


WITH A FOREWORD BY WIM WENDERS

THE FILMS OF CLAIRE DENIS

A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a light pink short-sleeved dress and flat shoes, stands on a wide, reddish-brown dirt road. She is looking off to the side. The background is a dense, green forest with a path leading into the distance.

INTIMACY ON THE BORDER

EDITED BY MARJORIE VECCHIO

I.B. TAURIS

Marjorie Vecchio has curated over 40 art exhibitions, shown 250 artists, published numerous authors in exhibition catalogues and commissioned established and emerging print designers. Before becoming a curator, she was an exhibiting artist for 12 years, president of Artemisia Gallery (Chicago) and the photography faculty at Wright College and Evanston Art Center for eight years. From 2006–2012 she was the director of Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery and faculty at the University of Nevada, Reno. In autumn 2009 she was the inaugural scholar-in residence at Columbus State University, Georgia. She is currently a board member of the Signal Fire Artist Residency. She has a BA from Mount Holyoke College, BFA from The School of the Art Institute, Chicago, MFA from Milton Avery Graduate School of Arts at Bard College and a PhD from the European Graduate School, Saas Fee, Switzerland.

‘This book compiles insightful essays and interviews concerning the work of one of the most innovative and particular narrative filmmakers of our time—Claire Denis. I feel so lucky to have this remarkable body of films accessible to my consciousness! THANK YOU CLAIRE DENIS.’

Jim Jarmusch, *Film Director*

‘Claire Denis’s films are unequalled in contemporary cinema in their political rigour, sensitivity, artistic verve and sheer sensuality. This beautiful, exploratory book responds to these films through interviews with the director and her collaborators, photographs and tributes and through a series of coruscating critical essays from the finest writers in the field.’

Emma Wilson, *Professor of French Literature and the Visual Arts, Cambridge University*

‘Marjorie Vecchio has put together a stunning volume, full of intellectual verve and breathtaking insight that throws light on the work and critical impact of Claire Denis. Unpretentious yet spot on in terms of philosophical framing, the contributions will occupy a central place in the ever-growing archives of film criticism and the theoretical soundtrack that accompany every screening of our ability to think.’

Avital Ronell, *Professor in the departments of Germanic Languages and Literature and Comparative Literature, New York University*

The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border

Edited by Marjorie Vecchio

Foreword by Wim Wenders

I.B. TAURIS
LONDON · NEW YORK

For my parents Joseph and Diane Vecchio

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Notes on Contributors

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Firoza Elavia teaches courses in Film and Media Studies and earned her PhD from York University, Toronto. Her current scholarly interest examines difference and repetition in analogue and digital technologies, focusing on memory, perception and the virtual time of media events. She has edited *Cinematic Folds: The Furling and Unfurling of Images* (Toronto, 2008), an anthology on film and digital media.

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Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and David Lynch. His writings have been translated into Hungarian and Italian. His current book project, *Being and Immanence, or Non-Acting for the Cinema*, considers the different uses of the non-actor throughout cinema history and the relevance of this figure for understanding the ontology of film. He is also currently developing a collaborative film project inspired by the philosopher Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1896).

Kirsten Johnson works as a director and a cinematographer. She is currently editing a documentary she shot and directed in Afghanistan called *I Dream Them Always*. In 2010, as the supervising DP on Abby Disney and Gini Reticker's series, *Women, War and Peace*, she travelled to Colombia, Bosnia and Afghanistan. She shared the 2010 Sundance Documentary Competition Cinematography Award with Laura Poitras for *The Oath*. She shot the Tribeca Film Festival 2008 documentary winner, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* and the Warner Independent/Participant Pictures *Darfur Now*. Her cinematography is featured in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Academy Award-nominated *Asylum*, Emmy-winning *Ladies First* and Sundance premiere documentaries *This Film is Not Yet Rated*, *American Standoff* and *Derrida*. A chapter on her work as a cinematographer is featured in the book *The Art of the Documentary*. Her feature-film script *My Habibi* was selected for the 2006 Sundance Writer's Lab and Director's Lab and is recipient of an Annenberg Grant. Her previous documentary as a director, *Deadline* (co-directed with Katy Chevigny), premiered at Sundance in 2004, was broadcast on prime time NBC and won the Thurgood Marshall Award.

Florence Martin is Professor of French and Francophone Cinema and Literature at Goucher College, in Baltimore, Maryland. She is Associate Editor of *Studies in French Cinema* and has published articles internationally on cinema. Her books include *Bessie Smith* (Paris, 1994; Marseille, 1996); *De la Guyane à la diaspora Africaine* (co-authored with Isabelle Favre, Paris, 2002); and *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema* (Indianapolis, 2011). She co-edited, with Patricia Caillé, *Les Cinémas du Maghreb* (Paris, 2012).

Laura McMahon is College Lecturer in French at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. She is the author of *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Oxford, 2012) and of various articles on Denis's work. She is also the co-editor, with Michael Lawrence, of *Animal Life and the Moving Image* (forthcoming) and, with Elizabeth Lindley, of *Rhythms: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture* (Bern, 2008). Her current research project explores the relations between film, ecology, politics and the nonhuman.

Jean-Luc Nancy is a French philosopher who has published over 40 books since the 1970s and is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, France, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel Chair at the European Graduate School, Switzerland. Many

artists have worked with Nancy, such as Claire Denis, Simon Hantaï, Soun-gui Kim and Phillip Warnell. Nancy has written about the filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and was featured prominently in the film *The Ister*, directed by David Barison and Daniel Ross. Recently Nancy played a role in *Les Chants de Mandrin*, by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, which won the 2011 Jean Vigo Award.

Adam Nayman is a film critic in Toronto for *The Grid* and *Cinema Scope*. He has also contributed articles to *Cineaste*, *Film Comment*, *Reverse Shot* and *LA Weekly*. He has an MA in Cinema Studies from the University of Toronto and teaches on documentary cinema for Ryerson University.

Rafael Ruiz Pleguezuelos was born in Granada, Spain, in 1974. He has a PhD in English and degrees in Spanish Philology and Literary Theory from the University of Granada. His writings on cinema and theatre have been awarded prizes including the Ciudad de Segovia (2011) and Garcia Lorca (2009). In 2011, he published *La Rebelión Nace en el Bosque* (Granada, 2010), a study on Alan Sillitoe.

Noëlle Rouxel-Cubberly teaches French at the Isabelle Kaplan Center for Languages and Cultures at Bennington College, Vermont. She also serves as a co-director of the Master's in Teaching in a Second Language Program. Her research focuses on French films and pedagogy. Her book, *Les titres de film* (Houdiard, 2011), examines the economics and evolution of French film titles since 1968. Her current projects include an article on films as textbooks and the publication of a nineteenth-century correspondence.

Cornelia Ruhe is Professor of Romance Literature and Media Studies at the University of Mannheim. She holds a PhD in French literature. She has published two monographs on the literature and film of Maghrebi immigration in France and co-edited the German translations of Yuri Lotman's late writings on cultural semiotics.

Andrew Tracy is the Managing Editor of *Cinema Scope* and Publications Manager at TIFF Cinematheque (formerly Cinematheque Ontario) in Toronto. His work has appeared in such publications as *Sight & Sound*, *Cineaste*, *Film Comment*, *Reverse Shot*, *Moving Image Source* and *The Auteurs Notebook*, and in the recent anthology *Kazan Revisited* (Middletown, 2011).

Marjorie Vecchio has curated over 40 art exhibitions, shown 250 artists, published numerous authors in exhibition catalogues and commissioned established and emerging print designers. Before becoming a curator, she was an exhibiting artist for 12 years, president of Artemisia Gallery (Chicago) and the photography faculty at Wright College and Evanston Art Center for eight years. From 2006–2012 she was the director of Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery and faculty at the University of Nevada, Reno. In autumn

2009 she was the inaugural scholar-in residence at Columbus State University, Georgia. She is currently a board member of the Signal Fire Artist Residency. She has a BA from Mount Holyoke College, BFA from The School of the Art Institute, Chicago, MFA from Milton Avery Graduate School of Arts at Bard College and a PhD from the European Graduate School, Saas Fee, Switzerland.

Wim Wenders was born in postwar Germany in 1945. One of the most influential figures of the New German Cinema in the seventies, his films – among them *The American Friend* (1978), *Paris, Texas* (1984), *Wings of Desire* (1987) and *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) – have won numerous prestigious awards, including the Palme d'Or in Cannes, the Golden Lion in Venice and an Academy Award nomination. Several of his soundtracks have acquired cult status. He also works as a photographer. A major survey of his photography, *Pictures from the Surface of the Earth*, has toured museums and art institutions worldwide since 2001. He has published numerous books of essays and photographs and teaches film as a professor at the Hamburg Art School. He is President of the European Film Academy and a member of the order Pour le Mérite.

Catherine Wheatley is a lecturer in Film Studies at King's College, London. Her books include *Je t'aime, moi non plus: Anglo-French Cinematic Relations* (Berghahn, 2010; co-edited with Lucy Mazdon); Michael Haneke's *Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (Berghahn, 2009); and a short guide to the film *Hidden* for the BFI Film Classics series (2011). Her most recent book, *Sex, Art and Cinephilia: French Cinema in Britain*, was published by Berghahn in 2012. Catherine is also a regular contributor to *Sight & Sound* magazine. She is currently working on a monograph examining iterations of Christianity in contemporary European cinema.

James S. Williams is Professor of Modern French Literature and Film at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of (among others) *The Erotics of Passage: Pleasure, Politics, and Form in the Later Work of Marguerite Duras* (Liverpool/New York, 1997), *The Cinema of Jean Cocteau* (Manchester, 2006) and *Jean Cocteau* (London, 2008). He is also co-editor of *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000* (Amsterdam, 2000), *Gender and French Cinema* (Oxford, 2001), *For Ever Godard: The Cinema of Jean-Luc Godard* (London, 2004), *Jean-Luc Godard: Documents* (2006; catalogue of the Godard exhibition held at the Centre Pompidou, Paris), and *May '68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution* (London, 2011). In 2011 he recorded an audio commentary for a new DVD edition of *Orphée*, by Criterion, and his latest book is *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester, 2013). He is currently working on a new monograph project, entitled *Reclaiming Beauty: Post-Political Aesthetics in Francophone African Cinema*.

Preface

Marjorie Vecchio

The self is the least of it.
Let our scars fall in love.

Galway Kinnell
from *Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata*

Since 1988, the year of her first film premiere, filmmaker Claire Denis has grown to become a leader in contemporary cinema. Born in France but raised throughout Africa until the age of fourteen, Denis assisted directors such as Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch before writing and directing her own work. However fascinating her personal story, it is through her films that we can imagine the world as uniquely as she does. The best description I have seen of Claire Denis's work is by someone not writing about her at all. American poet Ann Lauterbach wrote two essays describing what she calls the 'whole fragment', first in her 2002 book, *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*, and in 2007, for the exhibition catalogue *Whole Fragment*, presented by Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery. Combined, these essays present a mindful conceptualisation of Denis's success.

The whole fragment brings the near into the proximity of *here*... Reason's rapture is the goal, annealed as it always is to curiosity: a kind of following through and around the boundaries of the already known... I like to think that all our experiences are, or can be, whole fragments, in the sense that what happens to you and what happens to me, our voyage of incidents, exposures, conversations, touches, and signals, shared between us but which, in the ensuing episodes of our several lives, are subsequently taken up either as part of our

individual passages, or forgotten: blanks in our separate retrieval systems. . . . The whole fragment historicizes the intimacy of gesture, the singular node that finds succor in the gesture before and the gesture to come. It finds meaning in the interlocking precision of seams; it attends to the preposition . . . The whole fragment configures the 'it' into it is.

A film by Claire Denis does not complete into a presumptuous whole but rather exists as gesture and tone – as the type of 'whole fragment' described so elegantly previously by Lauterbach in her exhibition catalogue essay, 'A Blade of Grass: On the Whole Fragment'. The films are akin to the presentation of details rather than the digestion of a finished story simply waiting to end. Characters are not sacrificed or dominated by dialogue or storyline, which means we also never know the whole story because there is not one; the films only end by conjuring more questions. It is not her intention to be illusive but rather to straightforwardly present how life actually works: her films are filled with images of quiet communication and miscommunication between people, stories that are told by tracing the daily life of characters, which in turn expose how relational our movements are. Thus to compare any of her films to wholeness would be the denial of life force: Denis's films are instead about subsistence. In the following pages you will read what makes Lauterbach's notion of the whole fragment so pertinent to Claire Denis's work and so contemporary to our times. A variety of voices will describe why her films matter, covering a broad range of topics from her process to the place of her work in (or out of) film history.

From the beginning, Claire Denis has created film after film that exposes the cracks between identity, circumstance and action. She has a disconcerting skill for telling one story, which in turn tells other stories. With a Chekhovian style, whereby events often happen offstage or somewhere other than within the cinematic narrative, for Denis, each work is a Trojan Horse pushed into the heart of contemporary globalism *and* globalization, eroding the slim barriers between the two concepts. Hidden in the belly of a Claire Denis film is the truth that all the scholarship and governing of identity politics and socialisation is nothing in the face of simple human interaction, regardless of how small those interactions may be – a glance, a gesture, a conversation, a decision. In her work, dynamics change subtly, even if the plot features shocking or grandiose events. In any given film, you will witness the authentic intersection of people, landscape, music, animals, urban space, war, food, work, authority, sex, government and family – this is where the content quietly occurs in her narratives, more than through obvious plot or storyline.

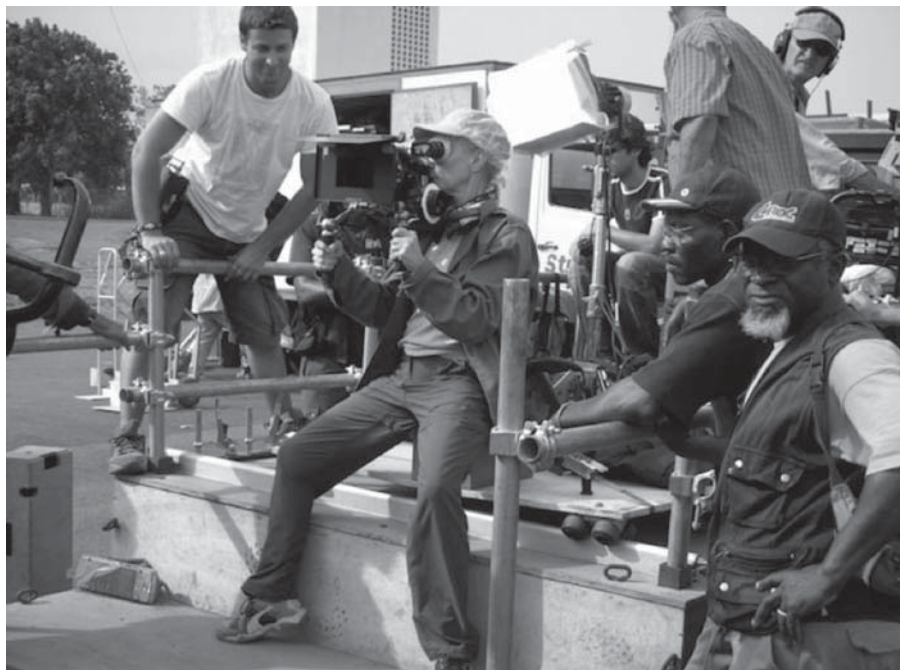
Denis's films are about philosophy and politics as much as they are about film and art. They are not didactic; rather, they present examples for the viewer to witness and question. Through an understanding of cinema's formal potential,

her films prompt us to question how we live, both as individuals and as part of an indefinable social community, where the rules and their scale are not always clear, natural or humane. Her work constantly pushes the concept of personal agency against the boundaries of unquestioned allegiance, nationalism, stupidity, innocence and multi-culturalism. Her images are elegant and tangible, raw and bold, or reserved and frightening – and always passionately expose the most complicated circumstances of being alive: immigration, illness, family life, jealousy and survival.

This book aims to display and challenge the questions presented in the films of Claire Denis. It is divided into two sections: the first part is composed of interviews and the second of essays. The interview section is crucial in order to understand Denis's career model: she continuously collaborates with a regular assortment of actors, editors, cinematographers and composers. The essay section is dedicated to new writings by a diversity of scholars from across the globe, some of whom have written extensively about Denis elsewhere and others by those new to the field. The subtitle of the book, 'Intimacy on the Border', speaks to the content within Denis's filmmaking form. The borders touched upon in her films include intimate ones such as between children and parents, siblings, neighbours, strangers, old friends and lovers – individuals who are always encircled by larger, and oftentimes powerful, borders such as class, race, country, gender, age, politics and land. Being encircled by so many borders is our human plight, yet Denis never falsely assimilates the incongruities between people's experiences; instead her films hint at co-existence within difference – possibly without resolve or surrender but at least with stability and respect.

There are writers missing from this book who ought be here: some were invited but were engaged with other projects; others missed during the book's development. Denis's body of work continues to grow. Her 2013 film *The Bastards* premiered at Cannes Film Festival just before we went to press. In order to cement her importance in cinema history, her films deserve more serious scholarly attention. I would like to thank the following people for making this one possible: all the contributors and interviewees for their utmost patience in a lengthy process, Kirsten Johnson and Alissa Surges for excellent copy-editing, translators Nathalie Le Galloudec and Anna Moschovakis, Martine Beugnet and Judith Mayne for their seminal books, Rémi Fontanel and Sébastien David for their Denis book, Jean-Luc Nancy, Wim Wenders and Heidi Frankl, Stuart Staples, Dickon Hinchliffe, Dan Oggly of Tindersticks Management, Lucie and Pauline of Why Not Productions, Hendrik Speck, Jean Goldsmith, Zoé Zurstrassen, Noël Véry, David Sorfa and Douglas Morrey of Film-Philosophy, Mahen Bonetti of the New York City African Film Festival, Jackie Brookner, Lydia Davis, Avital Ronell, Stefanie Koseff, Jim Jarmusch and Carter Logan, Emma Wilson, Yves Cape, Joan Goldin, William L. Fox, Carina Black,

Sandy Stone, Joy Garnett, Tad Beck and Grant Wahlquist, Larry Engstrom, Wendy Ricco, my former staff at Sheppard Gallery, Wolfgang Schirmacher and the European Graduate School for deeply influencing my life and the initial inspiration for this book, Hannah Israel and Columbus State University's Visiting Artists and Scholars Residency Program, which supported this project from the beginning, Isabelle Favre, my parents Joseph and Diane Vecchio for everything from A to Z, my editors at I.B.Tauris, Philippa Brewster, Anna Coatman, Lisa Goodrum, and of course, Claire Denis.



1 Claire Denis with crew on the set of *White Material*

Forward: 'Klärchen'

Wim Wenders

I was waiting for my new assistant in Houston.
I had worked on the script for *Paris, Texas* with Sam Shepard,
(well, it was called *Motel Chronicles* then . . .)
I had traveled huge parts of the American West on my own
in preparation for the film
and now it was about time to start prepping it for real.
The project was a German–French co-production,
to be shot entirely in the US,
by an almost all-European crew.
An enterprise unheard of at the time.
Some sort of guerilla filmmaking, in hindsight . . .

My French co-producer had determined
that she had found the perfect assistant for this task
to guide us safely through this journey into unknown territory:
A young woman by the name of Claire Denis . . .
I had not met her before.
I didn't even know what she looked like.

She showed up one morning at the hotel in downtown Houston.
We walked towards each other, a bit awkwardly.
Were we going to speak French together
or would English be the language of choice here in Texas?
My future assistant was smaller than I had anticipated.
'Frail' would be the right word.

She stared at me
with curious, wide-awake eyes under short blond hair.
Was she up for this tough job?
Maybe my eyes showed what I thought.
She smiled shyly . . .

Only time would tell.

Well, time did tell!
I can safely say that Claire single-handedly pulled this film through.
She steered it through thick and thin.
When the teamsters discovered us
and found out that most of our European crew members
worked on tourist visas
they forced us to employ a dozen drivers.
Our alternative was terrifying: to be thrown out of the country.
End of the film!
We had to accept the deal they offered
which took a huge chunk out of our budget.
Claire had to shorten the shooting schedule from eight weeks
down to six, then to five . . .
That alone would have scared the shit out of anybody.
Claire was fearless.

We ran out of script after the first two weeks.
(Sam Shepard was supposed to stay with us during the shoot
and write the second half of the film as we were going along.
But then he fell in love with Jessica Lange
and decided to play opposite her in a film called *Country*.
That was shot a thousand miles away.
I had lost my writer . . .)
We had to interrupt the shoot and send the crew home.
Everybody was gone except for Claire.
The two of us sat in a crummy hotel in Hollywood
and tried to figure out how this film could possibly continue.
She got us out of this hole, too.
With Claire's help I managed to write a story and ship it to Sam
who would write dialogue overnight
and dictate it to me way after midnight.
(This was in the age before internet or fax machines . . .)

We continued the shoot, after all.
 Claire was relentless.
 When we had actually finished principal photography
 we had totally run out of money
 but we still needed a few extra scenes and travel shots.
 So we shot a last week with a team so reduced
 that apart from Robby Müller, my cameraman, and me,
 Claire fulfilled practically all other functions.
 We paid all the bills on my credit cards until they were busted.
 In the end we literally had to stop eating.
 (Well, almost.)

Claire was the unsung hero of this whole adventure.
 I could not have done *Paris, Texas* without her!
 Her strength and perseverance
 were in reverse proportion to her physical size.
 Little had I known on that first encounter . . .

She even surpassed the heroic efforts of our first collaboration
 when we teamed up a couple of years later
 for what was going to become *Wings of Desire*.

To even think about doing an entire film without a script . . .
 I would not have dared approaching a project like that
 if I hadn't known I was going to be backed up by Klärchen.
 (That was Claire's name by then.)

We actually made this film with the help of a big wall in my office.
 One side was covered with photographs
 of my favorite places from all over the city.
 The other half was a whole bunch of cards
 with loosely sketched ideas for all sorts of scenes.
 Our heroes were guardian angels
 and there were countless story possibilities
 that could be explored by our invisible characters.
 Well, there wasn't much of a plot, anyway.
 We really made this film like you would write a poem:
 every day we would add a new line
 not knowing what the next day would bring.

Claire and I spent late-night hours in front of this wall,
trying to figure out where this journey was taking us.
One night, deep into our shoot already,
we even dreamed up a new character: an ex-angel.
And the miraculous happened:
that very night we found the actor for it
and he even agreed on the phone to do it,
laughing his heart out about such a preposterous proposition
to come from LA to Berlin to play the unwritten part
of a former guardian angel now turned human: Peter Falk.

My own guardian angel on this film was Claire.
She was both the assistant in the American sense of the profession
that she would lead the shoot like a military operation,
and in a more European tradition
she shared all creative issues, fears and dreams with me.

There was no way to follow up on these two experiences.
And one thing was clear:
Claire was more than ready to make her own films.
It would have been a waste to let her continue
working as an assistant director.

I am proud that I was able to help (a bit)
that she could go (back) to Africa
and start her directing career with the masterpiece
that *Chocolat* turned out to be.

The rest is history.
And this book will hopefully throw many new lights
on the amazing director that Klärchen became,
a path she carved out all on her own,
and that didn't owe much to her first career
as the greatest first assistant (not only) I ever had.



2 Claire Denis and Cécile Ducasse on the set of *Chocolat*

Part I

Interviews