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by Mark Alice Durant

SHEEP'S CLOTHING

by Jennifer Krasinski

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DOUBLE DUBYA

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Sheep's Clothing: On Claire Denis's *The Intruder*

JENNIFER KRASINSKI

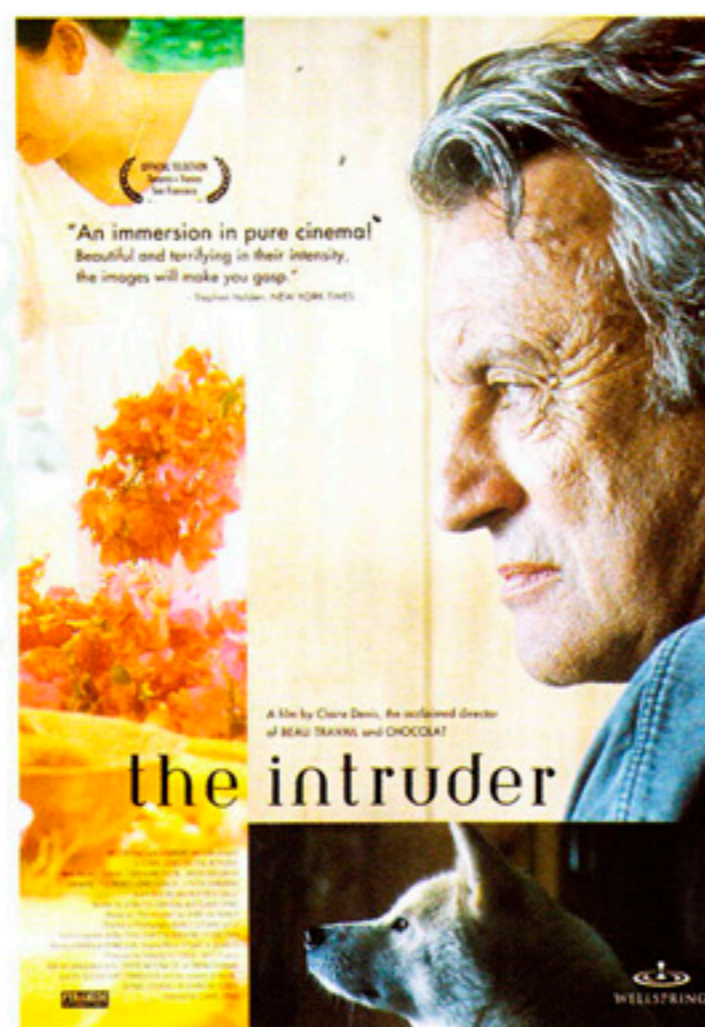


Possessed of a demanding generosity and a rigorous delicacy, Claire Denis's eleventh feature, *L'intrus* (*The Intruder*, 2005), takes its place among her other vastly accomplished films to mark the near perfection of her style, one that is ceaselessly poetic and ever-innovative. Indeed, Denis has earned her brilliant reputation by repossessing for cinema the dignities of its own medium, not as it functions as a language (a one-time revolutionary, now excruciatingly limiting framework), but as it revels in the virtues of what was once simply and more suitably labeled "the moving picture." It is precisely this return to the primacy of the picture that complicates criticism of Denis's work. After all, words and images still struggle to find their happy medium (so to speak). And even though Roland Barthes once described the photograph as an object that aspired to possess "the dignity of a language," I—as I bang away at my dingy keyboard—can-

not believe that a man who sentenced so many words for a living wasn't being even a little bit ironic.

Nevertheless, stowed away inside Denis's lyrical passages is the story of Louis Trebor (embodied by a crackling Michel Subor), an ailing man who leaves

his home in the mountains along the French-Swiss border to procure a heart for his transplant—and to make amends with his long-lost son. Trebor's journey is both geographic and psychic, as the compass he follows proves to be faulty, or at least only points to himself. It is important to note that Denis's film is loosely based on Jean-Luc Nancy's book *L'intrus* (2002), in which the French philosopher-author recounts his own heart transplant and his body's subsequent rejection of the replacement organ. Regarding the difference between her film and Nancy's text, Denis recounts: "My films are more formulated like questions, and being a philosophy teacher are more [like] stating things."¹ That said, what can be asserted to direct the viewer of *L'intrus*? It would be my hope that the following words could perform something between a question and a statement, and serve as a compass that in the end points always back to the film.



(ABOVE) BEATRICE DALLE AS THE QUEEN OF THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE. PHOTO OGNON PICTURES.



THE MAP

The experience of reading a film script is similar to that of studying a map while someone looks over your shoulder and begs to know, *What do you think of this country? Isn't the landscape beautiful? Isn't the culture fascinating? Wouldn't you like to go there?* But how can I—even after carefully scrutinizing these lines and their legends—answer those questions? Of course, there are the options of memory (for that which is familiar) and imagination (for that which is foreign), but neither gives me any certainty.

Territories must be traversed to be known.

THE PORTRAIT

*How does one become for oneself a representation?—a montage, an assembly of functions?*²

First, we meet the body of our hero. Unclothed, resting, swimming, fucking, killing—we watch it in action. We watch it in silence. We read his skin—the moles, the crow's feet, the hair—for there are stories there. We watch his hands, his shoulders, his neck, his back for



any signs of character. (Any great artist knows how a face can distract from the essence of a portrait.)

Only later do we learn our hero's name. Here's how:

Approximately 32 minutes into the film, our hero encounters his son and his son's family in the street. Our hero looks at the baby in his daughter-in-law's arms and asks, *"Et ça c'est une fille?"* (And is that one a girl?)

"C'est Louis," replies his daughter-in-law, *"Louis comme vous."* (It's Louis. Louis like you.)

(Note: In French, "Louis" is pronounced very like the word "lui," meaning "him.")

This "him" echoed in the name of our hero, could it be the man who supplies the body for Louis?

After all, we have known his name since the opening credits:

Michel Subor.

(TOP) THE FRENCH-SWISS BORDER IN THE JURA MOUNTAINS. (BOTTOM) DIRECTOR CLAIRE DENIS. COURTESY OGNON PICTURES.



THE BORDER

The story begins on the border between France and Switzerland. One country charged, the other neutral. (I wonder, is neutrality enforceable?)

Bodies cross over in the night. Foreign bodies. *Intruders.*

But there are other borders marking inside and outside, here and there, strange and familiar: the windows, the doors, the mirrors, the water.

(Later: the skin, the suture, the scar.)

A question: what is learned at the limits of a territory? Or, to use the argot of border patrol, what is "declared"?

THE INSURGENTS

From within a blue-black night, a woman speaks. "Your worst enemies," she says, lighting a cigarette, "are hiding inside, in the shadow, in your heart."

Listen once to this chorus, and the shadow is inside the heart. Listen to it repeatedly, and the shadow and the heart become the same thing.

An ailing heart is a peculiar propeller.

Its unreliability is its urgency, its momentum. In this case, the condition that threatens to end our hero's life begins our story. So at the story's core: insurgency.

(A cruel irony of life: that revolutions, no matter how unexpected, always come from within.)

Again: *Your worst enemies are hiding inside, in the shadow, in your heart.*

Listen once to that chorus, and the heart hides the enemy.

Listen repeatedly, and the heart is the enemy.)

Nancy duly noted that life itself arrives

in sheep's clothing. "Life cannot but impel life," he wrote, "but life also moves toward death. Why, in me, was it proceeding according to the limits of this heart?"³

As though in answer, Louis demands of a beautiful black-marketeer, "I want a young heart. Not an old man's heart or a woman's heart. I'm a man. I want to keep my character." He wants only a change of heart. He himself wishes to remain.

She makes no promises. She is not beholden to him. She is the same woman who at the beginning of the film lit her cigarette and clearly mapped the enemy's territory. But of one thing Louis is certain: a new heart is full of promise.

After all, a dying man doesn't buy a watch.

THE SOUND

Never mistake verbosity for virtuosity and remember: very few films are silent.

THE SON

A favorite homonym of dramatists from





Shakespeare to Ibsen, the mere mention of the son brings purpose—brings incentive—to a sentence (death- or otherwise). Hasn't there always been something dark, something of the doppelgänger in the father-son story? (A lovely irony—*le son* in French means “sound.”)

Louis has two sons. One here, the other there.

Wrote Louis in a letter never sent, “Every year I’ve been away from you weighs heavily on my heart.” (Whose heart?, one wonders. A woman’s heart? An old man’s heart? A young heart? Which one is yours?)

To find the son he has never seen, he travels from the mountains to the Pacific islands to find him (*lui*). He buys a boat—a gift. When Louis’s heart proves too heavy for the search, auditions are held and an actor is chosen.

An actor in whose face Louis can see his own.

THE PORTRAIT, PART II

Footage is taken from Paul Gégauff’s unfinished film *Le Reflux* (1965), starring

Michel Subor. In this film, Subor played a man who travels by boat to the tropics. From the cut, his purpose is unclear, though the storm is fierce.

Here we remember that the actor was young once. We recall that he was Bruno Forestier twice.⁴

How handsome this young actor, now almost unrecognizable as Louis Trebor. None of the skin we have been watching looks at all like his did then.

How does one become for oneself a representation?—a montage, an assembly of functions?

Sheep’s clothing.



THE END (WARNING: SPOILER)

At last the origin of Louis’s heart is revealed (or at least, called into question). One wonders if Louis sees himself in his dead son’s face. In other words, transplanted.

Lui.

Perhaps due to its violent history, due to its having been ripped from its home, Louis’s heart goes back on its promise.

Though as far as I can recall, the heart never actually gave its word. How could it?

It is but a brutish muscle, possessing no heart of its own.

JENNIFER KRASINSKI is a writer and filmmaker who lives and works in Los Angeles. CLAIRE DENIS’s *The Intruder* is now available on DVD from Wellspring. NOTES: 1. Rob Davis, “Intruding Beauty: An Interview with Claire Denis,” *Errata 9* (December 2004), http://www.erratamag.com/archives/2004/12/intruding_beaut.html. 2. See Nancy, *L'intrus* (Michigan State University Press, 2002), 3. 3. Nancy, 6. 4. In Denis’s 1999 film *Beau Travail*, Subor played the role of Commander Bruno Forestier, which Denis named after the character Subor had played in Godard’s 1963 film *Le Petit Soldat*.