which she demonstrates the existence of at least two expressions of life along the lines of sexual difference. For both thinkers, self-affirmation can only emerge through a critique of values: Nietzsche focuses on Christian morality, and Irigaray debunks the commonsensical assumptions at the heart of phallocentrism.

⁵⁵ This difficult element of Nietzsche's work has led to the ignoble fascistic interpretations that have stained his reputation. As Keith Ansell-Pearson notes, it is not clear whether Nietzsche himself was not "advocating a *conscious* cultivation of evil as a means of overcoming nihilism" (*Political Thinker* 132). But perhaps approaching Nietzsche from the perspective of ethics is missing the point entirely. Lou Andreas-Salomé proposes an incisive understanding of his rejection of ethics, arguing that it makes space for an embrace of an "aesthetics of life" that privileges the cultivation of talent and greatness over the spread of mediocrity that accompanies the leveling of all values (Andreas-Salomé 121-3).

Further, in her early works, Irigaray develops a tragic vision of feminism, echoing Nietzsche's tragic view of life. In *Birth of the Tragedy*, Nietzsche argues that the function of Greek tragedies is to bring the audience to face the terror and the absurdity of existence (afflictions occur in all lives, and death is inescapable). Deleuze argues that modern cinema does something similar, and Denis herself demands from her spectators that they surrender to the flow of life and resign themselves to accepting that misfortunes will inevitably befall them. Hers is not a universe where individual choices predominate: rather, her characters are doomed by their desires and must follow their fates. For Nietzsche, to accept a tragic view is to live heroically, embracing a "*strong pessimism*" (*Birth* 4, emphasis in the text), and it is the mark of the Overman, the being who incarnates man's own overcoming, to be able to face the tragedy of existence permanently, as it repeats itself over and over again for all eternity, while remaining joyful, creative, and avid for more. This Nietzschean vision of what constitutes the good in human beings is profoundly at odds with the liberal view of existence that rests on the relativization of all values, such as truth and self-delusion, greatness and mediocrity, and that sees equality among all as the end goal of politics. Irigaray shows, throughout her work, that this obsession with equality is but another face of phallogentrism, as that with which all must seek to become level is a masculine subject. Moreover, far from proposing a liberal feminism anchored in solutions (such as justice, happiness, or agency), Irigaray puts us face to face with insoluble problems, and in particular with that of sexual difference, which can never be resolved since its reality cannot be undone: women and men have different bodies. She implies that phallogentrism has buried the feminine so deeply into women's psyches that it may never come to the surface, making the

feminist's struggle echo that of the Overman: to persist in the affirmation of life in spite of the tragic wounds that sustain it and the eternal elusiveness of victory.

Further, Denis, Nietzsche, and Irigaray develop complex filmic and writing styles and force their viewers and readers to engage with a creative, and therefore inherently violent work. The intervals in Denis' films compel her viewers to fill in the gaps strewn between and within scenes. Nietzsche frequently resorts to aphorisms, which form a deliberate strategy on his part to force his readers to actively interpret his work, instead of passively accepting it as received wisdom (Faulkner 83). Irigaray is equally demanding: her eminently poetic writing style, usually impossible to grasp in positivistic language, forms a sort of incantation of the feminine, and she asks her female reader to summon it from the abysses to which it has been confined and to create new forms of relationship between women and with men.

In her early work, Irigaray is thus doubly Nietzschean: both through her tragic vision and through her attachment to the will to power and self-affirmation. Like Nietzsche and like Denis, her thinking is fed by violence: the violence of a sexual difference left unactualized, and the violence of self-affirmation, to which it constitutes the only response. In *Ce sexe*, she examines the figure of the hysterical woman, whose symptoms cry out that which cannot be said in phallogentric language, in particular in relation to the feminine and women's desires. Contrary to women who engage in a *mascarade* of femininity, that is, who turn themselves into what men desire them to be (*Ce sexe* 131), the hysteric performs mimicry: a caricatural reproduction of masculine language that emphasizes its artificiality for women (*Ce sexe* 134). The hysteric undermines the hegemony of phallogentrism, and Irigaray sees it as a disruptive tactic

that can open the door to the creative elaboration of a language (and beyond language, to a world) through which the feminine could express itself.⁵⁶ Starting in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, Irigaray becomes more and more focused on the practical implications of her work and her strategy for the accomplishment of sexual differentiation shifts from mimicry, which she by then deems to be a negative, insufficient response, to a positive double tactic: women must become attuned to the feminine within themselves (this is now considered to be a more straightforward and achievable task than it was previously), and they must develop romantic relationships with men that are grounded in mutual affirmation.⁵⁷

Hence, the late Irigaray appropriates the Nietzschean concept of will to power as self-affirmation, but turns it into a nonaggressive affect: instead of the solipsistic affirmation of the self *over* others, Irigaray deploys a will to mutual power that can only function if it affirms both the self and the other simultaneously, through the interval. Having shown in *Amante marine* that Nietzsche disavows sexual difference, and in particular his debt to the maternal body, she proceeds to suggest that unless there is enough space for at least two individualities to affirm themselves simultaneously, humankind inevitably drifts into a regime of sameness, which is inherently dehumanizing (for masters and slaves, for men and women). This reconceptualization of the will to

⁵⁶ Incidentally, mimicry, the method that Irigaray proposes to subvert phallogentrism also seems to be inspired by Greek tragedies, as it echoes mimetism, of which Aristotle showed that it was one of the two key elements of the genre (the other one being catharsis).

⁵⁷ Irigaray has come to harshly criticize mimicry. She said in 2002: “I have suggested that mimicry could serve in a strategic way as a joke to overcome a past status, but certainly not as a new way of becoming woman. Mimicry is a behaviour of a slave, of someone who is dominated. It does not correspond to an affirmation of an identity of one’s own” (*Dialogues* 115).

power also involves a reworking of desire: instead of a desire that wants to take, to which Nietzsche refers, for instance, through his extolling of rape in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Irigaray proposes a desire that shares and aims toward the harmony of a mutual affirmation of the self and of the other.

Irigaray's aim is thus to produce a Nietzschean ethics. But since violence is both ineradicable and at the heart of Nietzsche's project, this is not an unproblematic gesture: the needs and interests of each of us would still constantly be at odds with those of others, thereby creating inevitable conflicts. In particular, turning to Denis and Nietzsche shows that by proposing amorously sexual relationships rooted in mutual affirmation as the pathway to a new world, Irigaray disavows the fundamentally violent nature of lust (to take or to give oneself to be taken). The inescapable violence of desire cannot be undone and it comes back to haunt her work, inscribed as it is at the heart of her concept of the interval. Indeed, the latter points to the tension between distance and the desire to come together: as an oxymoron, its subversive, contradictory force itself can be seen as a form of violence.

3.7. Conclusion

Trouble Every Day raises the question of the nature of love. What is this violent attachment? And how can it be represented? Denis resists mainstream accounts of romantic love, which extol the harmonious complementarity of two souls. For her, it is an affect that is primarily fueled by desire, and far from being a peaceful embrace, it is driven by a paradoxical double movement: the urge to devour the beloved and the failure to ever truly reach her. A recourse to Deleuze places the film in its historical-

philosophical context, by bringing to light the tradition of post-WWII art films to which Denis belongs. Deleuze argues that our age, complacently ensconced in the horrors of banality, no longer has the courage to face life head-on. What he calls “modern cinema” aims at making us believe in the world again, starting with its most fundamental elements: life, love, death, and the body. But to do so, modern films cannot simply turn to the methods of classical cinema, as the hope for wholeness and harmony, which were recuperated by fascistic politics, can no longer feed a desire for transformation. Therefore, the primary formal feature of modern cinema becomes the interstice, the gap between shots and/or sounds that are chosen not for their complementarity, but for their shock value.

In *Trouble Every Day*, the interstices come to serve Denis’ view of love, rooted, in an echo of Irigaray, in the impossibility of ever truly grasping the other, in spite of the brutal urge to possess her or him. The interstice is in many ways reminiscent of Irigaray’s interval, and it is therefore logical that most of the films studied here, which all seek to confront us with the appeal of difference and the efforts that it demands, would to a larger or a smaller extent participate in the aesthetics of modern cinema. Further, Denis offers a critique of gender and sexuality in phallocentrism that is strongly reminiscent of Irigaray’s own analysis of the same question in *Ce Sexe*. But *Trouble Every Day* also markedly departs from Irigaray in its treatment of violence, and it offers an opportunity to point to the limits of Irigaray’s approach to love. Indeed, the film is inscribed, like Irigaray herself, in the Nietzschean tradition: Denis and Irigaray both subscribe to Nietzsche’s view of the subject as a site for self-affirmation, and both embrace his exhortation (also taken on by Deleuze in his cinema books) to recognize the tragic nature

of life, while also embracing it with joy and desire. Yet Irigaray cannot agree with Nietzsche's affirmation of violence, which is at odds with her own project for a reconciled, mutually nourishing sexual difference grounded in heterosexual relationships. This unilateral rejection of violence, however, makes her unable to contain one of the most fundamental, irrepressible of human affects, and it forms a disavowal of the violence that drives any process of self-affirmation, especially if the latter tears through the fabric of the established order.

Chapter 4. Lucrecia Martel and the Curious Body in *La niña santa*

4.1. Introduction

Two teenage girls wearing school uniforms stand in a small crowd, watching a street musician play the theremin, an electronic instrument that functions without any discernible physical contact from the player. A middle-aged man casually positions himself behind one of the girls and presses his crotch against her buttocks. The adolescent's face registers surprise, disgust, and confusion. After about thirty seconds, she turns around and the man vanishes. Then her gaze, meeting that of her unsuspecting schoolmate, unexpectedly reveals a sense of luck, and her face becomes illuminated by a beam of sunlight. She stares away again, as her eyes harbor a newfound, if transient, feeling of purpose.

This scene is at the core of Lucrecia Martel's 2004 film *La niña santa*. Its ambiguity and slow rhythm are typical of Deleuze's cinema of the time-image, which I introduced in the previous chapter. Steeped in ambivalence, the teenage girl, whose name is Amalia, is exemplary of characterization in modern cinema for she "resists identification." This oft-used formula points to the impossibility for spectators to feel in accord with the characters on the screen, that is, to readily understand their motives and to experience for themselves the emotions that befall them. Whereas classical and mainstream films tend to rely chiefly (though by no means only) on identification to ensnare their viewers, modern films often leave the spectator at an affective loss—and yet it is in this psychological distance, in this very *Verfremdung*, that some of their finest pleasures reside. Hence, the suggestion that modern films tend to resist mainstream

dynamics of identification also begs the following question: How do we relate to the characters on the screen? And how does a film invite us into its fold if not through character identification?

I suggest that Henri Bergson's concept of intuition offers a way to theorize the spectator's relation to a large number of films that resist identification. Intuition refers to the subject's ability to understand the world from the inside. It takes place through a leap of consciousness whereby a person projects herself into the object of her attention and makes sense of its experience from this interior position, instead of analyzing it from the outside through intellect and decomposition, as we are wont to do. Intuition can enable us to understand the appeal that modern cinema makes to its audience: rather than prompting traditional processes of identification with characters, modern films tend to seduce us into destabilizing milieus made up of a confusing flow of affects and perceptions. Once caught, we can open ourselves up to an embrace of ambiguity, or resist the film's appeal and close ourselves off to the pleasures it has to offer.⁵⁸

The typology that I develop in this chapter, which places an intuitive process on the side of the cinema of the time-image, and identification on that of mainstream film, is not strict, even though most movies fall fairly clearly within one category or the other. The intuitive appeal of modern cinema is a generic tendency, just like the identificatory pull of mainstream films is one: no movie is hermetically sealed away in one single aesthetic orientation. Alternative forces, such as ghosts of the time-image in mainstream

⁵⁸ It should be noted that although Bergson divides consciousness into two modalities, intuition and intelligence, I do not seek to map the latter onto identification. Rather, the two analytical methods (psychoanalysis on the one hand and Bergsonism on the other) are distinct, each being best suited to understand either mainstream/classical or modern cinema.

cinema, can and do erupt since a variety of discourses is always at work in a single film. In fact, this trend has tended to intensify recently, as genres ceaselessly renew themselves by either inventing new aesthetic devices or by borrowing them from elsewhere. Many mainstream films, and in particular action movies, have adopted a number of features from modern cinema to disrupt continuity and confuse time and space.⁵⁹ Conversely, the movement-image is and was always present in the time-image, as only very experimental films are able to divest themselves entirely of their allegiance to the rounded pleasures of the movement-image. Deleuze himself is careful to remark that no film is able to give an uninterrupted and direct representation of time: the time-image is an intention of a certain kind of cinema, rather than an accomplished, systematic feature. Yet in spite of this enmeshment, they remain strong, relevant markers of film as the vast majority of movies can readily be identified as belonging mostly to either one or the other.

In *La niña santa*, the aesthetics of the time-image serve to illustrate a particular instance of sexual differentiation, through a focus on an adolescent girl. This context reveals that Bergson's intuition can also provide an interesting echo to Irigaray's interval. Uncovering the latter's epistemological dimension. I argue that intuition can function as a threshold to sexual difference.

4.2. Narrative Summary

Amalia (María Alché) is a devoutly Catholic teenage girl who lives with her mother Helena (Mercedes Morán) and uncle Adolfo (Alejandro Urdapilleta), as well as a large, fluid extended family in a run-down nineteenth-century thermal hotel in the city of Salta

⁵⁹ Steven Shaviro addresses this trend in *Post-Cinematic Affect*.

in the north of Argentina. Her life revolves around Catechism classes, taught by a hypocritical, idiotic, gorgeous teacher (Mia Maestro), and lazy afternoons with her best friend, Josefina (Julieta Zylberberg). One day, as Amalia and Jose are watching a street musician (Manuel Schaller) play the theremin, a man (Carlos Belloso) casually presses himself behind Amalia in the scene that I have evoked above. She sees the event as a revelation of God's plan for her--to rescue this man's soul from his own evil--and sets out to save him by multiplying their encounters, making him feel tremendously uncomfortable and shameful. These meetings are facilitated by the fact that the man in question, Dr. Jano, an ear specialist, is attending a medical convention in the family's hotel. The disturbing nature of his behavior toward Amalia is counterpoised to his endearing courtship of Amalia's mother, a confident and seductive middle-aged woman. This romance, however, is not consummated. Rather, the film ends on an anti-climax as the scandal of Jano's sexual harassment of Amalia is about to be made public, after Josefina, in an attempt to divert her parents' attention from her own forays into sexuality, has told her mother (Mónica Villa) about the situation. The last scene takes place just before the public revelation, as Jose meets up with Amalia in one of the hotel pools. Amalia is unaware of her friend's betrayal, and the two girls swim peacefully together.

4.3. Film Aesthetics

La niña santa provides a strong basis to study the resonances between Bergson's intuition and cinema. Indeed the film, drawing as it does on far-reaching, even disturbing thematic and aesthetic ambiguities, deliberately makes it impossible for the viewer to settle meaning, thereby rendering a sole recourse to intelligence impossible. Further, the movie

operates through a strong appeal to the senses, in particular touch and sound, which are relevant to a theorization of intuition in film. Lastly, its main concern is an adolescent girl who is the subject of an intuitive search of her own. I will analyze these elements in some detail before moving on to my theoretical discussion.

La niña santa is a prime example of the remarkable rejuvenation of Argentinian cinema that started in the mid-1990s. Along with Pablo Trapero, Martín Rejtman, and Adrián Caetano, Martel is one of the most important figures of a generation that has developed a new cinematic language in Argentina. Martel entered the national film school in the mid-1980s, just after the end of the military dictatorship (1976-83). However, she relates in an interview with Hayden Guest that after she passed the extremely selective exam, the economic crisis⁶⁰ was so severe that most professors had left and the materials had disappeared. She and her peers were thus self-taught, watching and analyzing movies together, making short films and writing scripts. In 1995, she won a script contest and was able to make her short film *Rey muerto*. It was then included in *Historias breves* (1995), a collection of shorts that is often said to have inaugurated New Argentine Cinema and that enjoyed a stunning popular success: over 10.000 viewers went to see this omnibus film made by young, unknown, local filmmakers.

Gonzalo Aguilar, in his authoritative study of New Argentine Cinema, notes that the young directors are not unified around a clear, well-delineated aesthetic agenda. Rather, they form a rather disparate generation, in which the Woody Allenesque tone of a Daniel Burman rubs shoulders with the detached irony and marginality of Diego Lerman or Martín Rejtman. Yet, Aguilar shows that they do share a few important characteristics.

⁶⁰ Argentina suffered from hyperinflation throughout the 1980s.

New Argentine directors have left behind the political, somewhat pedagogical (though often masterfully executed) narratives that were preferred by their predecessors of the 1980s (e.g. María Luisa Bemberg, Luis Puenzo), and have opted for what Aguilar calls a “strategic carelessness” that turns “less than perfect shots” into “aesthetic assets,” and a systematic avoidance of metaphors and allegories, replaced by an insistence on the literal (14). He notes that this emphasis on the literal goes hand in hand with a great thematic ambiguity: it is often hard to tell what a specific film is about: interpretations are widely open and so are most endings, characters are ambiguous and never judged, good and evil often remain impossible to assess, and political readings are rejected (18-20). These films are steeped in a strong sense of precariousness and display a predilection for “ruins, the unthinkable, what is beyond our control” (40). Their aesthetics tend to produce a “documentary effect, of a direct, quotidian register” (29), at odds with the polished, efficient universes of Hollywood cinema. Aguilar further remarks that a large number of these films are immersed in sedentarism and claustrophobia, two defining features of *La niña santa* in which the principal location (the hotel) is at once a point of passage and an old, suffocating building.

In fact, the aesthetics of *La niña santa* are thoroughly in line with the characteristics of the new wave of Argentine cinema (or perhaps the reverse is true: the movement has largely modeled itself after the example of its foundational figures). Like the other films that I have analyzed in this study, *La niña santa* is articulated around a pervasive destabilization of meaning: How are we to evaluate Amalia: is she a victim or a harasser? And how are we to judge Jano, who is at once presented as a sinister character and as a vulnerable man? The film story offers an ambiguous account of what happens to

Amalia: although Jano's inappropriate touch is undoubtedly sinister, it is not conveyed as brutal and it does not traumatize the young girl. This is not to say that Jano's act would not count as both sexual harassment and an aggression in the real world. But it is very ambiguous in the context of the film, in large part because the movie does not indict him. Indeed, Martel does not invite us to feel particularly sorry for Amalia, who does not appear to be hurt, as she interprets the incident as a sort of divine call. Tellingly, the director writes in the press notes that "[i]t is a tale about good and evil. Not about the confrontation between good and evil, but about the difficulties in distinguishing one from the other—a story about the dangers of differentiating good from evil" (qtd. in Tsai 54).

Martel further frames Jano's conduct as a childlike consequence of his profession: "There are many instances of doctors behaving without propriety... Men and women who study medicine have to slot their lives into a very conservative order. So for me the doctor is someone who has had to lock inside him childhood secrets that will inevitably surface here and there. These men who rub themselves against kids in the streets are infantile; there's an innocence or even naivety about them" (Martel, "Carnal Knowledge"). Indeed, Jano partakes in a form of infantilism: he is a confused man, his touch is not penetrative, and he plays a game of hide and seek. The alignment of his sexuality with childhood and even a certain innocence is reinforced by the sweet flirtation in which he engages with Amalia's mother, whom he already liked as a teenager. Jano is the embodiment of the blurring of boundaries that pervades the film as he is at once loathsome and likable, even touching in his courtship of Helena. His name forms a conspicuous reference to Janus, the two-faced Roman "god of doors, limits, and thresholds," the man who sustains at once a romance with the mother and harasses the

daughter (Aguilar 86). The actor who plays him, Carlos Belloso, captures both his character and Amalia's in an incisive formulation: "Jano is the innocence of wickedness, and the girl is the wickedness of innocence" (Lerer).

Amalia quickly becomes the harasser, relentlessly tracking down the doctor for the salvation of his soul. She is a pugnacious redeemer—*la niña santa*, the holy girl of the title—but her insertion within the tradition of Catholic women mystics is also ironic: first, because the object of her salvatory covetousness is a rather pedestrian street pervert, but most importantly because Amalia believes that redemption is possible through goodness, and this conviction is set within a movie in which no redemption is really possible or even necessary, because nobody, not even the filmmaker, truly knows what good and evil are. But Martel is careful never to judge Amalia. Even though she makes us conscious of the foolishness of her character's endeavor, she also takes Amalia very seriously. The teenager's great intelligence is underlined by her gravitas and her depth. She is courageous and upright, and her thoroughness endows her with a distinction beyond her years.

The solemnity of Amalia's mission contrasts with the immaturity of adults in the film, almost all of whom are irresponsible children playing at being grown-ups. They form Amalia's extended family, which is omnipresent in *La niña santa*: characters are hardly ever alone, but constantly surrounded by friends, siblings, aunts, mothers, etc. In a sense, this is a film about a community, in which the individual matters less than the collective, but in which the collective itself is not moving toward a well-established goal, according to a set defined rules (e.g. the Law of the Father or social ascension). Rather, the family is always a little absurd, a disparate collection of mostly indolent individuals,

who are sometimes a bit cruel, often a bit risible, but nothing worth mentioning more than in passing. It is in the portrayal of the family that Martel's keen sense of irony, as well as her refusal to dwell on individual tragedies, takes its sharpest form.⁶¹ The immobility, the listlessness of the clan in *La niña santa* stands in contrast to the perpetual flow of visitors that the hotel accommodates. In particular, Amalia, Helena, and her brother Freddy spend many lethargic afternoons lying down on various beds, chatting the day away in the stifling penumbra of the hotel's closed velvet curtains. The family, the locus of great tenderness and of a reassuring sense of permanence, is thus also associated with torpor and claustrophobia, as well as a certain murkiness conveyed by a dull color scheme. Further, it is a site of sexual confusion: for instance, one night, as Helena and Amalia are sleeping together in the same bed, a man whom we presume to be Helena's lover joins them and makes comments on Amalia's beauty. He then turns out to be Freddy, Amalia's uncle, which suggests a possible incestuous dimension to their relationship. But this interpretation too is later invalidated when we understand him to be a wacky, immature man, whose affection for Amalia is harmless. This infantile relation between uncle and niece provides an uncomfortable echo to Jano's encounters with Amalia.

All these elements call to mind Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, for the repulsive in *La niña santa* has to do with the enmeshment of lives that makes the other seem a little too close for the establishment of proper boundaries (and Jano's improper

⁶¹ Martel is neither a compassionate filmmaker nor a mean one. Although she will sometimes give a glimpse of the depth of a character's pain she does not keep it in focus long enough for pity to arise. For example, Mirta (Marta Lubos), Helena's main aide, bullies her adult daughter each time they meet, and the repetition of the abuse is at once heartbreaking and a little comical.

touch is the epitome of this entanglement). However, remaining entirely faithful to Kristeva's account of abjection is complicated in the context of this film because she focuses exclusively on the relationship with the mother.⁶² Reading *La niña santa* through the bond between Amalia and Helena betrays Martel's emphasis on the extended family, all of whom partake in the mild madness that stems, it seems inevitably, from living together with many close relatives. Although this film needs to be considered beyond the strict limits that psychoanalysis imposes, Kristeva's connection of disgust with the lack of boundaries remains compelling.

Traces of abjection pervade *La niña santa*: at the beginning of the film, Inés, the stupid catechist argues that “[n]o creo que alguien pueda confundirse algo feo con algo lindo, algo que te llene de felicidad con algo horripilante” (“I do not think someone could confuse something ugly with something beautiful, something that fills you with happiness with something horrible”). Then the whole film proceeds to demonstrate that it is actually impossible to tell one from the other as the two are systematically enmeshed and confused: the hotel is decrepit, full of old stuffy dark rooms, and Amalia's mysticism, with its compulsive prayer-recitation and its masochistic self-offering, reeks of humid churches and stymied sensuality. The film can be read as a coming-of-age movie, but one where the force of youth blossoms in a setting that evokes the end of a world, as the hotel echoes the downfall of the self-absorbed white bourgeoisie that Martel has so cleverly and mercilessly dissected throughout her work.

The director further resorts to water and air to sketch a paradoxical sensory universe in which the horrible and the beautiful coexist, often within the same signifiers,

⁶² For a strictly psychoanalytical interpretation of the film, see Martin.

producing a strange mixture of pleasure and disgust. The hotel is an old thermal resort and it hosts two derelict pools whose stagnant waters are said to be tepid. Yet water is also associated with youth and pleasure: in a short sequence, we see a group of teenage girls playfully attacking laughing boys with a water hose in the showers in a suggestive reversal of traditional gender roles. Likewise, air is an ambivalent elemental motif in the film. For instance, faith is associated with asphyxiation from the very beginning of the film, when Jose explains why the religion teacher cries while she is singing (and also perhaps why her intellectual means are limited): “[e]s por falta de aire. No sabe respirar. Eso te hace pésimo a la irrigación del cerebro” (“it’s because she’s lacking air. She does not know how to breathe. This is terrible for cerebral irrigation”). This lack of air in *La niña santa* is tied to a sense of claustrophobia, as the whole film takes place in small, crowded spaces. In one scene, we see a young maid spraying the room (purportedly for disinfection) in which Helena and her brother are chatting. Similarly, the street on which Amalia watches the theremin player is narrow and packed with cars and people, and even the woods in which the children run in one of the only three outdoor scenes are thick and crowded with hidden hunters. Yet the motif of the air partakes of two opposite directions, as it is also connected to the divine. Amalia is able to hold her breath in the swimming pool for a long time, which suggests her special attunement to God, as Catholicism associates the holy spirit with the breath. In her thorough analysis of sound in the film, Dominique Russell⁶³ points out that the spectral tunes of the theremin, produced not through matter but by touching the air, seem to relay the breath of God and to deliver the divine call to Amalia (it provides the soundtrack to her simultaneous abuse and

⁶³ All references to Russell in this chapter are to her article “Lucrecia Martel: A Decidedly Polyphonic Cinema.”

revelation). The theremin is at once material and immaterial, since, for all its incarnated existence, it is played without being touched and produces ethereal tunes.

A complex visual universe further supports the affirmation of opposites and the impossibility of settling meaning that pervades the film. Space is confusing: for instance, we never know exactly where the hotel is located but can ascertain that it is about fifteen minutes from the center. The editing suggests that the catechism classes take place in the hotel but the girls can hear the theremin playing on the street, so they must be in the center of town. This disorientation at the macro-level carries over to the geography of single shots: Martel eschews establishing shots, which would give spectators an overview of the whole space of the shot before the breakdown into closer shots of characters. As a consequence, it is often impossible to assess the space of the room in which we are thrust, let alone guess how it relates to the other locations we have seen (the same can be said of time, of which we have no precise notion). She also relies consistently on close-ups and extreme close-ups of faces or body parts, thereby allowing for the identity of characters to remain unclear for a while. This often occurs in the absence of establishing shots, which further serve to disorient the viewer.

The depth of field in the film is always shallow (one plane of the shot will be in focus while the others remain blurry), a preference that Martel attributes to her myopia (Tsai 55). Yet *La niña santa* frequently portrays characters engaging in different activities in the various planes of a single shot. In other words, the coexistence of different levels of reality, of different experiences, is rendered literally by the different layers on the screen, reinforcing the impossibility of being isolated in the midst of a large family.

In an uncharacteristically unequivocal move, Martel also frequently uses these layered shots to indict the pervasive racial and economic discriminations suffered by the large native communities in the north west of Argentina. In the film, the material needs of the slothful white family are entirely supported by the hotel workers (the maids, the waiters, and the washerwomen), all of whom are indigenous. The workers tend to remain in the back of the frame and out of focus, which reflects their actual position within the composition of Argentine society. However, their dignity contrasts with the dissipated white family that they serve, inviting us to concur with the silent consternation that we often sense from them.

In the instances where it does not serve the critique of race relations, the shallow depth-of-field, with its prevalent blurriness, can be read as a literal evocation of this enmeshment of categories. Indeed, *La niña santa* never resolves the tension between reality and appearances: its foundational gesture, Jano's rubbing of Amalia, is hidden in the crowd and therefore remains invisible to the outside world, especially since Jano's face is entirely impassive (although the film does provide a privileged close-up view for the spectator). Similarly, Amalia's redemptory quest is impossible to categorize (salvation or harassment?) and the two girls and their friends see miracles in everything. The hypocrisy of Catholicism also rests upon this tension, and it is epitomized in the figure of the catechist, Inés, whose reported lasciviousness contrasts with her moral demands on her pupils. In more general terms, the irony that pervades *La niña santa* further underlines this ubiquitous subversion of boundaries. Martel thus presents us with a cinematic universe in which appearances can never be trusted and this blurring of limits is reflected within shots.

Cécile François makes an intriguing remark that resonates with my own observations about *The Piano*. She notes that in *La niña santa*, “nuestra desazón nace sobre todo de la tensión que mantiene la cineasta entre implicación y distanciamiento” (“our uneasiness stems above all from the tension that the director maintains between involvement and distancing”). She gives the following example: in one scene, Jano and Amalia find themselves together in the hotel’s small elevator. Through a point-of-view shot from Amalia’s perspective, the spectator is made to observe Jano’s neck carefully, as it is shot in extreme close-up. What Martel seeks to convey is Amalia’s physical feeling of turmoil that stems from her proximity to Jano. However, François points out that the spectator’s position is particularly uncomfortable because we are made to identify with a character, Amalia, whose general impassibility prevents access to her interiority (we never know what she thinks). We thus find ourselves awkwardly oscillating between the physical nearness and the emotional distance without ever being able to settle for either. This impossible position reinforces the general sense of opacity that dominates the atmosphere of the film.

La niña santa further undoes our mastery of signification by relying heavily on non-visual senses, and primarily on touch and sound. The importance of sound in Martel’s work is paramount, and her command of its filmic orchestration hardly equaled. Russell notes that *La niña santa* answers Randy Thom’s calls for “aurally conceived cinema” as the film is “written for sound.”⁶⁴ Martel’s use of sound hinges both on scarce dialogue and a rich diegetic soundscape. People do not say much in this film and the

⁶⁴ Russell quotes Thom’s criteria for such a film: it would “tell the story more-or-less through the point of view of one or more of the characters; have locations and sets which encourage sound as a player; and avoid non-stop dialogue” (these two electronic sources contain no page numbers).

purpose of dialogues is rarely to drive the plot. Instead, they serve tangential functions, such as to delineate in small touches the often tender, ironic absurdity of the family and the world of the hotel. In this respect, Aguilar remarks, about New Argentine Cinema as a whole, that “los diálogos no son sólo lo que los personajes se dicen, sino una tonalidad, un ruido o una musicalidad que recorre transversalmente las historias” (“the dialogues are not just what is said, but also a tonality, a noise or musicality that runs through the stories crosswise”; 95).

Further, whereas most filmmakers tend to make of music the most remarkable aspect of their soundtrack, Martel uses it sparsely, and always diegetically, in *La niña santa*: we hear music in the restaurant, see Helena dance with two little children, Inés and her pupils sing religious songs, and most importantly, we hear the intriguing tunes of the theremin. Instead of foregrounding music, she creates a rich and curious aural universe that is more focused on noise than on melody. We hear the sounds of machines, of doors, of radios and television sets, and indistinct noises that come from unseen spaces. The source of these is often unknown or only revealed later, a feature that reinforces the often-disquieting tone of the film. Debra Martin notes that Martel borrows many elements of sound design from the horror film⁶⁵ and in particular that she shows a predilection for the “cacophonous,” “often highlighting those noises we normally tune out, in particular the creaking and murmuring of the hotel’s fittings and pipes,” as “her soundscape favours high-pitched, diegetic sound” (Martin 62). In one particularly memorable instance, Amalia, looming behind a semi-transparent plastic curtain, watches Jano as he bathes in an open-air swimming pool. She signals her disquieting presence by

⁶⁵ The connection with the genre has been established by Martel herself, who has said that she liked titles that sounded like “B-movies” (Martel, “My Love of Storytelling”).

knocking her fingers on the iron curtain pole, producing a shallow metallic sound. His eyes are closed but he hears the worrisome ticking and gazes in her direction. When he recognizes her, he turns around, panicked and uncertain how to proceed. The young girl does not move and continues to stare at him intently. She leaves without a word, her body becoming spectral behind the shoddy plastic. As spectators, we find ourselves in a position similar to Jano's throughout the film, for, as Russell notes, Martel is extremely precise in her sound compositions but paradoxically, this precision, like that of her visual effects, serves to disorient the viewer.

Russell suggests that sound is consistently thematized in the film, both visually (for instance, through several close-ups of ears) and within the narrative itself. At the center of the film is Amalia and Jose's patient yearning for the call of God. Further, the medical convention that Jano attends gathers otolaryngologists, and he himself is specialized in hearing problems, which enables him to diagnose Helena's tinnitus. Russell argues that Martel's engagement with sound is rooted in the more general sense of paradox and confusion that I have sketched out above. As an example, Martel replicates with sound some of the film's visual effects: the confusing multiple layers we see on the screen are matched with multiple layers of sound that add a mysterious depth to the film. We often hear the dialogues and soundtrack of the layer that is in focus along with the noises that accompany what is playing out of focus.

Further, Russell points out that "the paradoxes of sound, with its confusion of materiality and immateriality, its sensuous elusiveness, as well as difficulty of interpretation is central in the narrative of *La niña santa*." Indeed, both the body and the spirit are mobilized in sound, as it partakes at once of the ethereal (the invisible waves,

the call of God) and of the physical (the auditory system, the sound source). This double nature reflects the tension between the disincarnated ideals of divinity and chastity of Catholicism and the deeply embodied character of its female mysticism and in particular of the “mission” upon which Amalia embarks. The theremin also captures this double movement, toward the body and toward the spirit, as its spectral tunes, which evoke the call of God, emerge from the player’s caress of the air. Tellingly, the tune that the musician plays as Jano rubs Amalia is Bach’s “Air on a G string.” Martel said in an interview that “[s]ound is also the only truly tactile dimension of the cinema. It is the only way in which the cinema physically touches the spectator. Audio frequencies are experienced through the entire body” (Interview by Guest).

The ambiguity of sound as both a caress and an absence echoes the ambiguity of touch itself, and the two senses point to the ambivalence in Martel’s engagement with matter and the spirit. Touch in *La niña santa* is both soft and violent. On the one hand, we find the softness of Helena’s touch of Amalia and of the kiss that she exchanges with Josefina. At the other end of the spectrum are the horrific stories of death and sacrifice that the girls and their classmates tell during the catechism class. Jano’s touch stands on an uncomfortable middle ground between perversion and infantilism.

At the heart of question of touch in *La niña santa* lies the diffuse touch of the teenage girl. It is not clear that Amalia desires Jano. Her pursuit of him seems to be solely motivated by the wish to save him from himself and to let the good in him triumph over the bad. We see her masturbate once, and although it occurs after she has seen him, it is not at all clear that there is a relation of causality between the two scenes. If anything, it would seem that it is the situation (she was introduced to Jano by her mother) that excited

her, perhaps not even primarily in a sexual way. Her lust does not seem to be for him in particular, maybe not even for Josefina, whom Amalia kisses languorously, but appears to function on its own, as the disoriented explosion of life that marks female adolescence. Teenage girls often do not know what they desire but know that they need to be desired by someone. Amalia is in this sense a typical girl, as the object of her pursuit is the man who has desired her and whom she identifies as the nexus of God's plan for her, not one she has chosen herself. Her desire is diffuse rather than pointed, and this detachment is reflected throughout the film.

Echoing Amalia's confused desire, touch in *La niña santa* is articulated around a series of "almosts." For example, Jano's inappropriate touch can be seen as one that does not reach its goal: it is *almost* sexual harassment, *almost* an aggression—but not quite.⁶⁶ Like Amalia, Jano is animated by a sort of detachment, albeit one that is very different from hers. Whereas she has the passionate, blind courage of a desire that does not know its object, Jano is ever the coward, and he therefore touches, to use a French expression, *sans avoir l'air d'y toucher* (literally, 'without seeming to touch it,' i.e. in a stealthy manner, as if it meant nothing). Indeed, Jano's rubbing happens in the middle of a crowd and is invisible to all except for the spectator. It is echoed by the theremin, an instrument in which the player produces sounds through aerial stroking. Other examples abound: in one scene, Amalia wakes her mother up by holding her hand above Helena's back; in another one, she puts her hand above the heater in Jano's room without touching it; the call of God does not actually call Amalia (her divine mission is really fantasized). Other boundaries are systematically blurred, between the divine and the lowly, between the

⁶⁶ Again, this is to be understood within the context of the film.

sensual and the ethereal, between the disquieting and the benign, which is to say that these elements are at once touching each other, blending, and pursuing their own singularity. Irony, the almost serious, pervades the film. Most strikingly, the film features many close-ups and extreme close-ups, both visual and aural, and these, as I have shown in the first chapter, can be read as forms of almost touching. The “almost touch” is thus both a central narrative theme and a metaphorical device that can be traced throughout the film, and whose non-accomplishment ensures that its mystery remains ceaselessly open.

4.4. Haptic Visuality

Haptic visuality marks this gaze that almost touches:⁶⁷ it is a form of tactile vision, “as though one were touching the film with one’s eyes” (Marks, *Skin* xi). Extreme close-ups tend to form good examples of this visual modality for they let us experience viscerally, more than simply see, the texture of the image. The term “haptic” was made popular in film studies first by Deleuze (*Image-Temps* 22), who borrowed it from Aloïs Riegl, a nineteenth-century art historian, and then by Laura Marks, who, in *The Skin of the Film*, produced a thorough study of the concept in relation to intercultural cinema and Bergson’s work on memory. A haptic image, because it functions like the sense of touch, takes us away from the supremacy of vision and its corollaries, identification at a distance and rationalist thought, to bring us into a different sensorium, that of touch, the often

⁶⁷ The study of haptic visuality, along with phenomenological film criticism, with which it often overlaps, has formed a powerful response to the semiotic, psychoanalytical film theory that dominated cinema studies from the 1970s to the 1990s. See Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film* and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*; Vivan Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* and *Carnal Thoughts*; Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*.

neglected, often disdained sense, which is usually associated with the opposite of thought. “Haptic visuality involves the body more” (*Skin* 163) and Marks uses it as an entry point into a reconfiguration of cinema as an art that makes an appeal to all the senses, including the ones it cannot represent directly (smell and taste for instance). Because the haptic image makes us feel like we are observing something for the very first time, it is new and destabilizing, and “it forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into the narrative” (163).

Hugo Ríos has produced a very detailed reading of Martel’s challenge to supremacy of vision through an appeal to all the senses. He finds four strategies at play in the film: the decentralization of vision and the intensification of audition, which I have already discussed here, as well as smell and haptic visuality. Olfaction does not occupy a predominant role in *La niña santa*⁶⁸ so I will focus on his account of tactility. Ríos gives an elegant description of haptic visuality: “el roce de la mirada sobre los objetos, no para clasificarlos o imponer un orden sino para generar fricción con su aura” (“the rubbing of vision against objects, not to classify them or to impose an order on them, but to generate a friction with their aura”; 18). He explains that Martel produces a “hypertexture” (20), the sense of a visual tactility: in the elevator scene, which I have described earlier, we observe Jano’s collar in a close-up through Amalia’s point-of-view. The intensity of this fixed gaze produces a suspense that prepares the viewer for the next shot, a close-up of Amalia’s hand that slowly reaches out to Jano’s. The elevator then stops brutally,

⁶⁸ Ríos does cite an interesting example of the interaction between vision and smell in the film. Amalia goes into Jano’s room in his absence and puts some of his shaving cream on the collar of her shirt. As she is smelling it, one of the maids enters and sprays the room, resulting in a provocative combination of auditory and visual elements that evoke the sense of smell (Ríos 18).

interrupting Amalia's endeavor. Martel cuts to the next sequence, in which a hand-held camera follows Amalia's hand touching windows and then the heads of children running down the hallway. These images are out of focus. Ríos writes,

Es claro que se está privilegiando un sentido que no es la visión. Es el desgaste de la intensidad que Amalia ha acumulado durante el viaje en el ascensor lo que queda pegado, reflejado en la escena. El espectador siente con Amalia, palpa los muros y las cabezas infantiles; participa del tacto de la secuencia. (20)

It is clear that what is privileged here is another sense than vision. What is captured, reflected in the scene is the wearing away of the intensity that Amalia has accumulated during her trip in the elevator. The spectator feels with Amalia, touches the walls and the children's heads; participates in the touch of the sequence.

La niña santa thus plays with suspense and condenses our expectations in order to intensify our sense of touch. It channels our sensations not only through the use of specific visual techniques, but orchestrates them in such a way that the expectation itself comes to dwell in the tips of our fingers. I argue that this never-resolved suspense (the film ends in a swimming pool but its actual denouement is taking place elsewhere) reflects the never-consummated touch between Amalia and Jano, which is itself mirrored in the numerous extreme close-ups in the film, that is, touches that almost happen, but never quite do.

The soundtrack of *La niña santa* can also be qualified as "haptic." Marks does not say much about haptic sound, but she does give the following brief definition:

Hearing can perceive the environment in a more or less instrumental way. We *listen* for specific things, while we *hear* ambient sound as an undifferentiated whole. One might call 'haptic hearing' that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to. (*Skin* 183).

It is through haptic sound and haptic visuality that the diverse forces of this film take their shape. Through them, mastery is undone, and the film's form makes us find

ourselves, like Amalia, in a position of surrender to this aesthetics of confusion and curiosity.

4.5. Haptic Epistemology

Since haptic visuality makes it impossible to settle meaning, how do we know in the realm of these images? Allow me to recapitulate Marks's arguments regarding this question. In *The Skin of the Film*, she focuses on what she calls "intercultural cinema," that is, experimental cinema produced by immigrant filmmakers from developing or emerging regions who have relocated in Western metropolitan centers. It is "an international phenomenon, produced wherever people of different cultural backgrounds live together in the power-inflected spaces of diaspora, (post- or neo-) colonialism, and cultural apartheid" (*Skin* 1). She suggests that in intercultural cinema, haptic visuality awakens memories of touch: the films that she studies draw their targeted audiences, typically emigrant spectators of the cultures represented on the screen who no longer have daily access to their original sensory world, back into the fold of sensations they had forgotten. Beyond touch, it is an entire neglected sensorium that comes back to life for the viewer, emerging from the hidden realm to which it had been confined for it could not be expressed with words. She argues that cinema "appeals to contact—to embodied knowledge, and to the sense of touch in particular—in order to recreate memories" (129). Marks uses the concept of "mimesis" to make sense of this mode of understanding: "according to Auerbach (1953), mimesis requires a lively and responsive relationship between listener/reader and story/text, such that each time a story is retold it is sensuously remade in the body of the listener" (138). Film is thus "grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole" (145).

Basing herself on Deleuze and Bergson, Marks elaborates an alternative epistemology, one that is not grounded in disincarnated vision, but in the whole sensorium. Sight itself, rather than being condemned for collaboration with the sensuous and ethical shortcomings of Western culture, ceases to be the sense of mastery and the only source of valid cognition to retrieve its own embodied nature alongside the other senses. In this, she differs from Bergson, who, she argues, "undervalued embodied memory" because "he privileged the intellectual intervention in the bodily actualization of memory" (142). Marks resolves the problem of using this reading of Bergson's work to think about embodied experience by weaving the question of the body and tactility into his account of memory. Bergson contends that the distance senses require the mediation of memory, but he sees the other senses (smell, touch, and taste) as triggering an immediate reaction. Conversely, Marks argues that memory can intervene in the entire sensorium for the senses themselves are not simply pre-symbolic, but educated, shaped by their given cultural environments. She notes for example that we are culturally trained to distinguish "good" smells and tastes from bad ones. The pleasures and displeasures of touch too, are acquired, as both psychoanalysis and the subtleties of any *ars sexualis* reveal. Further, she remarks that Proust's work demonstrates that "any sense perception can call up seemingly infinite, widening circles of memory like concentric ripples on a pond" (147).

In the films that Marks studies, which often feature long, static takes, the spectator makes sense of the images on the screen through a process of "attentive recognition," a Bergsonian concept that Deleuze uses in *L'Image-temps* and that accounts for what happens when we look at something in a sustained way: "a perceiver oscillates between

seeing the object, recalling virtual images that it brings to memory, and comparing the virtual object thus created with the one before us" (Marks, *Skin* 48). This process, she argues, is also pertinent to think about the other senses and it makes it possible for the spectator to participate in the production of the cinematic experience (149).

Like Deleuze, Marks uses Bergson's work on memory and perception to make sense of the films that she studies. Her approach is very apt as these films are precisely addressing questions of cultural memory. However, *La niña santa* is not directly concerned with memory. On the contrary, it is a film about the discovery of the world, about the age of adolescence, which is the age of the possible and of the new. Amalia is not yet haunted by memory, and beyond her, it is New Argentine Cinema as a whole that seems to embrace amnesia. As Aguilar points out, the new generation of filmmakers tends not to be interested in addressing their country's past. The hotel of *La niña santa*, albeit old, does not deliberately seek to evoke memories of the Perón years or of the military dictatorship, and neither do the adult characters, almost all of whom are grown children who only seem to remember the flirts and crushes they had in their own youth. Instead, *La niña santa* is a film that addresses discovery and curiosity. This process of learning, which is Amalia's, and through her, ours as well, relies mostly on touch and sound. We are, like the protagonist, put in a confused position, very different from the stance we are led to adopt in, say, a classical Hollywood movie, where clarity eventually triumphs. In *La niña santa*, we are invited to abandon ourselves to our senses to discover what we normally cannot know, refuse to know, or have no access to.

Bergson proposes a groundbreaking epistemological method to make sense of the world in general and of art in particular: intuition, the open-ended attunement to the

duration of another being, which he opposes to perception (the latter being geared toward action and divisible by intellect).⁶⁹ I argue that intuition can be used productively to make sense of a film like *La niña santa*. The two methods, perception/memory (attentive recognition) and intuition, need not be mutually exclusive in cinematic analysis, as both can be used to think about the same films. However, they do raise different issues and highlight different aspects of film viewing. On the one hand, Marks' focus on perception and memory, grounded in Bergson's work in *Matière et mémoire*, asks how the film situates us in the world by showing how the experience of film viewing can reawaken (or not) a series of forgotten memories. In contrast, an approach grounded in intuition, which rests mainly on Bergson's work in *L'Évolution créatrice* and *La pensée et le mouvant*, seeks to know how I can attune myself to a film and what means it puts at my disposal to do so—in other words, how the film seduces me. This is an important question, because conceptualizing these processes of seduction makes it possible to understand the alternative that time-image films develop to identification. Therefore, before turning to a discussion of the pertinence of Bergsonian intuition for cinema studies, let us take a brief look at the functioning of cinematic identification.

4.6. Identification

Scholars such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz have suggested that films, and especially mainstream films, lull the spectator into an invocation of the mirror stage, the early developmental phase that marks the creation of the ego and of its complement, the

⁶⁹ This may seem confusing in the case of attentive recognition. Everyday perception enables us to detect only the stimuli that we need in order act. Attentive recognition forms a prolonged instance of everyday perception that is turned toward the past.

ego-ideal. Seeing his reflection in the mirror, the child identifies with the coherent, finely coordinated self-image that he receives. This episode establishes the Imaginary, the order of forms, which will serve as the basis for all other identifications in his life. The typical spectator has already moved well beyond the mirror stage and into the Symbolic, the realm of culture and language. Therefore, he must first allow the Symbolic to subside temporarily so the Imaginary can once again dominate his psyche before he can let himself be transported by the film world. As he becomes absorbed in the ideal pictures that he sees unfold on the screen in the guise of film characters, his first identification will be with the camera itself, and only subsequently with the characters.

Feminist film critics, in the wake of Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking work, have proposed that cinematic identifications are far from neutral with respect to sexual difference. Focusing their critique on the politics of desire in the cinema, they have shown that despite its apparent abstraction, the implied spectator of cinema is male. Indeed, the content of most films, and in particular of mainstream films, relies on traditional structures of desire that objectify women. Hence, spectators tend to identify with the character that occupies the masculine, i.e. active, position. Several critics (for instance Sandy Flitterman-Lewis and Teresa De Lauretis) have produced studies explaining the ways in which certain films (often women-authored) can and do undermine this phallogentric structure of the gaze. To a certain extent, *La niña santa* lends itself well to this analytical framework, as Aguilar notes that Amalia and her mother deal with the gaze in diametrically opposed ways. Helena is presented as futile and superficial: she is a seductive woman who seeks validation from men, and she is therefore subjected to the male gaze. Amalia, unlike her flirtatious mother, cares little for

the attention of men and thereby resists objectification: she “escapes the gaze and penetrates the labyrinths of hearing, touch, and divine will... [she] touches and listens to the call” (Aguilar 88). However, Amalia is also far from incarnating a feminist heroine, as her ideal of self-accomplishment is to sacrifice herself for a man’s salvation.

Rather than going deeper into the question of the gaze and its relation to phallocentrism, what interests me here are identifications with film characters, which Metz and Baudry call “secondary” because they come after the identification with the camera itself. These recall what Lacan himself calls “secondary identifications,” which follow the primary identification that takes place during the mirror stage. They come closest to the general, most common definition of the term, as a process of assimilation by the subject of an other that relies on the desire to *be* the other. What we ordinarily call “identifying” in film involves an empathetic reaction to a character and belongs to this realm of secondary identifications. In this particular sense, identifying means feeling unconsciously that “this is me,” “this could be me if I were in her situation,” “I wish this were me,” or “I feel her pain.” In order to function, it requires sharing or inventing an emotion, either good or bad. Therefore, identification requires a certain level of emotional legibility—one that, as the preceding pages suggest, *La niña santa* avoids. Instead, in this film, we remain mostly unsure how to feel about what we see on the screen, and we are not pressed to identify with Amalia or her fellow characters. Our relationship to her is quite different from those that we usually establish with film protagonists. Indeed, we do not feel particularly sorry for the young girl, nor are we invited to endorse her choices, nor do we admire her, for instance, for her rectitude or her

resilience. In other words, identification is thwarted: although spectators may at times identify with Amalia, this is not what the film primarily encourages.

Instead, *La niña santa* engages us by presenting a reality that we can never fully grasp. We can only allow the film to take us where it aims to take us, by accepting, even affirming, its irreducible intricacies. *La niña santa* appeals to our embodied experience to discover that which we cannot know with the devices that we normally use to make sense of the world, and therefore the film lends itself well to an intuitive approach.

4.7. Intuition

Bergson divides the human intellect into two main categories, intelligence and intuition. Intelligence, our principal mode of orientation to the world, refers to a mode of thinking that relies on repetition and division, and it underlies such activities as mapping territories, creating words, or analytical thought. It is what enables us to act by making the world manageable to the human mind. However, since the nature of life is to ceaselessly produce new things, intelligence, which functions on the basis of repeatability, cannot adequately comprehend its flow and that of difference. Hence the mind is possessed of a second capability, intuition, that follows the movement of life. In contrast to intelligence, which is oriented toward action, intuition has no practical aim. Rather, through intuition, the mind becomes one with duration, the uninterrupted unfolding of time, and it comes to understand the world not from the outside, through analysis, division, and repetition, but from the inside, through an openness to the emergence of the new. Bergson makes of intuition the method of metaphysics, for it bypasses intelligence by placing the subject within matter and change itself, so she can

apprehend what has stirred her curiosity not through division, but in its totality.⁷⁰ In order to intuit, we engage in an effort that Bergson calls “sympathy,” whereby we put ourselves in the place of the object that we seek to understand.

As the method of metaphysics, intuition is generally understood to be entirely focused on the mind: it forms “la connaissance intime de l’esprit par l’esprit” (“the intimate knowledge of the mind by the mind”; *Pensée* 216). Yet a careful look reveals that it is in fact closely allied to the corporeal. Indeed, Bergson lists two unexpected sources for his mode of philosophical inquiry, both of which underscore its embodied accents: art and the animal.

In *L’Évolution créatrice*, Bergson argues that intuition is the human heir to instinct: in the natural world, instinct allows a predator to attune itself to its victim so it knows where and when to strike. It is the organic movement that leads an animal to act as it must (although, as Bergson insists, it can be augmented with a small measure of intelligence, for instance with regard to the choice of location where a given action is to be accomplished). Although instinct does not subsist in mankind beyond the fringes of the self, it finds a new, human manifestation in the intuitive exploration of the world, which perpetuates the “sympathetic” ability of instinct to capture a position other than one’s own. Intuition is what instinct has become: no longer geared toward action, it is “désintéressé, conscient de lui-même, capable de réfléchir sur son objet et de l’élargir indéfiniment” (“disinterested, conscious of itself, capable of reflecting on its object and to

⁷⁰ This brief introduction presents intuition and intelligence as more separate than they actually are in Bergson’s work: indeed, intuition can only be verified by and articulated through intelligence, and the latter can only offer up deep insights into the world if it is nourished by intuition. For an in-depth study of the points of convergence between these two modalities, see Husson.

enlarge it indefinitely”; *Évolution* 178). Thus the medium of our most subtle engagement with the world is, at the hereditary level at least, directly indebted to the animal.

If the genetic lineage of intuition can be traced back to instinct, its model, insofar as it serves as the method of metaphysics, is to be found in art. Bergson frequently evokes the aesthetic intuition, the great artist’s natural ability to perceive the simple intention of life,⁷¹ and to make visible to the rest of us what had remained obscured by the necessities of action and the grids of intelligence. He already draws out the analogy between philosophy and artistic creation in the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. In *Le rire*, he suggests that artists are endowed with a natural aptitude for embracing (and revealing) a more direct vision of reality than others. However, not only does Bergson not yet use the word “intuition” in its technical sense, but this artistic capability is a blessing that befalls only a few, instead of a universal human trait. It is only in his 1903 article “Introduction à la métaphysique” (*Pensée* 177-228) and his subsequent works that the gift of attunement becomes a willful effort available to all, and that philosophy finds in art more than a kindred approach to the world but the very source of its method. The philosopher, Bergson suggests, needs to follow the artist’s course: to leave behind the urge to act, and to embrace instead an unmediated relation to the world and to the undulations of life. It is true that for Bergson art remains inferior to metaphysics: the latter is deeper and more complex, intuited as well as intelligent, encompassing the

⁷¹ Bergson uses the word “intention” in relation to life and art in *Évolution*, 178. However, it should be noted that this intention is not teleological: life for Bergson does not advance toward a predetermined goal. Rather, “intention” should be understood as the energy that propels life to the endless creation of the new.

general rather than concentrating on the individual.⁷² Yet it remains that painters, writers, and composers are to be emulated because they are more attuned than the rest of us to the rhythms of the world and they perceive more finely its shimmering play of sensations. Bergson's method, in short, makes the philosopher stretch toward the artist.

The artistic intuition is unmistakably embodied, as the artist's purpose is to reveal to the senses the subtle, barely visible nuances of the world. But it is worth noting that traces of the incarnated origins of intuition can be found even in its most metaphysical manifestations, as Bergson regularly uses embodied images to describe the intuitive process: for example, its goal is "se replacer à l'intérieur de l'objet" ("to place ourselves within the object"; *Évolution* 178) for "les forces qui travaillent en toutes choses, nous les sentons en nous" ("we can feel inside ourselves the forces that are at work in all things"; *Pensée* 137). Intuition forms "une incitation au mouvement" ("an inciting to movement"; *Pensée* 225). Most strikingly, in "L'intuition philosophique" (*Pensée* 117-142), he suggests that between the philosopher's intuition and his texts comes a fleeting, intermediary image that the careful reader can make out, and that gives him a more faithful sense of the philosopher's vision than any abstract discourse can. Bergson invites us to pay close attention to this image for it is on its basis that we can perceive "l'attitude du corps" that the philosopher adopted to capture a particular insight into the world (*Pensée* 119). He thus suggests that each intuition relies on a corporeal stance that is presumably as subtle as the object it approaches, almost imperceptible, but nonetheless extremely specific.

⁷² For an exploration of the shortcomings of art in comparison to metaphysics, see Camille Riquier, 177-179.

4.8. Intuition in *La niña santa*

La niña santa similarly seeks to awaken in us a subtle yet very precise bodily attitude, through which we are invited to adopt an intuitive approach to the complex experience of its main character and of the world that she inhabits. To this effect, the film makes an appeal to our senses, primarily touch and sound. The movie produces a tactile vision through an abundance of extreme close-ups that configure a universe in which knowledge is not conveyed through language, but through proximity: it is by coming close to the characters that we get a sense of who they are. This movement is not primarily sexual but sensuous, often without being eroticized. Amalia herself, as noted earlier, does not function primarily as an object for the gaze. Rather, we follow her explorations by attuning ourselves to her embodied mode of apprehension of the world. The look that Martel invites us to bestow on Amalia, and beyond her, on the world, opens up the limits of our prejudiced mind: the film disorients us physically (time and space are unclear) and intellectually (we do not know what to think), and it is through her tactile examination that we learn to see differently.

Touch and sound cannot be entirely disentangled, as both are constitutive of our access to intuition in the film. Martel relies on a rich, often mysterious and disquieting soundscape that I have described above. Russell notes that sound in the film is related to knowledge:

For Martel, listening is the first stage in the conception of a screenplay. More radically than her male colleagues, however, she sees listening as knowledge, sound as a conduit to a mode of being and understanding. While sound is most often associated with irrationality and emotion (music most obviously) and used in film primarily to externalize subjectivity, Martel posits sound as rational, listening as intelligent a sense as seeing, and equally primary to our being in the world. The surprising result of this sound awareness is an embodied intellectual experience.

Hence in *La niña santa*, Bergsonian “attunement,” which is a synonym for the sympathy that is at the core of the process of intuition, is literally an adjustment to a tune or a rhythm. It is by following the strange sounds that give its depth to the film that we make sense of its confusion: although we are only able to explain the film through its contradictions (as I have done in the first section on this chapter), resorting to intelligence to dissect its aesthetic devices and its formal complexity, we can feel the coherence, the simplicity of its movement, of what it seeks to say about this adolescent and about the world in general.

La niña santa asks that we attune ourselves to Amalia’s experience: in order to make sense of the film, or simply to enjoy it, we must try to bridge the gap that separates the singularity of her life from that of our own. This marks a profound shift in focus from the processes of identification that are prevalent in mainstream cinema: whereas the latter is always in the last instance about “me” (it is myself that I project in the other), intuition is about the other, whose world it seeks to divine.⁷³ Hence, whereas identification involves a strengthening of the ego, intuition relies on a diffusion of the self that enables an opening to alterity.

This intuitive movement is not only present in *La niña santa*, but rather forms a tendency of what Deleuze has called modern cinema. Indeed, the conjunction of the primacy of time and of the privileging of contemplation makes of modern cinema an ideal milieu for the deployment of intuition. Modern films, like Bergson’s method, invite a special “attitude of the body” from the spectator, one that is very different from the

⁷³ The parallels between intuition and the interval will be examined in the last pages of this chapter.

dynamic movement that responds to a call to action. *La niña santa* provides a powerful example of this demand for a reflexive corporeal position, attuned to the meanderings of the figures on the screen, for it intensely engages the spectator's senses, while befuddling their minds with an ambiguous narrative. The same can be said of the cinema of, for example, Claire Denis, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, or Terrence Malick.

Admittedly, not all authors of modern cinema focus on the body. In "Cinéma, corps et cerveau, pensée" (*Image-temps* 246-291), Deleuze divides modern films into two categories: those that are oriented toward the corporeal, and those that speak chiefly to the spectator's brain (in the latter category, he cites Stanley Kubrick and Alain Resnais). Still, I argue that both styles of modern cinema make an appeal to the viewer's intuitive body: although it may be less manifest in the case of intellectual films, they too demand an intuitive openness, one that, as Bergson suggests, goes hand in hand with a particular corporeal inclination.

This subtle attunement, paradoxically, requires a tremendous effort, of which Bergson makes no secret: intuiting is a rigorous yet transient endeavor that must ceaselessly renew itself, for it seeks to experience and to think that which always changes: movement, life, becoming. Intuition itself can only be sustained for a few instants, and the task of the philosopher, of the artist, or of the reader or viewer, is to harken back to this moment of truth to let their understanding of the work or of nature unfold. Therefore, modern cinema must accomplish two things: it must produce the conditions for the emergence of intuition, while at the same time seducing its viewers so they will consent to engage in the required effort. Both happen simultaneously: the slow or confusing narrative developments, ambivalent characters, and sometimes challenging

aesthetic choices that create the context for the emergence of intuition are also the elements that modern films deploy in order to beguile their viewers. One may balk at the idea that we can “sympathize” with repulsive or destructive characters, as is often the case with characters in modern films, which privilege ambivalence over moral comfort. But nowhere does Bergson restrict the object of his “camaraderie.” And it is because a film appeals to us in other ways, because it enraptures us viscerally or intellectually, that we may not only be able to tolerate, but also to attempt to attune ourselves to these sometimes-unpleasant figures. This is well exemplified in *La niña santa*, where Amalia, while far from being odious, is at once tormentor and victim.

4.9. Sexual Difference

Since *La niña santa* is built through the perspective of a young girl, we must ask what the status of sexual difference is in the film, and how intuition is related to it. Let us start from the question of aesthetics. Marks, in her analysis of the haptic, warns of a “temptation to understand haptic visuality as a feminine kind of visuality.” Instead, she argues that we should see the “haptic as a visual strategy that can be used to describe alternative visual traditions, including women’s and feminist practices, rather than a feminine quality in particular” (*Skin* 169-70). In this, she echoes my own remark in the first chapter that nearness and Ada’s characterization in *The Piano* should not be seen as a direct evocation of the feminine, but as producing the conditions of openness from which any difference, including the feminine, can emerge, in a radical destabilization of the regime of oneness (that is, of the masculine, which is also, in a Western context, that of the white, the heterosexual, the able-bodied, etc.). Similarly, Russell notes that sound

tends to “be feminized and subordinated to the visual,” making of aurality one of the senses that becomes minoritarian in order to ensure the domination of the scopic economy. This does not mean, however, that all sound, not even all haptic sound, calls forth the feminine. Rather, sound can only serve toward the elaboration of an alternative sensorium that undermines the primacy of phallic, distanced, masterful vision.

Therefore, I would be extremely reluctant to describe haptic sound and visuality in *La niña santa* as “feminine,” in the sense of the thorough transvaluation of values that Irigaray calls for. This is reinforced by the fact that Amalia is a highly ambivalent character, who partakes at once of a refreshing rebelliousness and of a consternating, dangerous conformism, and who cannot simply be said to embody a new figuration of the sexes. However, we do experience the film through her, and as a young girl, she embodies a standpoint that we are not accustomed to see in film, and certainly not in a portrayal that respects the singularity of its character and of the age and sex that she incarnates. Female adolescents on the screen are usually vacuous and artificial, their desires made to conform to the projections of adult spectators. This has led one commentator to remark that *La niña santa* portrays “the weirdness” of girl adolescence (Jones 24), as Amalia’s experience cannot be understood by the usual markers of normalcy (that is, unless one happens to be a teenage girl...). But in fact, female adolescents are not “weird,” they are different. Their actions and their worldviews do have a coherence and a rationality, albeit one that may seem illogical to boys and to adults of both sexes. This specific vision is what the film offers up: through the process of intuition upon which we are invited to embark, we come to sense this particular condition of being. *La niña santa* asks that we attune ourselves to Amalia’s experience.

In order to make sense of the film, or simply to enjoy it, we must try to bridge the gap that separates the singularity, the “weirdness” of her life from that of ours. This curiosity for the sexually differentiated other partakes not only of intuition, but also of the Irigarayan interval.

The similarities between the two concepts are far-reaching, as both refer to an embodied movement toward the other, an embrace of difference without hierarchy that is at once of the body and of the mind. Bergson himself conceptualizes intuition through an interval. Indeed, intuition is first and foremost an attunement to duration and as Hill notes,

[Bergson] privileges a concept of the interval as the opening of time, or what he calls ‘duration’ (*la durée*). For Bergson the interval of duration is nothing other than the threshold of intuition, the method he believes philosophy must pursue in order to become a rigorous form of knowledge. (*Interval* 4)

In other words, through the interval of time that nourishes intuition, the mind becomes aware of duration, and is able to follow other rhythms than its own, and thereby to become so intimately connected to them that it comes to understand them from the inside.

This process, Grosz remarks, is twofold: “intuition... is directed both inward, to grasp oneself and one’s being as an internality, and also outward, insofar as it directs us to the unique particularity of objects” (*Nick* 236). Again, the resonances with Irigaray’s interval are profound. Like Bergson, Irigaray conceives of the interval of sexual difference as a dual movement directed both inside and outside the self. The space between the two cannot achieve its productive work if woman is not attuned to herself. Since phallogentrism has dispossessed her of a feminine identity, she must, as Irigaray writes in *J’aime à toi*, “se rassembler en elle-même” (“re-gather herself in herself”; 53), produce a world of her own, with a horizon of becoming that corresponds to her needs

and desires. In Bergsonian terms, woman must develop an attunement to her own duration, she must reach into those regions of the self that are yet to be explored and embrace this difference within the subject to constitute herself as an autonomous being. For sexual difference to come into its own, women must first and foremost direct their intuition inwards, toward the uncharted territories of the self and toward the forces that constitute it. Men also need to look inward because phallogentrism, even though it has senselessly privileged the interests of male bodies, has betrayed them too (for example by affecting their ability to acknowledge difference, or by repressing all other sexual organs than the penis). The movement of the interval of sexual difference is, like Bergsonian intuition, a double motion that aims at both the inside and the outside.

Further, both the interval and intuition demand that we refashion our understanding of epistemology. The acquisition of knowledge is usually seen as sustained by intelligence, which is directed toward inert things, and associated with mastery and appropriation. In contrast, Bergson suggests that intuition is fleeting, as the effort to follow the flow of duration can only be sustained for a short time. It is also somewhat frustrating, for the kernel of truth that it gives us remains impossible to translate adequately into language (this is evidenced by the voluminous oeuvres that philosophers, Bergson tells us, spend their whole lives writing as they seek to convey a single evanescent intuition). The interval is similarly open-ended: its constant movement makes it impossible to pin down. It is, as Hill puts it, a “threshold of becoming” (*Interval* 56), one through which two individualities can at once generate themselves and the other. This process does not have an end, and there is no one moment at which one can say: This is woman! (this very indeterminacy saves Irigaray’s work from charges of

utopianism and essentialism). Therefore, both intuition and the interval are forms of knowledge that can never stabilize their object and can not be used for dominion. Theirs is a position of humility, an effort to be attuned to difference.

Grosz argues that intuition is not simply what instinct has become in humans, but that it is in fact a weaker form of instinct. Indeed, who can claim to have the extraordinary foresight of the animals described by Bergson in *La pensée et le mouvant*? For example,

Quand l'Oestrie du Cheval dépose ses oeufs sur les jambes ou sur les épaules de l'animal, il agit comme s'il savait que sa larve doit se développer dans l'estomac du cheval, et que le cheval, en se léchant, transportera la larve naissante dans son tube digestif. (*Évolution* 146-7)

When the horse-nostril fly lays its eggs on the animal's legs or shoulders, it acts as though it knew that its larva must develop in the horse's stomach, and that the horse, by licking itself, will transport the nascent larva in its digestive tract.

Similarly, Grosz cites the following example from *La pensée et le mouvant*: through “anatomical ‘insights,’” the wasp “instinctively knows just where to paralyze its prey so that it is not killed but incapacitated, and thus provides the wasp with living, ongoing sustenance” (*Nick* 224). In contrast to instinct, intuitive knowledge remains woefully limited: I can never actually be the other and can only intuit her experience from my own embodied position. Similarly, the interval never accomplishes its curve, that is, it never grants subjects a true, absolute insight of the experience of the other's body. It is impossible for a woman to know what life is as a man, and vice versa. One can attune oneself to sexual difference, sense what it must be like to have another's incarnated experience, but the ontological difference that separates the sexes, their respective positions regarding existence, makes a thorough knowledge of the actual experience of

masculinity or femininity impossible. Therefore, the interval remains a mutual *movement toward* the other, one that seeks to affirm difference without imposing signification.

Irigaray writes in this respect,

L'admiration est avant et après l'appropriation. Soustraite au rejet, s'exprimant notamment par les contradictoires. Ce qui est avant la convenance n'a pas de contraire. Pour émouvoir, il faut et il suffit qu'il *surprenne*, qu'il soit nouveau, *non encore assimilé-désassimilé comme connu*. Éveillant encore notre passion, notre appétit. Notre attrait du pas encore codé, notre curiosité (?, mais en tous sens: vue, odorat, ouïe? etc.) vis-à-vis du non encore rencontré ni fait nôtre. (*Éthique* 77)

Admiration is before and after appropriation. Excluded from rejection, expressing itself among others through the contradictory. What is before appropriateness has no contrary. To stir, it must and it is enough that it *surprises*, that it is new, *not yet assimilated-unassimilated as known*. Still awakening our passion, our appetite. Our attraction to the not yet coded, our curiosity (?, but in all the senses: sight, smell, hearing? etc.) toward the not yet encountered nor made ours.

Irigaray enunciates several of the themes tied to the interval that I have explored in these pages: the interval can only be expressed through oxymorons, it comes before the possibility of arresting meaning and is therefore without an opposite, it is a pure affirmation, and a source of surprise and renewal. She frames her concept within what I will call an epistemology of openness: the interval, she writes, rests on admiration, which she opposes to appropriation by arguing, like Bergson, that they do not belong to the same time. The flow of duration is explicitly associated with “curiosity,” which is at the heart of the encounter and which, the odd question mark suggests, is itself an open-ended concept. Irigaray is careful not to enclose it within the realm of the mind, as the senses play a crucial role in the movement toward the other. Indeed, one can hardly see how such a movement could take place at all without vision, smell, hearing, and of course touch, which Irigaray does not list here but to which she often refers as “la caresse.” This does not mean that the encounter between the two needs to be sexual, but rather that the

production of an interval between the sexes can only be embodied. Indeed, one fails to see how embodied difference could be affirmed without a sensuous (though not necessarily sensual) exploration of alterity.

In *La niña santa*, Martel too prompts an epistemology of the senses: Amalia, unlike her mother who relies on vision and the male gaze, explores the world through sound and touch. Hers is a desire to know through the body, to know what resists articulation, and this mode of learning matches the vaporous desire of her age, a desire that is often not well-defined, as I have already noted, and maybe not even primarily sexual, but rather is directed toward exploration. We are, like her, engulfed in a sea of sensations that rarely has a clear object. Through Amalia, the spectator is invited to get a taste of difference, to experience another mode of being to the world that rests less on a phallically organized, hierarchical gaze than it does on sound and touch. I do not argue that Amalia incarnates the feminine, but rather that the entire film proposes a different epistemology as we are plunged into a cinematic world in which our common sensuous reference points are challenged, and thrown into situations for which we have no ready-made moral code. We do not identify with the characters as much as we attune ourselves to the world of the film, and we have no choice but to seek to understand this taciturn teenage girl from the inside, through a process of intuition that is also that of the interval of sexual difference.

4.10. Conclusion

I have argued that Deleuze's distinction between the movement-image and the time-image was matched by two different modes of cinematic seduction: identification on the

one hand, and intuition on the other. The cinema of the time-image elaborates demanding filmic universes in which temporal and spatial coordinates are often disrupted. Far from embracing a specific moral argument, a worldview in which right and wrong are clearly delineated, these films tend to offer ambiguous narratives in which the spectator is meant to lose her footing. This is true of *La niña santa*: by weaving together and affiliating various planes of experience, Martel prevents her spectators from indulging in the simple joys of self-righteousness, and it is impossible to resort to morality to assess the film. By seducing us into an effort of intuition, modern cinema makes us, like Amalia, listen closely to the call, and stretch ourselves beyond the comfort of the familiar to conjure up, furtively, the place of the other. In the case of this film, and of the others considered in these pages, this place is occupied by a character whose identity emphasizes sexual differentiation. Therefore, the Irigarayan interval, which in many respects echoes Bergsonian intuition, lends itself well to an understanding of this particular operation of cinematic attunement.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how three contemporary filmmakers, Campion, Denis, and Martel have implicitly responded to Irigaray's crucial challenge: the necessity to reinvent space, time, and embodiment in order for alterity to become a lived experience, rather than a virtuality. Of all the arts, cinema is perhaps that which lends itself the best to the realization of such an endeavor, since at the most fundamental level, it is deploying bodies through space and time.

Each of these three directors develops this project through one particular category. Through her consistent use of the close-up, Campion creates a particular form of spatiality in *The Piano*, one that establishes an intimacy with her main character, Ada, while also honoring the distance that makes possible her autonomy. This dual spatial arrangement echoes Irigaray's own theory of space in her concept of the interval, the close distance that makes possible the emergence of two subjects who can affirm each other as such, and move beyond the subject/object hierarchies that feed phallogentrism and other forms of oppression.

In *Beau Travail*, Claire Denis creates a cinematic universe devoid of hierarchies between good and evil, between the local and the foreign, or between different types of people. Instead, each character functions as a single trajectory, calling to mind Bergson's concept of duration, which refers to the lapse of time that it takes for a single movement to be accomplished, be it a whole life or the quiver of leaf. The temporal structure of the film, constituted of different kinds of time, accentuates this constellation of singularities found at the level of characterization.

Denis' next film, *Trouble Every Day* also engages with time in a way that opens up to alterity. The film can be seen as a study of love, understood not as the delusion of perfect complementarity, but as a terrifying affect that wants to take at the same time as it never reaches the object of its desire. Denis resorts to editing to convey this impossibility, and the film is rife with effects, such as false eyeline matches, that emphasize the unbridgeable gap between characters through an interstice between images and/or sounds. Deleuze shows that this interstice is in fact typical of post-World War II cinema, and I suggest that it can be related to Irigaray's interval.

Through Amalia, the protagonist of *La niña santa*, Martel explores a mode of approaching the world that does away with disincarnated, masterful visuality, to replace it with an intuitive, tactile and aural, curiosity. Amalia's attunement to that which she does not know, as well as our own attunement to her enigmatic character, echo Bergson's intuitive method, through which one can come to understand a different being not through analysis, but from this inside, by becoming one with its duration. I suggest that intuition functions as an alternative to identification in art cinema, as the latter seduces us with aesthetic and emotional confusion.

These four films portray engagements with difference that resonate with theories of alterity, and in particular Irigaray's concept of the interval. Through all of them, we find depictions of difference that describe curiosity, a movement toward the other, and intimate distances that respect both singularity and the richness of the encounter itself. However, these four films also represent violence, and in particular sexual violence. Even more surprisingly, they do so without condemning brutality.

Sexual violence is present in each film: Ada (*The Piano*) and Amalia (*La niña santa*) both undergo sexual harassment; in *Trouble Every Day*, Shane and Coré are afflicted by a disease that compels them to rape and murder; and even though there is no manifest sexual brutality in *Beau Travail*, Galoup's belligerence against Sentain can be seen as an effect of his repressed desire for Forrestier. Yet the films resist outright reprobation: neither Ada nor Amalia is traumatized, and the men who harass them are themselves victims; Denis is always careful not to judge any of her characters, regardless of their actions (a careful analysis of *Trouble Every Day* shows that it does offer a critique of phallocentrism, but not of Shane himself, who is a melancholy, haunted man).

To some extent, the presence of sexual violence can be explained through generic conventions, as it is a frequent trope in art cinema. Many male art filmmakers (among many others, Roman Polanski, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Claude Chabrol) have depicted the sexually aggressive man as a rebellious figure, who is subverting bourgeois norms and conventional values by engaging in what is seen as transgressive desire and sexual practices (although it can be argued that nothing is more conventional than the oppression of women). Further, Dominique Russell shows that art cinema has a long tradition of simultaneously representing and disguising rape (*Rape 2*), and of effacing the victim's trauma (*Rape 4*), as is the case in *The Piano* and in *La niña santa*. However, I do not think that these filmmakers simply collude with phallocentrism.

Campion and Martel utilize this generic erasure of trauma in ways that differs from and ultimately subverts its traditional purpose. Art films often obscure women's pain so the figure of the male rebel can be glorified, his freedom epitomized in the

violations he commits (*Rape* 6).⁷⁴ In contrast, Campion and Martel resort to sexual violence to show how deeply focused their female characters are on their inner worlds. Sexual violence comes to serve as a foil, an obstacle that would derail others, but that only accentuates the desire and the tenacity of these female protagonists. Ada is willing to risk violation (from both her husband and her to-be lover) to know who and how she loves. In *La niña santa*, Amalia makes herself available for sexual harassment in order to explore her sensual experience of the divine. *Trouble Every Day* deviates from generic conventions in that it does not disguise sexual violence.⁷⁵ But similarly to Campion and Martel, Denis uses this trope to insist on the integrity of her female protagonist: unlike Shane, who pretends to be a respectable doctor and husband, Coré remains true to herself, even as the disease is killing her.

Hence, Campion, Denis, and Martel engage in a subversive imitation of the generic, traditional use of sexual violence in art cinema. Lucy Bolton has read this form of feminist appropriation of dominant tropes by women filmmakers as an instance of Irigaray's mimicry (Bolton 47-50),⁷⁶ and indeed, these women directors can be seen as

⁷⁴ Russell gives this chilling, well-known example: "In *Last Tango*, Jeanne is so ready for anything, so opaque as a character [...] that the difference between her willing and unwilling submission is nearly (but not quite) imperceptible. But if Maria Schneider felt violated by the demands made of her while playing Jeanne, it was only one sacrifice in the quest for Marlon Brando's extraordinary performance and Bertolucci's vision" (*Rape* 6). This, the critic points out, "reinforces a hierarchy of masculine imagination over the feminine body" (*Rape* 6).

⁷⁵ Denis belongs to a group of French filmmakers, dubbed "The New French Extremists," who have challenged the preference for the effacement of sexual violence in art cinema by depicting violations in "hypervisible" ways (as is the case for instance in *Trouble Every Day*) (*Rape* 3).

⁷⁶ As noted earlier, mimicry forms a tactic for women to access subjectivity by imitating and exaggerating the phallogentric definition of the feminine. The function of patriarchy is to cover up a possible operation of the feminine in language. Therefore, women have to mimic being subjects, to ventriloquize masculinity, in order to be subjects at all. But of

ventriloquists: rather than taking an oppositional stance against phallocentrism (like Virginie Despentes or Chantal Akerman for instance), they undermine the phallic voice by imitating and exaggerating it. What gets validated through sexual violence is not a desiring male figure, but desire itself, as each film portrays characters of both sexes who pursue what they want: not only are Baines, Stewart, and Jano lascivious, but both Ada and Amalia are driven by lust and by the imperative to explore their inner worlds; Shane may be the figure of phallic sexual terror, but Coré is the incarnation of an absolute, primal desire; and Galoup, even though he may not be aware of his true motivations, does act out on his need to do away with Sentain and attempts to kill him.

Further, the simultaneous presence and lack of condemnation of sexual violence is a sign of the filmmakers' adamant affirmation of desire, which they recognize as an affect that wants to take, or to abandon itself, but that is ineluctably entangled within relations of power and domination. Campion, Denis, and Martel all portray desire as the force of life itself, one that is as vibrant in women as it is in men. However, phallocentrism divides desiring bodies into at least two categories, and puts them on divergent tracks: it marks women's desire as excessive, and endows (straight) men's with senseless privileges. The directors studied here all wrestle with this division, and if their male characters are often phallocrats (as they impose their phallic power on others) it is because they belong to the group that benefits from this imbalanced power distribution along corporeal lines. But their desire is in essence no different from that of the female

course, they never succeed in being wholly male, and from this excess stems the possibility of a new kind of female subject position.

characters. The directors offer no reprobation of sexual violence because they see the same force at work in all subjects.

In sum, the four films that I have examined here depict two fundamental tendencies of life: on the one hand, the violence of desire, which wants to take and consume, and on the other the equally vital need for self-actualization and for relationships that allow difference to be lived out without hierarchies. The movies do not seek to resolve this tension. Rather, they affirm these two lines of life simultaneously, offering their viewers no hope for closure. This may explain the deep melancholy that pervades the films, as well as the silence that typifies their female characters: one female protagonist is mute (Ada), another one does not say more than a couple of sentences (Coré), and the last one is a teenager, Amalia, whose rare speech is dominated by compulsive prayers (besides the extra's, *Beau Travail* only pictures one female character, Rahel, who does not speak in the film). Silence offers the expanse necessary for this tension to be sustained, as it marks the unutterable of desire, especially for women (there is no vocabulary that honors its specificity in phallocentrism), at the same time as it provides the openness necessary for relations of lived difference.

This tension also forms a last parallel between the films and the philosophical works, in line with those I have traced throughout this dissertation. Indeed, in this double affirmation of two irreconcilable tendencies, we find another instance of the oxymoron, the figure of speech that presents us with a collision of conflicting forces, while leaving open the outcome of their encounter. The pleasure that these films offer is ultimately that of contemplating this tension and of deferring resolution indefinitely.

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