

foreclosed, or at the very least deferred. We have no idea where Théo is going, only that he is walking in those very uncomfortable shoes. We then cut to Daïga, who is driving out of the city. We have no idea where she is going either, although following the circle of the film, one assumes she is returning to Lithuania. Daïga is, at least, on the move. The film began with her arrival in the city in the early morning hours, and it concludes with her departure at night, now with the money she took from Camille's room. Daïga wanted to stay in Paris, and Théo wanted to leave. If their dreams have been stalled, their roles are not exactly reversed. In the end, the white woman's narration—Daïga as a symmetrical frame for the film, whose discoveries match those of the film's spectator—provides closure. In a somewhat perverse sense, her curiosity has paid off—she has made some money in Paris. But we are left with the haunting sense that the price paid for her mobility is the foreclosure of the dreams of Théo. The most significant encounter of bodies in motion in the film may well be this one, realized not in the flesh but through film editing, making visible the ways in which bodies in motion are always relative.

Beau travail may well be the ultimate film about strangerhood, since members of the French Foreign Legion are strangers wherever they go. The film was conceived as a contribution to a television series on “foreign lands,” produced by Pierre Chevalier and Patrick Grandperret for ARTE. Denis used the telefilm as an opportunity to consider not someone's travels to a foreign land but rather “the notion of foreignness” (Renouard and Wajeman 2001: 2). The process of thinking through the notion took Denis and her usual co-screenwriter, Jean-Pól Fargeau, to two poems by Melville as well as his novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*, on the one hand, and to the East African country of Djibouti (where she lived as a child) and the French Foreign Legion, on the other. From the outset, the project was beset with difficulties, since not only did Denis not receive any help from officials in Djibouti (whether French or Djiboutian), but also she had to contend with a swirl of rumors about the film: “What I heard was a real shock: that I was going to make an anti-French army film, then a porn film about Legionnaires and young Ethiopian girls, and then a film about homosexuality in the Legion” (Renouard and Wajeman 2001: 5).

Denis worked with her usual collaborators on the film (Fargeau, Ag-

nès Godard), and she also worked with choreographer Bernardo Montet, who was an integral part of the preparation of the film. In Paris before shooting started, he worked with the actors who play the Legionnaires. Denis and Fargeau also worked a bit differently from usual on the preparation of the script; Fargeau wrote Galoup's notebooks, which became, as Denis says, like a "libretto" for the film. Montet's choreography was not added on to an existing script but was, rather, essential to the conception of the film from the outset (Renouard and Wajeman 2001: 5).

The film has had a phenomenal reception, and it has been shown at more international festivals and received more commentary than any of Denis's other films. Some critics seem to have discovered Denis as a serious filmmaker on the basis of *Beau travail*.⁶ Calling *I Can't Sleep* a film that offered an "interesting portrait of a Paris neighborhood" but nonetheless "wallowed in a kind of professional morbidity," and *Nénette and Boni* a "sicko story about two teenage siblings in Marseilles," Jonathan Rosenbaum asks, in his glowing review of *Beau travail*: "Did previous Denis films have a poetry I didn't notice or appreciate, or did she make a quantum leap as an artist in *Beau Travail*? Probably some of both" (2000: 4).

The preoccupations of *Beau travail* seem to me relatively consistent with Denis's earlier work; what has changed in this film is the level of abstraction, on the one hand, and the increasingly deliberate focus on the male body, on the other. As in other works by Denis, male bodies are investigated and the particular bonds between men are explored, and the complex encounters between Africa and France are central. But in *Beau travail* there is even less reliance on dialogue than in previous films, and a more emphatic reliance on bodies as they move through beautiful but desolate landscapes. If the music of Kali, in *I Can't Sleep*, conjures up the desire for Martinique, in *Beau travail* the music has much more of a counterpoint function in relationship to what is seen on screen; and if dance has always been a privileged motif in Denis's films, in *Beau travail* it is far more than a motif. Rather, the entire film functions as a kind of choreographed ritual.

There is a core narrative in *Beau travail*, one that is borrowed from Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* as well as Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit soldat* (1960). It draws as well on an entire tradition of the iconography of the French Foreign Legion, from Jean Gabin in *La Bandéra* (directed

by Julien Duvivier, 1935) to Gary Cooper in *Beau Geste* (directed by William Wellman, 1939). Two narrative threads are particularly important. First, the triangular structure of *Billy Budd* is adapted to tell the tale of desire, envy, and jealousy. Galoup (Denis Lavant) adores Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor), the commander of his Legion outpost in Djibouti. A new recruit, Gilles Sentain (Grégoire Colin), attracts the attention of Forestier when he performs a daring rescue after a helicopter crash. Galoup immediately perceives Sentain as a threat, and Galoup jumps on an opportunity to expel Sentain from the group. When a soldier is punished by Galoup, Sentain comes to his aid. The punishment for Sentain is banishment, and it becomes a death sentence when Galoup provides Sentain with a broken compass. Yet Sentain is found by members of the Djiboutian community, who take care of him; it is unclear if he dies or survives. Galoup is then punished by expulsion from the Legion. The film unfolds, more or less, as Galoup's recollection of the drama that led to his expulsion and, we are led to believe, suicide. But never is the relationship between Galoup's memories and what "really" happened made clear. It isn't that Galoup is necessarily an "unreliable" narrator but that his narration is the very symptom the film explores.

The second narrative thread is suggested by the very first words that Galoup speaks in the film: "Marseille, end of February. I have time before me now." The second sentence cites the last words spoken by Bruno Forestier, the main character in Godard's *Le Petit soldat*: "I have time before me now." With actor Michel Subor playing Bruno Forestier more than three decades later, *Beau travail* is a kind of homage to Godard's film. In *Le Petit soldat*, Forestier is a political wanderer against the backdrop of the French Algerian War (the film was banned for a number of years because of its allusions to torture). "I told myself," says Denis, "that after the film, when he leaves the army and kills the correspondent for the FLN [Front de Libération Nationale, the Algerian independence movement], Forestier joined the French Foreign Legion" (Lalanne and Larcher 2000: 51). Subor's character is not the only homage to Godard's film, for the very structure of *Beau travail* cites the narrative device of voice-over used throughout *Le Petit soldat*. Galoup, not Forestier, becomes the literal "voice" of the film, although Denis, like Godard, does not attribute any particular authority to the voice-over. To the contrary: while we are aware in the film that Galoup

is narrating the events that led to his expulsion from the Legion, the precise connections between those events are left ambiguous.

The citation of Bruno Forestier is equally a citation of the New Wave. While the two texts that inform the film, *Billy Budd* and *Le Petit soldat*, are obviously different, one could also consider the practice of citation in *Beau travail* as a reading of one text through the other and, in particular, of the homosocial and homoerotic triangle of Melville's narrative through the New Wave's (and especially Godard's) explorations of heterosexual desire, particularly insofar as the woman's place, as icon, is concerned. *Le Petit soldat* was the first film by Godard to feature Anna Karina, his wife at the time, who continued to appear in his films as a beautiful woman who becomes both a love object and a figure that encourages, to varying degrees, an examination of the very status of woman-as-icon. Similarly, the function of the heterosexual couple in New Wave cinema—embodied by Subor and Karina—is read through the homosocial bonds between men so central to *Billy Budd*.⁷ After noting that “the mythic coupling of Man and Woman, a New Wave staple,” is “alive and well” in the films of many contemporary French directors, Kent Jones says, in his review of *Beau travail*, that “one of the many felicities of post–New Wave cinema” is the “suggestion of cinema without a strict sexual orientation” (2000: 26). In other words, then, Subor and Bruno Forestier also bring to *Beau travail* a point of reference for an opening up of the Legion to heterosexual desire beyond the clichés of the Legionnaire—or, for that matter, of the woman's traditional place in the Legionnaire narrative, the woman who waits, or follows.

The place of women in *Beau travail*—“women are in the film for sexuality, but they aren't a part of the world of the Legionnaires” says Denis (Lalanne and Larcher 2000: 52)—is one of the most pronounced examples in the film of how abstraction both conjures up the traditional view of the Legion and repudiates it at the same time. For the women may not be a central part of the Legionnaires' world, but they are definitely part of the spectators' world. All of the women in the film are black, and they fall into two distinct categories, conjured in the beginning of the film in the contrast between the women on the dance floor and the women whom we see in the train—between, that is, women who let loose, who mug for the camera, whose dress is a combination of European and African, who dance, and women whose movements

are restrained, who observe the Legionnaires (and, at the conclusion of the film, care for the near-dead Sentain), and who wear traditional garb, their heads covered. While we see both groups of women interacting with men (the first with the Legionnaires, the second with other Djiboutians), there is also a sense of a communal female identity. The women at the disco provide a sense of a female world that could be construed as liberating (sensual, full of movement, laughter) or constraining (they are the providers of pleasure for men). The more traditional women are, perhaps ironically, more defined as independent entities.

Denis has alluded to the number of prostitutes in Djibouti, but the women whom we see at the disco in this film are not coded stereotypically as prostitutes. They very definitely signify pleasure, however, and they stand in sharp contrast to the women who function as somewhat awed and perplexed observers of the Legionnaires. Yet these two groups of women share one characteristic, and that is that they function as observers within the film, witnesses. For Jonathan Rosenbaum, this is the aspect of *Beau travail* that most clearly marks the film as a film by a woman director. “Denis uses African women to subtly impose an ironic frame around the story; from beginning to end, they figure implicitly and unobtrusively as a kind of mainly mute Greek chorus—whether they’re dancing in the disco, speaking in the market, appearing briefly as the girlfriends of some legionnaires (including Galoup), or serving as witnesses to part of the action” (2000: 4).

Rosenbaum’s assessment is astute, and the function of women as witnesses is one that has been characteristic of almost all of Denis’s work, from France, the observer of her past in *Chocolat*, to Martine, the hidden observer of Alain’s frenzied dance in *U.S. Go Home*, to Daïga, the detective, of sorts, in *I Can’t Sleep*. And Denis’s own position as a filmmaker is one of witnessing, of observing worlds not necessarily her own. Denis’s authorial signature is very much tied up in the ways in which women function as observers, yet it is also useful to see Denis’s work in this context as having a lineage with that of Godard. If any single director’s work has been productive in exploring the ways in which formal innovation and gender politics both inform and resist each other, and the ways in which representations of women and femininity evoke yet refuse to be contained within the polarities of a “celebration” versus a “critique” of dominant iconography, it is surely Godard’s. Denis, of

course, belongs to a different generation, and she brings an entirely different sensibility to the representation of gender—one in which, most notably, not all women (or men) are white. But consistently, as Claire Denis's films ask us to look, and especially to look differently at male bodies, we are asked to consider different configurations of the woman who looks.

In response to an interviewer's comment apropos of *Beau travail*, "You film men as erotic objects," Denis replied: "Not exclusively. In any case, I asked the actors to be aware of that so that we could think about it together. I was afraid of that 'erotic object' aspect of the film, tank tops, tanned skin. I wanted us to work together to maintain a distance from that. For example, filming their clothes drying on the line was a way of *de-objectifying* bodies" (Lalanne and Larcher 2000: 53). The male bodies in the film may well be masculine. Yet in their rituals of dance on the beach or in the ironing of their uniforms, they are present in such a way that the dividing lines between masculinity and femininity seem tenuous, at least insofar as male bodies are concerned. Perhaps most strikingly, the beginning of the film leads us to an unveiling of the male body, a process generally much more associated with the female body.

It is instructive, in this regard, to look at the one space in the film where male and female bodies are presented together, and that is on the dance floor of the disco. The beginning of *Beau travail* presents a series of sharply contrasting images and sounds. The film opens with a tracking shot, accompanied by the Legionnaires' song, of a wall with drawings of mountains, or cliffs, and outlines of soldiers, and what appears to be a flag. Formally, this opening tracking shot is difficult to read. Largely because of the sound track, the Legion is evoked, yet the image retains a very abstract quality. The tracking shot is ethereal and concrete at the same time. We then cut to the dance floor of the disco, to the accompaniment of Tarkan's song "Simarik," a Turkish pop song with a pulsating beat. Bodies are shot at close range, and the camera moves through the crowd of dancers on the floor; all of them African women and (mostly white) men from the Legion. The women whom we see initially introduce us to a radically different kind of space and image than the tracking shot that opens the film; they laugh, they move, and they seem to be having a genuinely good time. No single woman or single Legionnaire takes center stage, even though three main characters are

introduced in this scene. While the Legionnaires are dancing, Grégoire Colin, as Gilles Sentain, walks across the dance floor as if preoccupied with something else. The camera follows him, and when he moves out of frame we are introduced to Rahel (Marta Tafesse Kassa) whom we see dancing with Galoup (Denis Lavant).

Tarkan's song is sometimes called the "kissy song" because of how its lyrics are punctuated by exaggerated sounds of loud kisses, and the scene in the disco ends with one of the soldiers mimicking the kiss, approaching but not actually kissing the woman he is dancing with. We then cut to a train station where a man, on the telephone, is saying "Djibouti." We see the interior of a train. It too is populated by both men and women, all of them African, and the women stand in sharp contrast to the women we have just seen in the disco, for they are all modestly dressed, their heads covered with scarves, and still. This is another tracking shot, thus marking a symmetry with the first shot of the film, and here we see the landscape through the window of the train. We then cut to a series of deserted objects in the landscape, and the camera then tracks once again, showing us, first, the shadows of the men and then the men themselves, moving in what is a kind of dance, and certainly a choreography of movement, although once again, in sharp contrast to the dance we see in the disco. These are solitary movements, almost physical practices of meditation. The unveiling of the men's bodies is preceded by a void, first by army artillery in disuse, and then by the shadows of the men, as if their traces precede them.

While the film observes men's bodies as they go about the rituals of dailiness, including everything from ironing to dance, visual echoes of the women that we see at the beginning scene in the disco appear throughout the film. Galoup's narration, his diary as well as his voice-over, gives the film both its substance and its ambiguity, and the passage from remembrance to fantasy is never clear. One of the recurring images in his evocation is the figure of Rahel, who is presented as Galoup's steady girlfriend, although this is not actually stated until near the conclusion of the film. Images of women, including Rahel, dancing in the disco appear at several moments in the film, seemingly part of Galoup's mental landscape of Djibouti. Rahel's function becomes more complex approximately thirty minutes into the film—before, that is, the actual events that cause Galoup's expulsion are revealed. We see Rahel,

dressed very casually, without makeup, in a man's shirt—perhaps one of Galoup's—hanging up laundry to dry. Suddenly Galoup appears, in uniform, to help her. The scene suggests a dailiness to their relationship, and we see Rahel intercut with images of the Legionnaires hanging up their laundry. Then we see Galoup ironing a dark shirt (presumably the same shirt he will wear at the conclusion of the film); it isn't clear if he is in Marseille or Djibouti. As if in his mind's eye, a beautiful close-up of Rahel appears, her face suspended against the dark background.

We then see Galoup, in Djibouti, as a street vendor approaches him; Galoup buys what appears to be perfume, and we see him approach Rahel, asleep on a bed, and put the box in her hands. She doesn't awaken, but we then see a startling image of Rahel, in close-up, as she stares directly into the camera (the effect is not unlike when Anna Karina, as Nana, stares directly into the camera in Godard's *Vivre sa vie*) (fig. 20). Quickly we return to the disco, where Rahel is dancing along with the group of women, and a shot of Galoup, watching her, is inserted. It is obvious, in these brief appearances, that Rahel functions as an object of desire for Galoup, and it would be easy to see her as a stereotypical evocation of Africa as sensuality, pleasure, and comfort, and of woman as the promise of heterosexual completion. It appears as though Rahel's



Figure 20: Rahel in *Beau travail* |

function is primarily as a sexual object. Later in the film, we see Rahel in conversation with a female friend, who asks about Rahel's relationship with Galoup. The two women talk and giggle, and the sounds of their conversation continue over a shot of Galoup, as if he were in the next room listening to them.

The presentation of the two women is startlingly different from how we have seen Rahel thus far. Rahel appears in casual attire, while her friend's head is covered in a white scarf. This is the first time in the film that two kinds of women—one associated with the disco, one associated with traditional Djiboutian society—have been seen not only in the same frame but also in intimate conversation with each other. But perhaps more striking is the image in the background: a large image of the Madonna and child. Rahel's head is in symmetry with that of the Madonna, and her friend's, with the child (fig. 21). What are we to make of this sudden evocation of Rahel as a Madonna?

A partial reply is to be found in the journey of another female figure in the film, one who belongs to the more traditional category of woman. One of the first views we have of the town near where the Legionnaires are stationed occurs when we see what appears to be a completely extraneous event: a woman carrying rolled-up rugs descends from a minivan



Figure 21: Rahel and a friend in *Beau travail* |

and walks into a building. Inside the building, she converses with another woman, and they discuss the sale of a rug, made with thirteen stripes, which the woman made herself. On its own terms, this brief scene is not unlike those moments in Denis's films where a small, seemingly unrelated detail provides an evocative sense of contrast. But the woman in question, who is selling the rugs, reappears near the conclusion of the film. In the desert, a group of Djiboutians stop when they see the body of Sentain, near death, on the ground. Inside their van, this same woman appears, now to nurture Sentain back to health. This woman evokes the image of the "cosmic wet nurse" in Paul Jorion's discussion of white people in relationship to Africa (1988). Not only is she a fundamental part of the local economy, she is also, literally, a savior (figs. 22, 23). Interestingly, the film draws upon two clichéd images of Africa in the feminine—the exotic sexual being on the one hand, the nurturing traditional mother on the other—in order to complicate the opposition from within. Beneath the fantasy of the love object, Rahel, and of the woman as nurturing savior, is the common bond of the white man's absolute dependence upon the images he creates to assure him of his authority.

Beau travail concludes with the frenzied dance of Galoup on the disco floor that we have seen, intermittently, throughout the film. The dance seems both regimented and wild at the same time. If, in the previous scene, we are led to believe that Galoup is about to commit suicide, this concluding dance suggests another way to imagine the male body. There is, after all, a connection between the last two scenes. The last image we see of Galoup's body before the dance shows Galoup's arm in close-up, a vein throbbing. In the final scene, the vitality, the pulsating energy, of that detail explodes. If the film suggests, however briefly, that there are ways to imagine the breakdown of the whore/Madonna stereotype in relationship to women, no such possibility exists in relationship to Galoup. His pulsating body, whether throbbing slightly in the contemplation of suicide or performing frenetically on the dance floor, cannot escape the dualities of regimentation and desire, duty and passion.⁸

Denis's collaboration with cinematographer Agnès Godard has created a particular style of representing bodies in motion. The tracking shot is visible in virtually all of the films where they have collaborated (which means practically every film directed by Denis). In *Chocolat*, the transition from present to past is made on the road, as the camera



Figure 22: The Djiboutian woman in *Beau travail* |



Figure 23: The Djiboutian woman in *Beau travail* |

shifts from the adult France in a car moving down the highway to her as a child, sitting on the back of the family truck with Protée, observing the passing landscape. In *Nénette and Boni*, our first introduction to Boni occurs inside a rapidly moving car. In classic, traditional terms, the tracking shot is literally a shot “on track,” that is, where the camera moves, but on a fixed support. (Interestingly, the French term—*le travelling*—emphasizes the effect more than the literal support.) In Denis’s films, the tracking shot is far more complex, for it often moves “off track,” as it were, veering wildly (as in the car with Boni). Usually the tracking shot implies a kind of measured distance, and we see plenty of such images in Denis’s films, particularly in the passage of trains or cars through landscape or cityscape. But just as frequently, the tracking shot is used at close range, sometimes (as in *No Fear, No Die*) created by a handheld (or shoulder-held) camera, and sometimes as a way of capturing the fleeting connections between strangers (as in the opening of *Nénette and Boni* when the con man tries to sell counterfeit telephone cards).

Now one could say that the tracking shot loses any particular meaning when it is defined in such a loose way. Isn’t it enough to say that the camera moves in Claire Denis’s films? That her films provide, through intricate, sometimes dizzying camera movement, superbly complex variations on the *plan-séquence*, the single shot in which comings and goings are recorded in constant shifting cinematic space? Put another way, is the insistence on the tracking shot a mere formality, in both senses of the term? The tracking shot is not necessarily the most important element of cinematic writing in Denis’s work, but in these two films, it has a particular function having to do, precisely, with the dynamics of witnessing, of “strangerhood,” and of French film history.

The tracking shot inspired Jean-Luc Godard’s famous declaration that the tracking shot (his specific point of reference is Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras’s 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour*) is a “question of morality.” Tracking shots call attention to the very fact of the cinema, to traveling, to moving through the world. In response to Eric Rohmer’s comment that one can admire *Hiroshima mon amour* and still find it jarring in places, and to Jacques Doniol-Valcrozes’s query whether this discomfort is “moral or aesthetic,” Godard replied: “It’s the same thing.

Tracking shots are a question of morality” (Domarchi et al. 1959; rpt. 1985: 62). More relevant, perhaps, to the tracking shot in Denis’s work is Jacques Rivette’s pointed criticism of a film by Gillo Pontecorvo, *Kapo*, in which a woman commits suicide in a concentration camp, and the film tracks forward to show the dead body and to isolate an extended hand as a kind of aesthetic flourish. “The man who decided to compose this forward tracking shot,” writes Rivette, “deserves nothing but contempt” (1961: 55).

Both of these observations—one in which the tracking shot is praised, the other in which it is condemned—are part of the project of rethinking the cinema so central to the New Wave. Throughout the decades since the late 1950s and early 1960s, this rethinking of the cinema has been given a variety of names and definitions—the politics of form, cinematic *écriture*, political formalism, and, more recently, the politics of location.

The tracking shot has come to stand emblematically as the intersection of the physical presence of the camera and the notion of some kind of position, conscious or unconscious, a place for the spectator. Interestingly, Denis commented on the tracking shot by saying that “for me, the morality of the tracking shot has to be shared with the actor, so that the person interpreting the role be free in relationship to the fiction. There is always an element of ‘and as for him . . .’” (Jousse part 3). Denis has often spoken of the close relationship she develops with actors, of the “solidarity” she regards as an ideal relationship between director and actor. Of course, this particular relationship does not apply only to the tracking shot, but the tracking shot has come to stand for a particular fact of cinema, the fact of moving through space, of creating a mobile vision in which the director’s view is concrete, visible. The tracking shot in these two films reveals “strangers” to be figures in a shifting landscape, and ultimately, of course, that shifting movement becomes a figure of identification for the spectator. In *I Can’t Sleep*, the tracking shot that shows the policemen following Camille has a haunting, breathtaking moment when the reverse shot reveals these figures of authority as “tracked” themselves; for a moment they seem to be reflections of the spectators at Camille’s drag performance. The risk and the pleasure of “tracking strangers” in Claire Denis’s films are that sooner or later we no longer know who is a stranger, or to whom.