

Kristin Lené Hole

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

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Reviewed by Sarah Cooper, 2018

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In this inspiring book on Claire Denis's filmmaking, Kristin Lené Hole not only adds to the excellent existing literature on this exciting director, but also positions Denis differently from how she has been viewed and written about to date. Although Denis's work has lent itself to a philosophical approach, most notably because of her ongoing dialogues with the work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, her films have been less readily discussed at length in overtly ethical terms, and an encounter with Emmanuel Levinas has been largely absent.<sup>1</sup> Hole's work rectifies this, placing Denis in a sustained and in-depth dialogue with Nancy and Levinas. Respecting filmmaking and philosophy equally, and indeed blurring the boundaries between the two to challenge any sense that it is only in the latter work that thinking takes place, Hole treats all three figures as idea-makers. Their projects intrude upon and interrupt one another throughout her study, with each of their bodies of work preventing closure upon what an ethics might mean or do in cinematic practice.

Marking out the specificity of the filmmaker's relative freedom in comparison to the strictures that the philosophers grapple with through language, Hole notes how Denis has a level of flexibility with regard to articulations of difference that is not open to the two philosophers who must reckon with the language and history of philosophy, which binds them to meta-analysis and abstraction at times. Denis can, in contrast, and as Hole puts it, "give similar problems a pulse" (42), give weight to bodies, history, and geopolitical borders, as well as invite spectators to share in material *sense* (the French term *sens* to which Nancy has frequent recourse and that Hole uses profitably in her work combines direction, meaning, and the sensorial). It is through an interruptive dialogue within and between film and philosophy that Hole's sense of a feminist cinematic ethics gradually takes shape.

The role of interruption in establishing what Hole terms an "ethics of sense" is fundamental to chapter 2. Aligning cinema with literature rather than myth on both Nancy's and Denis's part, Hole argues: "When film is 'literature' or when it participates in an ethics of sense, it is interruptive, it refuses normativity, it privileges listening over understanding, and, finally, it opens up to the wonder of being exposed

to and with one another" (45). The notion of going or gesturing toward (*vers*) a position without ever occupying it fully is an important aspect in the opening stages of Hole's argument and in the project as a whole. It derives from Denis's practice, figured twice in the titles of two short films, *Vers Nancy* (2002), with which the chapter begins, and *Vers Mathilde* (2005), both kinds of portraits that eschew traditional biographical or documentary setups. These two short films offer impressions of the other and expose their sense as singularity. The concept of singularity, drawn from Nancy, abides throughout Hole's book, and is fundamental to the ways in which she understands Denis to challenge identity politics and to work toward a different way of approaching others. The notion of approaching the other, as Hole understands this process through Denis's work, is open to continual interruption, which frustrates closure and possession and is fundamental to Nancy's philosophy and the possibility of a Nancean ethics. Hole observes indeed that although Nancy is not an ethicist like Levinas, and none of the titles or main subjects of his books foreground ethics as such, his philosophy is in fact an ethics (46). Hole takes up themes in his work that have been less thoroughly worked through to date in scholarship on Nancy and Denis--considering not only interruption and listening, but also natality and wonder--and relates this productively to work outside of cinema, most notably by Anne O'Byrne on natality and Mary-Jane Rubenstein on wonder.

Given that her project is not to write an overview of Denis's entire oeuvre, Hole is legitimately selective, founding her opening reading of Denis's features in detailed analysis of *Nénette and Boni* (1996) in chapter 2, following this with focused discussion of *I Can't Sleep* (1994) in chapter 3, and ending with a thorough exploration of *Trouble Every Day* (2001) in chapter 4. *Nénette and Boni* is an appropriate starting point for Hole's select study of Denis's feature-length films, chosen because of its move, further than any of her preceding works, from narrative into a form of filmmaking that privileges the sensory over the cognitive. Films such as this one, in Hole's terms, "make *sense*, rather than moralise" (55). With recourse to Nancy's distinctive conception of listening, Hole highlights the tactility of audio-vision, its synaesthetic qualities, and the power of sound and music to evoke what cannot always be grasped. Hole's filmic analysis is persuasive and beautifully sensitive to the difference of the sound-image conjunctions of this film, which flouts narrative expectations and requires a different kind of engagement. This engagement is a form of "being-with" the film (terminology drawn from Nancy) that echoes the ways in which Hole explores subjectivity and ethical relations to others within the films, and that asks us to attend to what cannot be categorized or easily known, thereby breaking with conventions of semiotic and cognitive means of understanding and making sense of film.

The second permutation in this journey toward a feminist cinematic ethics, following on from the Nancean-inspired "ethics of sense," is an "aesthetic of alterity." In this, Hole draws on Levinas, presenting an original reading of Denis's *I Can't Sleep* through the lens of his ethics. There is already a substantial body of research on the possibility and fruitfulness of engaging with Levinas in the cinematic context, and Hole's study constitutes a cogent further working-through of his thinking on radical alterity through points of contact with Denis's film. The idea that Denis "pushes Levinas further" (93) is palpable when it comes to thinking ethics with reference to the figure of the serial killer in this film, shifting the ethical obligation from the categories in his philosophy of the stranger, orphan, or widow into more troubled

territory. Throughout this chapter, ambiguity becomes the "representational correlate" (112) for an ethics of alterity. From the poetics of Levinas's writing style--as the Saying continually undoes the Said, constantly unsettling stable meaning--to the ambiguity of the erotic, there is a movement, inspired by Levinas's work but fleshed out by Denis, between exposure and obscurity that Hole relates to a feminist ethics more broadly. Indebted to Diane Perpich's and Judith Butler's readings of Levinas but also modifying some of their insights on the basis of the specificity of Denis's films, Hole argues that there can be a representational practice of alterity that is not based on identity or recognition and that respects the impossibility of capturing the other (110).

In the final chapter, and bringing her three idea-makers together, Hole focuses on the body as it relates to the ethical and argues that Denis, Nancy, and Levinas make important contributions to rethinking the body in ways that challenge dominant Western narratives. On this point it is perhaps Denis who strikes the reader as the most obvious figure of the three to demonstrate this, and it is illuminating to see how the philosophers' work is read to contribute to this unthinking of Western hegemony. The Levinasian notion of one's skin not, in fact, being one's own, adds to the way in which Nancy and Denis contribute to an open "body" of ideas "clearing paths that challenge the monadic modern body and may be useful to critical disability studies and queer theory" (140). Hole thereby connects the relationships that she has been building throughout her study between ethics and feminism to these other crucial areas of theoretical enquiry that also attend to the body. Hole bases her argument on discussion of *Trouble Every Day* and on its challenge to generic categories. Denis is understood to alter the conventions of horror through this film, rendering her spectators as open to intrusion as her characters (142). The concluding lines of this chapter sum up what, for me, is at the core of the reading of Denis in the book as a whole: "her films offer an opportunity for an affective reorientation to cinema viewing and, through the film, to the world beyond the cinematic frame" (160).

This book thus takes its reader on a wondrous journey through the work of Denis, moving toward the cinematic ethics of its title in different ways in each chapter. The book understandably is not set up to explore a feminist cinematic ethics beyond this signal director, prompting questions about its transferability beyond the singularities of Denis's individual films, but this leaves open the possibility of extending the argument to others. Readers inspired by this book may seek out other ethical, feminist idea-makers and ask how they add further layers to the rich study Hole has made of Denis.

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<sup>1</sup> The exception here is Lisa Downing's reading of Denis and Catherine Breillat in "Re-viewing the Sexual Relation: Levinas and Film," *Film-Philosophy* 11 (2) (2007): 49-65.